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Reaping What You Sow: Southern Cultures, Black Traditions, and Black Women

Cynthia Mikell

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REAPING WHAT YOU SOW:
SOUTHERN CULTURES, BLACK TRADITIONS, AND BLACK WOMEN

by

CYNTHIA MIKELL

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This is an inquiry into Southern cultures, Black traditions, and Black women with a focus on the life of one Black woman educator. Drawing upon the works of Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning African American woman, novelist, and master storyteller, Toni Morrison (1970, 1973, 1976, 1987, 1988, 1993, 2003, & 2008); activist and Black feminist protest thinker and writer, bell hooks (1981, 1984, 1995, & 2000); the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, activist, and womanist, Alice Walker (1983); the Black feminist thinker and writer, Patricia Hills Collins (1998, 2000), and the critical race theorist and the first tenured African-American professor of Law at Harvard University, Derrick Bell (1992, 1995); I create a composite (He, 2003) main character, Marie Sincerely Lucky, an ordinary farm girl from a rural Southern community. I utilize Marie as a persona to tell key life events and experiences using fiction (which is not widely accepted in academia as a methodology) and the seasonal metaphor (literal and Biblical) which becomes the titles of chapters and sections throughout my dissertation.

The novellas section begins with an introduction and background of the main character. Each novella begins with a prelude that introduces time, place, and setting and ends with an interlude that summarizes and theorizes the novella. This study is intended to serve as an account of one woman's journey through oppression (racial, sexual, class,

and cultural) to womanhood. Marie's life is broken down into specific seasons: early childhood (with stepdad and after stepdad), the teen years, and adulthood (relationships, teaching career, military, and doctoral candidate).

Because teachers are farmers who plant kernels of knowledge in hopes that they grow into some greater understanding, it is my intention to challenge some stereotypes about Southern Blacks, reveal beliefs and culture, history, and experiences that many Black females encounter on a daily basis to provide these teachers with an understanding of who they may be teaching. Although my inquiry is regional (Black rural Southern community), the issues addressed are universal. I hope to also assist all stakeholders in understanding some deep-seated issues and to shed light on Southern traditions, Black cultures, Black women, and Black children.

INDEX WORDS: Black feminist thought, Critical race theory, Fiction, Womanism, Race, Racism, Culture, Religion, South, Southern

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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2011

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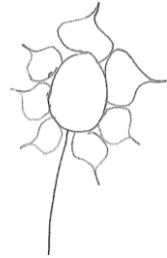
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DEDICATION

To my beautiful daughter Renae, the most important flower in my garden, who has sacrificed many mother-daughter hours to my studies. She has played secretary, earpiece (even when she did not understand what I was talking to her about), and gatekeeper to all who would intrude while I was working. She is a beautiful young lady with a beautiful heart. I love you this much (arms out wide) – stay beautiful inside and out.



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I would like to thank all of my professors at Georgia Southern University for allowing me the opportunity to expand my mind. Most of you challenged me to think about issues I paid little attention to (even those who personified the oppression we study). Thank you to my dissertation committee for allowing me the freedom to do things my way within the confines of acceptable research standards through fiction.

Most of all I want to thank Dr. Ming Fang He, my academic mother, without whom I would not have completed this program of study. When I was in a very dark place, you literally pulled me out of it and returned me to the world of academia. You have been my guiding light and inspiration throughout this process. When I grow up (academically), I want to be like you. To Dr. Weaver who never teaches a dull subject – thank you for daring to enter a dialogue that is not always comfortable but that will always thought provoking. To Dr. Ross – thank you for pushing me to challenge oppression through critical thought within my writing. You always make me think about what I thought I thought. Although intimidating at times, this has made me rethink a lot of my thought processes. To Dr. Carlyle – thank you for being a role model of how to break through some of the barriers in place in the South. You have all inspired me to want to question more, write more, and challenge more.

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PREPPING THE LAND: PROLOGUE

Writing about the “real” or lived South, if you are a Southerner, can be difficult because to “air dirty laundry” is not done. If it is not a pleasant topic, it should not be discussed openly. I have to watch what I say and about whom I talk about because everybody knows everybody else and their personal business. I have to live with the same people I write about; so, I feel that I must censor myself at times because some grudges are not worth courting. Being Black for me is just that – I cannot take it off at night or gain any special privileges because of it. Being raised in the South is just that too – you are raised with certain traditions and value systems that may not be your lived reality (at least that was my case). I found it difficult to view the South and my experiences objectively until I was introduced to another way of thinking. Before I go further, I must explain the use of capitals for “Black” and “South.” My purposes for capitalizing these two words are twofold: Black – to highlight the status in importance of the people to elevate them in status equal to that of the dominant society; South – to highlight and elevate the importance of the place as a geographic region as the place of my upbringing and many key events in the story of my main character.

Writing about the Black community may be an issue for me – I knowingly run the risk of being labeled as a race traitor because some of the issues are not positive and may show the seedier sides of my family and community experiences. No matter the repercussions, I must do what is right and not whitewash these experiences for the sake of protecting the community or my family. For too long, I have been silenced – mainly through the ingrained teachings of my childhood: the need to always show the positive, to deny the negative, to remain committed to uplifting family (literal and Black

community), and remain steadfastly loyal and supportive to family and community no matter what abuse they heap upon you because they are family and blood.

I am of the South and the South is within me. The seasons of my life were varied and sometimes harsh...I sometimes struggled for life and survival. The seeds of my life were planted long before I was born and I have reaped the harvest thereof. The sins of the mothers (and fathers) have been visited on the daughters (and sons) of the present and future. I grew up on a farm following the traditions handed down from former generations of slaves and hardworking Blacks. Farming is a noble but often tricky career choice. One must be somewhat scientific (mixing soils and fertilizers and rotating fields of crops to maintain fertile productive fields), clairvoyant (be able to predict times for planting and harvesting based on the sun/moon), hardworking (usually from sun up to sun down six days a week), and sometimes lucky (to have a good year and make a profit when pitted against a sometimes brutal Mother Nature). This was the legacy passed to us – to work the land every season of the year and the need to thank the Lord for any small blessings bestowed upon us as we eked out a living from the land.

The pastors of the churches I have attended in the past all taught us that what a person does during their lifetime is lived out for generations to follow. Church, during my childhood, was more than a place of worship it was also a meeting place. We met with family, neighbors, and our “church family” to fellowship, gossip, and see who was doing what with whom. For me, church was a sacred place of worship and the place I learned how to sing, how to usher, lead a devotional service, and accepted Christ as my savior. When my life became a living hell, church and God were not the sanctuary that I looked for and I eventually turned my back on the church for many years. Up until puberty, I

truly believed the “you reap what you sow” teachings because it was drummed into me at an early age that if you do right and treat people right, then good things will happen to you. For most of the early years, it appeared that when I did something good, I not only got satisfaction (internal warm and fuzzy) but it seemed that later, I would have something good happen to or for me. When I was bad, I almost always either got caught or if I thought I got away with it, would suffer some loss or retribution later on. At the pubescent age of 13, I knew I had not sown what I had to reap. I felt like I had been singled out by God and family to pay for someone else’s sin. This lesson of reaping lost its meaning for me; but, I still tried to live by doing my utmost to be good to others it hopes that one day I would reap a different crop of benefits. My grandparents were “upstanding” Christians (this was the face presented to the world) who did not push religion onto their children. My mother rarely went to church but allowed us to go whenever we wished. Of the six of us, I went most often and was baptized at age thirteen. Life experiences severely challenged my beliefs soon after my acceptance of Christ in my life.

For many years during and after my horrors, I questioned “*Why me?*” and “*Why would a good and just God let me be mistreated, abused, and victimized?*” I knew I was not supposed to question God; but, I desperately needed the answers. One day the answer came to me: “*Why not you? What makes you so special?*” From that moment on, I made choices (some good some bad) without caring about “What would Jesus do? Or what would he think?” before doing it. I just began the task of living and trying to survive from day to day. It took me over twenty years to come to grips with my childhood and to restore my faith because for most of those years, I was a mad Black woman. I was

intelligent, ambitious, and upwardly mobile in my career; but, I was mad as hell most of the time. I walked around mad at the world for no apparent reason. I was unable to understand why I was mad and would often sink into a depressive stupor because of it. This anger tinged my personal and professional lives in countless ways that I never took the time to care about, look at, or analyze. During those years, many people called me *Bitch* (many to my face as well as behind my back). My response to those brave enough to call me Bitch to my face was “*No, it’s Miss Bitch to you...I didn’t give you permission to call me by my middle name.*” I thought my life was perfect as it was and didn’t care what anybody else thought about me until my awakening at which time I felt the need to check myself.

The birth of my daughter was a catalyst for many changes I made both internally and externally in my life. It amazes me what can cause a person to pause and think. When I found that I was pregnant with a girl (first I cried because I did not want a daughter who would possibly go through life as I had) my outlook and anger changed. My mother and I reconnected after about seven or eight years of total silence between us (this was my decision and doing not hers). Relationship-building became important to me when before, as well as now, I had difficulty doing. I went into full protection mode...my daughter would not suffer as I had if I could protect her (a thing I felt I never had). People who knew me before then remark on how age has changed me; but, I felt the change in me begin when I first accepted the fact that I was having a girl and things completely shifted when I held her at the hospital for the first time. I had used my anger at my family and the world in general to raise my sons into honest and honorable young men. Operating on the notion that if I did not raise them right as children, the world (and penal system)

would raise them wrong later on, I was often a strict disciplinarian. My need to change myself so that I could raise a healthy young girl into a woman was paramount to me because I did not want her to be “damaged” or abused as I was. My main concern was being able to teach and guide her through this racist society without inflicting my pain and self-doubt onto her.

As I look at her now, at age nine going on fifty it seems, I reflect back and try to follow the examples of my maternal great-grandmother and maternal grandmother in how they guided me. They were both gentle women who when they spoke were often showing us how to do something or instructing us on what needed correcting. Neither was a strict disciplinarian but could wield a switch if necessary. My grandmother often thought of punishments worse than beatings like the time I fought my cousin Gina and beat her up. Instead of getting a beating, we had to hug and kiss each other and then tell each other “*I love you.*” I would have taken the beating any day. Both my grandmothers began telling me from an early age to “*keep ya skirt tail down, keep ya head in ya books, and be the first to go to college to make somethin’ outta ya shelf.*” I always knew I did not want to stay in the same situation that I grew up in. They expected more from me and I wanted more for myself. What neither of us thought of was how I was gonna do that. Nobody had ever been to college in the family, my guidance counselors didn’t talk to Black students about college, and I didn’t have a clue how to get into college. As luck would have it, I found my way into college in a roundabout way while in the military...I never took the SAT or any other test to get into college – I just began taking classes and eventually had enough credits to transfer into a four-year college (That, however, is another story). I always believed that I could ignore the teachings of my mother; but, in

reality I carried them with me as examples of what not to do in particular situations but also what to do when faced with some of the issues she faced as a mother – I was not as immune as I thought. Books became my escape, my guide, and my safe haven. I read every book I could get my hands on and learned there was another world out there beyond Nevils, Georgia.

How my life affected my students and how my experiences could help someone else in similar situations never entered my mind. I have come to realize that I have some commonalities with some of my students and children that I encounter on a daily basis. This program of study has forced me to realize that these experiences can validly assist in understanding and give voice to the Black female. I find that I am not alone – many young girls and women of all ethnicities and races share my experiences. Although we are becoming more aware of issues Black females suffer at the hands of Black men and society in general, more needs to be done. Oprah Winfrey used her talk show as a way to work through her issues of sexual abuse at the hands of her male relatives and acquaintances. She was once dubbed the queen of man haters when she discussed the abuse suffered at the hands of men; but, she was later called the queen of self-help when she focused on how women could not continue to suffer in silence and alone but seek the help necessary for them to heal. I don't think I ever healed – my wounds just scabbed over to hide the sores and scabs on my soul.

With the exception of the short amount of time spent on active duty in the military, I lived in the South for most of my life. I take my South and Southern upbringing with me even when I leave the area. It is not something like a coat you can take off and put on at will – it is a part of you that is easily recognized by insiders

(Southerners) and outsiders (northerners). To me, the South is like no other part of the world – it is as two-faced as a two-headed nickel. It is steeped in culture, graces, and traditions. When envisioning the antebellum South, one might envision large white houses with white columns, the Southern belle with her hoop skirt and parasol, and Blacks either working the fields or in the plantation houses singing because they are happy with their lot. Everyone seems cheerful and happy. Well, the reality is that some of this façade does exist for tourists; but, the South has a seedy side that is often white-washed. Southerners (Black and white) sometimes deny race issues or romanticize the Southern way of life to completely cover the harsh realities often faced by those living here – mainly Blacks, but some poor whites as well. These lived realities can manifest themselves in different ways into other areas of their lives. My aim is to as accurately as possible depict both good and bad realities of the lived experiences of my character.

When I recall my childhood in the South, I fondly remember a carefree childhood with balmy days, hot sand on my bare feet (sometimes so hot that one would dance and skip around to find a grassy or shaded spot to stand on), and backbreaking work days spent in the fields in hundred degree temperatures (in the shade). I spent all of my childhood on a working farm on which every task served a purpose. There was no time for wasted endeavors – everyone worked to ensure we were able to feed and clothe ourselves. There was no money for frivolities – food was grown, clothes were handmade, and everyone shared with each other when necessary. My brother and I spent any free time exploring the woods near our house. We picked berries, plums, or grapes (depending on the time of year) for our snacks and meals. He taught me to make a sling shot and how to kill small animals (birds and squirrels) during these adventures. We camped and

cooked in the woods from an early age. After killing our meals, we cooked them over open fires and devoured our food. Momma never worried about us spending time in the woods and nobody ever came looking for us – they were our playground and we were at home creating our adventures. Work and play were both family affairs – we worked the fields all week; tended our houses and yards on Saturday; and went to church, had huge family dinners, and played sports (usually softball) in the empty fields on Sunday. These were carefree and enjoyable times for the most part; but, there are dark memories that shadow the happy times.

Our day often began before daylight. We did chores – feeding the animals – before eating breakfast which was usually about daybreak. Either we piled onto the back of a pickup truck or climbed into a ford car of some type to caravan to whatever field we were working in for the day be it corn, potato, watermelon, peanut, tobacco, etc. It did not matter what field we drove to. They all looked like huge tracts with never-ending rows of crops. We usually could not see the end of the row by standing at the beginning. Some days the sun was so hot beating down on your head that it felt like your brain was actually cooking. We often ate hog brains and grits for breakfast so we knew it did not take much to fry them. Some Southerners will tell you that they eat everything on the hog from the “rooter to the tooter” or head to tail. Because most everything raised on the farm was for practical purposes, the summer months were not just for fun but were for hard work and hard play when we did have time off. We spent a lot of time barefooted during the summer months because money was scarce. I recall my mother often saying: *“I ain’t got money to buy no shoes. Ya better take care of ‘em ‘til ya git ya nex’ pair. When ya come home ya better take ‘em off else ya gonna be goin’ ta school barefoot.”* We heard

this year in and year out. There were six of us and our mother brought two pair of school shoes per year for each of us – one at the beginning of the school year and one pair at Christmas to last us through the remainder of the year.

If we did not have shoes that fit during the summer, we either wore shoes too big that had the toes stuffed with newspaper or cut the toes out of old school shoes that had gotten too small in order to have shoes to work in the fields. Needless to say, I learned not to be wasteful and to make other uses for things once they were obsolete (recycling in the early stages). Much of what I learned as a child created the adult I later became (positive and negative) – the work ethic, the pride in doing a job well, relying on myself rather than others, distrust of what people tell you (actions speak louder than words), and knowing that education is racist but can be accomplished. It is often difficult for me to watch my students (no matter their race or culture) “waste” their talents and my time. “Lazy” (meaning students who have opted out of the learning process as well as those who just won’t do anything) students really bug me because I know that if they do not try to break the cycle created for them, they are destined to repeat it and probably raise another generation to stay stuck in the same rut that has been furrowed for years. Some parents fail to take the good values and lesson of their past and pass them forward. Many (and I am one of them at times) are so stuck on ensuring that they give their children every opportunity possible that they sometimes fail to give them the foundations (character) to handle the opportunities. What some people can unintentionally but actively do is to teach their children to be rude and disrespectful. I have witnessed the disrespectful way many of my students talk to their parents; and, it is sometimes

appalling. What is more appalling is the way some parents appear to feel the need to apologize to the child when the child is being rude.

I try to greet everyone I meet in the halls, running around the park, on the street, etc. – that is how I was raised and I still do it forty-seven years later. Normally, I stand outside my classroom door and greet my students as they enter the room. The first few days I do this, I am often met with a mumble if they return my greeting, rolled eyes, and sucked teeth. I don't let it faze me; I continue to greet them and most eventually come around and begin greeting me first. I feel being courteous, polite, and civil should be lessons everyone aspires to practice because it makes my day go by more smoothly when I start out in a good mood – I tell my students and coworkers that I bring my sunshine to work with me every morning. It took this doctoral program to get me back to this feeling of happiness by looking at my past face-to-face and head-on. I shed a lot of old hurt and held-on-to grudges to be in a happy place emotionally.

What I call my unofficial Southern education began at an early age (at age three, I think, but as soon as I was born it sometimes seemed). My mother began instructing me in what to do or say and what not to do or say in public. The formal home training began, for me, began at age five. I learned how to cook, began working the fields, and babysat younger children. At first, I was so excited to be growing up and being allowed to go to the fields with the grownups. The older I got, the more I really understood the hard dead-end life we had. My experiences at home helped me to grow and navigate through the curriculum of the formal educational system. There was nothing in the public school system that was harsher than what I lived on a daily basis. Through the love/non-love and

relationship/non-relationships of and with my family, I have become a truly educated Black woman of the South.

I learned early on that some types of love and relationships were not worth having while others needed cultivation and nurturing because they were important. Except for my marriages and children, I have not formed too many lasting relationships for any long periods of time. Since Southerners have a habit of denying that the ugly seedy side of life exists, they will not speak of such matters (unpleasant family or life events) down South and in public. We carried on as if everything is pleasant and okay because speaking of it made it real while silence made it non-existent. Understanding of love and relationships can impact greatly on children and how they interact with adults outside their culture; so, teachers cannot just assume these students even know the proper (societal) way to act, can drop this baggage at the schoolhouse door, and are ready to conform to something else that is totally alien to them.

My body of work is a fictional story that closely parallels real events. It is intended to illuminate some of the least known and talked about aspects of my racial and cultural upbringing that greatly impacted and spilled over into the classroom without my intention of consciously doing it. Some stereotypes of Southern Black children include negatives such as: they are lazy, dumb, or just do not care about education. The reality may be the exact opposite – they are hardworking, intelligent, but unable or unwilling to assimilate into the mainstream educational system. Understanding the lived reality and child rearing techniques in our Black household and communities can help find solutions that answer some of the “perceived” problems teachers encounter and the oppressive society exploits. If teachers learn to recognize who they teach, they can better serve their

students. I often hear colleagues say “you don’t know what baggage these children come to school with. To reach them, you must have a clue about the baggage they bring with them.” While I agree this is true, I also offer another aspect that is rarely talked about – a glimpse at how the women in their life and what they live at home impacts their education. Most studies look at the community, socio-economics, and family history as it pertains to generational issues such as drugs, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases; but, few look at what impact the education (outside Black curriculum) these students receive before coming to the educational environment. Fewer still look at the issues specific to Black women (the myths of American society identified by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) – they are inferior in society, they are strong and not affected by life, unfeminine, prone to criminal behavior, and sexually promiscuous) and how their issues temper how their lives create a model for their children and how they raise the very students who enter the classrooms. Even fewer educators look at how their (the teachers themselves) personal experiences, values, and prejudices play out in the classroom and in the lives of their students.

I attempt to paint a portrait of a different type of Southern Blackness and use personal childhood experiences, experiences observed of acquaintances, and experiences relayed by personal acquaintances to counter the popular stereotypes and provide an authentic portrayal of a Black female child. I intend to reveal family traditions (beliefs and culture), personal history, and some widely known (and not so widely known) family secrets that many Black females encounter on a daily basis to provide the reader with a better comprehensive understanding of these issues. Because many of the stories are personal in nature, I will use fictional characters to protect the privacy of persons

involved. The areas I propose to look at are: lessons in survival which delves into lessons some Black children learn to adapt and survive in their family, community, and school; some of the issues strong Black women live with and through such as rape, incest, molestation, and loss of spiritual faith; and, various relationships children, especially girls, experience – some of these can lead to devastating relationships that have lifelong repercussions; others can be positive relationships that turn negative. These stories are grouped around chronological timeframes and age as well as major themes. Through the story, I intend to show how life experiences could be a repeat of lived experiences for some, why it did not for my main character, and how some Black girls struggle to break the cycle. My study also looks at how spirituality, traditions, and culture might affect the formal educational process in the classroom.

Although this study is regional to a Black rural Southern community, the issues addressed can be national in that they are not indigenous to the South but cultural to Black women. Many women living in the north, east, and west that may have different traditions face the same issues found in the South; but, I am not writing about those geographic locations – only the South where I was raised and have had many of my experiences. Women have been oppressed and marginalized in many ways and for many years. Many of the abusive experiences of women are because they are women not where they are from or what their socio-economic status is. I always felt my life was private (a Southern thing) and not for sharing with the public (airing my dirty laundry – also a Southern thing). I had fallen into the trap of marginalization that many Black females fall into – not assessing the value of my story because I believed nobody wanted to hear my complaints, problems, or issues. Besides, daily living and raising my children did not

leave a lot of time for self-pity or self-reflection. Since beginning this doctoral program at Georgia Southern University, I am beginning to understand the need for all voices to join the discourse – especially the Black female voice which is seldom spoken or heard from a Black female perspective.

Childhood is usually both happy and painful at the same time while adult life and choices are more often than not directly linked to that childhood. Most people have carried “baggage” around for many years (as many of us do) and not left it anywhere – it is part of them; but, by sharing my experiences and experiences of others, I hope to be able to release my baggage and to assist teachers and others in understanding some deep-seated issues in families. By sharing I also hope to shed light on traditions in my community (good and bad) that explain my behavior and attitudes and which may reflect some of the same issues they encounter daily. The Black female voice of the South is not widely published; but, the voices are beginning to sound and slowly make their way from margin to center. Many studies that do include the Black female are usually grouping her with white women (feminist) or the Black male (racism). This story is intended to give voice to the Black female sans white female and Black male except as periphery characters. My work will provide further insight into the oppression of Black females, their acculturation of the oppression, and some of the effects on their lives and the lives of their children. It will also provide a Black portrait of a Southern Black woman who teaches in a predominately Black school and how she navigates the otherness she feels as she encounters Black students from a different community (just as she is) that is alien to the world they enter each day (she to teach and they learn). She has been a teacher in many ways and for many years.

As I watch my daughter sleeping, I wonder what will be my legacy to her: How is her life is going to turn out? What she will be like as an adult? How can I protect her in a world that hates her on many different levels? How? The list becomes overwhelming. I am now an educated middle-aged Black woman who was born and raised in the South, who fought to get out of the circumstances of my birth, and who is still constantly trying to “make it” in this often cruel world. What makes a life worth telling? As I lived my life, I never thought about it being worth telling to anyone; but, as I look at it critically, I begin to think my life story has some merit or meaning to help others understand how my situational upbringing (which could very easily have made me a statistic) gave me the determination and fortitude to change my life (a thing that many of my sisters from all nationalities have not been able to do). I feel that I am one of the lucky ones. I have the scars on my soul, I put a smile on my face, and I hope to God that my daughter does not have to experience some of the things that I and other like me have had to endure.

As her mother, I fear that I may not be able to adequately prepare her to succeed. Her brothers are adults who have turned out to be good young men. Their lives are not perfect; but, I think I did an okay job preparing them to be self-sufficient. When I was young and my mother would, I felt, discriminate against the girls in favor of the boys, I did not understand when she would say, “*he’s a boy*” because it often meant he would be allowed to do something I wanted to do but could not. Life has shown me that, on some level, she probably knew best and was trying to protect me from myself and situations; but, I still think she was so oppressed or caught up in the tradition of oppression by the males in the family that she had no problem sacrificing us girls and our well-being. I used to think that my family had more perverts than the ones in the street. For me, this family

dynamic was unusual in how families operated; but, as I am now constantly seeing the number of issues arise in the classrooms with Black girls and the difficulties they face at home, in the communities, and in school as a result of dis-functionality and perverted family relationships, I find my family is not so weird...my experiences are not that unusual.

What I am realizing is that as more Black girls act out and report family issues, the attitudes and resource allocations are changing. If Black women continue to keep silent, there is no help available to assist them in rising out of their circumstances. Younger women of today are not keeping quiet as we were forced and taught to do. They are finding their voice. They are shedding light on their issues. They are getting help. I am sharing my story in hopes of adding to the dialogue of understanding the issues surrounding Black women of the South...this fight is not only against the oppression of the dominant society but also of the Black community. "By exposing my experiences. . . I hope and pray that many African men and women will gain an understanding of love and life, that they will have a chance to save themselves the pain of ignorance" (Souljah, 1994, p. xv). I think ignorance of Blacks (or any race other than your own) can lead to stereotypes and misjudgments.

My awakening and understanding of how my childhood experiences play out in my classroom were at times disturbing. The impact I have on my students is not something I take lightly; but, by not fully recognizing and dealing with the scars of my youth, I may not have been as adequate as I could have been to all my students but my Black students in particular. By sharing myself with the world, I hope, I will educate as well as inspire others to deal practically and realistically with their personal baggage and

our students who may also be carrying baggage around. I have created a composite (He, 2003) main character, Marie, who is an ordinary farm girl from a rural Southern community. I use her to retell key life events and experiences of myself and others using the seasonal metaphor (literal with crops as well as the Biblical). The life of my character is broken down into specific seasons of life: early childhood (with stepdad and after stepdad), the teen years, adulthood (relationships), teaching career, and as a doctoral candidate. Her life spans many seasons and harvests much like life on the farm. As I begin the first novellas, Marie is using the vernacular of her age and culture of the time; but, as the stories progress and as she becomes more educated and better able to code switch, her speech patterns change to reflect this in her ability to articulate with her environment based on with whom she is conversing.

The novellas section begins with an introduction and some background on the main character. It is divided into sections based, in the beginning, on chronological age and then later on themes or time periods. Each novella begins with a prelude to prepare the reader by introducing them to the time or topic about to be discussed in the story. At the end of the section of novellas is an interlude or summary that explains in more detail what Marie has going on and some discussion and focus on the main issues in the stories. I use the farming and seasonal metaphor for the titles.

In farming, proper planning is crucial if one is to create an abundant harvest. If planned properly, there are several harvesting periods (summer and winter season). Some summer crops can be planted later in the year and harvested during the winter if the farmer is adept at his or her craft. The land has to be prepped – all foreign objects must be removed (trees, stumps, and rocks) to allow for good growing condition; otherwise, the

plants can never create roots. Next, the soil must be turned (or plowed) to get a good mix of fertile soil for the seedlings or seeds (some seeds were planted in beds to later transplant in the fields while other were immediately planted in the fields as seeds). We often did this by just plowing the field with a tractor in an effort to mix the fertile layers of soil with the topsoil for better growing conditions. Then, the rows were harrowed with another tractor attachment – it furrowed (or made) the rows in preparation for planting. Seedlings were then removed from their beds at the appropriate time (and timing was crucial) for planting. Each seed or seedling is then planted into a hole punched with a stick or other usable object – one person punched holes, another deposited the seedling and lightly covered it with dirt, while a third watered each plant. The process was tiresome and backbreaking but a necessary part of farm life.

As the plants grow they are monitored for weed growth. Weeds need plucking or hoeing out as soon as they are discovered to prevent them choking the life out of the young plants or “taking over the field.” Once the plants mature and produce the desired products, they are harvested for consumption. Growing season is somewhat scientific and finite; but, the farmer must be able to read the signs of nature and respond to them also. The seasons of my life were not always as definite as those of the growing season and there is some overlap of events. The stories are real and are as accurately depicted as my memory recalls utilizing my composite character who can take on any role or side of the story. She is sometimes in the midst of the event or bystander or observer.

CHAPTER ONE

TURNING THE SOIL: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tilling the Ground - Black Feminist Thought, Womanism, and Critical Race Theory

My theoretical frameworks are Black Feminist Thought (BFT), Womanism, and Critical Race Theory. The aim is to provide an understanding of African American traditions, culture, spirituality, and how the educational environment can best serve the children of color by gaining insight into their culture. Many of these students often enter the educational environment heavily laden with problems that would break most adults. The “normally-recognized” hierarchies of authority they deal with are easily identified within the family, community, and the school environment. Some not-so-recognizable hierarchies that can be a combination of the different power structures within the culture become evident as the narrative unfolds. Power exercised over marginalized students is historically oppressive in every aspect of their lives. The African American voice and representation meta-narratives commonplace in the South cry out for a challenge because they keep these students in oppressive positions because of their race and cultural upbringing. The use of mass media and information technology to sell the public on the negative images and stereotypical depiction of criminal elements and poverty often found in the Black neighborhoods without regard to culture is further evidence that this issue needs challenging. The focus is on the lived experiences of children of color because they have yet to give voice to their experiences. The narrative will give life to the events, feelings, and repercussions of the lived experience from a Black female perspective. The goal is to provide insight into the strategies some students use to cope with or change

their circumstances and to shed light on another dynamic of the race/culture discussion and add another voice to the dialog.

Black feminist thought (BFT) predated much of the critical race/critical race feminism of today and other theoretical frameworks were born from it. It began with the daily lives of Black women and a shared oppression. Although Black women were not writing books about their oppression and plight, they utilized other outlets available to them such as “singing the blues,” having the conversations while going about their daily duties, or just sitting around the table discussing their issues in an effort to better their lives and experiences. It is a “dynamic system of ideas reactive to actual social conditions” (Collins, 1998, p. 9). Although the word “Black” is in its title, Black feminist thought is not limited to African-American women. It embraces women of all races. Black feminist thought is a push for empowerment of women of color through the collective works of all women. These collective works include such works as poetry, song, narrative, etc. that challenges the oppression, of any kind, of women of all walks of life. The resistance is not just theoretical and does not just come from the academics; it comes from women engaged in all types of work to include those who work in manual or service industries and identified as the “mules of society” to those employed in the professional careers across the world. All women of color from all walks of life and from all countries share commonalities in experiences of oppression due to colonization or subjugation by a dominant society. BFT is committed to social justice for all oppressed groups.

Black feminist thought has been around about as long as critical race theory (formerly called Legal Realism). The need for a theory to address the needs of African-

American women stemmed from their plight being silenced during the women's liberation movement. Women of color – slaves included - have for years exercised their voice to illuminate the plight of African-American women. Those voices are often silenced in a patriarchal society bent on white male dominance. There are six tenets or distinguishing features of Black feminist thought: 1) resists oppression through a dialectical relationship with activism; 2) links experience of all women who face common challenges from oppressive society to ideas of social justice; 3) provides connectivity of collective experiences and group knowledge through a dialogical relationship; 4) provides Black intellectuals the opportunity of self-analysis and merging of action with theory; 5) has adaptability or the ability to change as oppression changes to be better able to resist it; and 6) may have relationships to other social justice projects (Collins, 2000).

Social injustices are, for the most part, responsible for many of problems in education because education is political and social in nature (this can often be or become a moneymaking endeavor which is another story). Many of the practices in education do reinforce rather than break inequality issues (imposed by the dominant culture as the norm or standard) for the marginalized in education. “Black, and all, public education was a product of historically, politically, and socially constructed ideas” (Watkins, 2001, p. 179). Watkins’ (2001) *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954* is a historical look at how the educational system in the United States was methodically structured for the benefit of whites and the detriment of Blacks through philanthropic initiatives as well as social and political relationships. Dr. Watkins posits that the “architects” were not evil men, but men of vision on a mission. They were

racist businessmen who were also religious philanthropists. Their main goal was to ensure that they shaped the new nation's social structure in such a way that maintained racial status created in slavery. Their Accommodationist form of education was politically constructed to ensure education for all – just on different levels. It offered Blacks educational opportunities and a false hope for prosperity while only allowing them the opportunity to do menial jobs not on equal footing with whites. The architects created a school system and society that still exists today in the United States and other countries after colonial rule. These architects controlled the laws written and developed an educational system by financially supporting various public causes that furthered their goals. Attaching strings to monies donated allowed them to determine what types of classes were going to be taught and to keep citizens in their social class. This is still the living reality of our society today.

Social justice through activism is a theme running through both Black feminist thought as it challenges exploitive, oppressive, and discriminatory behavior in society by surviving the intersecting forms of oppression. Autobiographies, counter-stories, poetry, songs, etc. share the daily experiences of the oppressed as they experience discrimination. From these experiences, a common theme or grouping of shared experiences take shape. Empowerment from the stories of these women assists the BFT and womanist movement.

BFT advocates for social justice and also has race as an issue. It begins with the ordinary individual then encompasses all walks of life to begin a theoretical framework with gender as the central issue but also with issues of class, sexuality, religion and nation. BFT pulls all experiences to form or create a common theme. Black women understand their oppression and when faced with obstacles in righting the wrongs

committed against them, they stay the course and continue to fight. “It is more likely for Black women . . .to have critical insights into the condition of our oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures” (Collins, 2000, p. 35). Oppression and marginalization “. . . stimulate the need for new Black feminist analysis of the common differences that characterize U.S. womanhood” (Collins, 2000, p. 40). Unfortunately, this has not been the case in accepted published literature – it has been stereotypical and/or mythical rather than realistic. “It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment” (Lorde, 1984, p. 45). Theorists from outside the culture about which they are theorizing may have an inherent problem in their research – they do not know what it is like to be what they are studying. The prevailing authoritative or “true” literature on Blacks in the U.S. has not been written by Blacks but by white people who tells us what it is to be Black. For Black writers, this means upsetting the cart for the elite white male “norm” and “truth” setters (Collins, 1998). Overcoming the prevailing stereotypes has been and continues to be an uphill battle for Black writers who try to set the record straight. No matter what the socio-economic status, Black people from all walks of life more than likely have or will experience some sort of racism and oppression at some time in their life. Black women recognize their oppression for what it is on a daily basis and have various ways of expressing their discontent – this can range from nonverbal protest to actual legal action (a lot depends on the level of discontent at the time of the incident). For many, the blatant disrespect is usually the last straw before action. The intellectual may do research and write about it and/or become activists or critical theorist to effect change while the poor Black woman may follow legal recourses or “sing the blues” about events that make up

their life experiences. “Even though Black women’s autobiographical writing historically have remained largely unpublished and private, Black women wrote them anyway, because such writings challenge prevailing interpretations of Black women’s experience” (Collins, 2000, p. 48). Both extremes of social standing, and everyone in between, have their own way of analyzing their situation, developing collective theories, and developing ways or ideas about changes that need to take place to better their circumstances.

Black feminist thought does not operate in a vacuum. Its predecessor – the women’s liberation movement or white feminist movement (the original feminist movement), silenced the Black female voice by denying the discourse on race issues. This movement only addressed the issue of sexism which mainly addressed the issues of privileged white women rather than all women (hooks, 1984). The Black struggle is not just a Black thing. Black feminist thought supports the struggle of all exploited groups for social justice. Supporting other groups in their endeavors helps the Black struggle for justice.

Adding Fertilizer - Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) provides an alternate way of analyzing racial issues in society and their relationship to and impact on the marginalized or oppressed. The four insights and/or observations that characterize Derrick Bell’s scholarship of critical race theory in legal studies are:

. . . society’s acceptance of racism as ordinary, the phenomenon of white’s allowing [B]lack progress when it also promotes their interests (interest convergence), the important of understanding the historic effects of European

colonialism, and the preference of the experiences of oppressed peoples narrative) over the “objective” opinions of whites. (Taylor, 2009, p. 4)

Bell’s cutting-edge scholarship has resulted in some of his students and other legal scholar taking up the charge and to begin to challenge laws and policies. Their aims are to promote equality and democracy with a critical eye on the four criteria used to analyze racial issues: racism is normal in society, the interests of the dominant must converge with the interests of the oppressed group for change to happen, colonialism had an effect on the oppressed as well as the oppressor, and narratives of the oppressed provides a more composite history for society..

Bell contends that the U.S. society is inherently racist because white superiority was socially created by whites and is so ingrained in the every life of citizens that it is not unusual or even recognized by most white citizenry and the citizens of color also adopt the status quo as “normal and natural” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 12). The result of colonialism and slavery and their lingering effects are often written out of history in an effort to create the amnesia needed to erase the unpleasant past of genocide and slavery in the United States. When race is discussed, white is not usually discussed as a race – it is the “supreme” race standard by which all other races are measured; therefore, their interests are what most often drive societal discourse.

Any laws or policies enacted by white society for the benefit of Black citizens coincide with their interests. Even the historical landmark case, *Brown v. B.O.E.*, would not have been such a landmark case had it not been for the government at the time wanting to appear as in favor of human rights, equality, and a “democratic” society to the rest of the world especially in communist and third world countries (Bell, Jr., 1995). They

could no longer deny Blacks equal access to education while spouting equal rights for the rest of the world. As Blacks try to voice their issues and concerns, they are often ignored and silenced because their viewpoints can often “trigger powerful emotions, ranging from denial, anger, and defensiveness to shock, surprise, and sadness” (Taylor, 2009, pp. 7-8) from whites. This continues to be an issue today – a result of historical denial of slavery, racism, and colonialism.

Colonialism has, no matter where it has taken place, often left the oppressed and the oppressor with the “superiority complex.” The oppressor often does not recognize the fact that they oppress less fortunate and that the lingering effects are not the fault of the oppressed but theirs. They also fail to recognize “white privilege” stifles equal opportunities alluded to in a democratic society. The oppressed will often identify with and accept the stereotypical descriptions assigned to them by their oppressors to the point of denying or suppressing their native culture (which includes storytelling and oral history for Blacks – many of whom have been denied their voice for many years). Still others fail to utilize the lessons of earlier generations.

“Historically, storytelling has been a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 16). Rather than “hitting the wall square on,” many Black writers use narrative to express their point of view while deflecting the reader from the “wall” of racism and issues of oppression in such a way as to show them the wall that was there in the first place. It makes the bitter pill go down a little easier.

Roithmayr (1999) has identified two doctrines that she uses to define critical race theory: 1) CRT provides “critical intervention into traditional civil rights scholarship . . .

describes the relationship between race-neutral ideals . . . and the structure of white supremacy and racism” (p. 1); and 2) CRT, as “race-conscious and quasi-modernist intervention into critical legal scholarship. . . proposes ways to use the ‘vexed bond between law and racial power’ to transform that social structure and to advance the political commitment to racial emancipation” (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 1). Although the groundwork was laid in the 1970s, CRT emerged as an entity in 1989 with two dominant themes – the social construction thesis and the racism is embedded in American society. The social construction thesis portends that races have been socially constructed rather than being based on biology. The social construction provides hierarchical privilege for some races over others (Morrison, 1998; Wing, 2003). The second theme – racism is embedded in society – purports the fact that racism is not easily eradicated by laws because those laws are designed to benefit the privileged group.

Racism is like a cancer that permeates the body. It must be tackled with comprehensive approaches like the surgical, chemical, and radiation therapy of fundamental socioeconomic change. Despite the massive blitzkrieg, racism may persevere, spread, appear to be in remission for a while, only to reappear in a more virulent form. (Wing, 2003, p. 5)

This ordinary racism, which is often subtle and taken for granted, is not easily challenged because the “race-neutral” policies seem to be so, but they most likely provide the privileged more privileges while the oppressed are usually more oppressed. The most offensive acts of discrimination can be rectified through legal means whereas subtlety is hard to pin down. Critical race theorists highlight these issues with their research and writings to bring them to the forefront in the minds of Americans. This gives those

adversely affected the ability to determine their needs and ways to correct the injustices. CRT does not “play the race card” as alleged by critics; instead, it reiterates the fact that American society is divided into racial groups with a dominant group that has advantage over the “others” which are usually “of color” minorities. Denial by the dominant group that society is a “colorblind” society is to actually deny the fact that they are trying to “whitewash” the ordinary racism experienced by the others in society on a daily basis. The arguments “I am not racist, my family never owned slaves, and I don’t see color when I look at people” all ignore the fact that race must be viewed and dealt with to right the wrongs of a racist society – as Cornel West’s title implies “race matters” especially when white middleclass men and women make decisions that adversely affect people of color.

Creating Fertile Soil – BFT and CRT

Both Black feminist thought and critical race theory focus on resisting oppression, identify race as an issue, call for social justice through activism, advocate giving voice to the silenced, and use narratives to perpetuate a change for the betterment of the oppressed and marginalized. As they address these issues, both frameworks bring to light the daily discriminations suffered in daily lives of Blacks, in colleges’ and universities’ professorate, and in our public school systems across the nation. Both frameworks believe in giving voice to the oppressed through narratives of lived experiences. It seems that narrative is more palatable than the naked unvarnished truth. Expressing discrimination and unfair treatment seems to raise the defenses of the privileged dominant society rather than beginning a discussion of the issues. Simply raising an issue can quickly get responses of denials and excuses or worse the co-opting of the issue to

turn it into something totally different that what was intended – this often results in more harmful than beneficial effects for Blacks. A prime example of this, for me, is the issue of race and the presidential office. I think many racists use the fact that we have a Black president as a way of saying to the nations and the world – “*see we are a very democratic, non-racist, colorblind society and race is no longer an issue in the United States.*” In the meantime the Blacks of this country have not reaped any benefits of this change and the President is, in fact, being blamed for things that took whites years to put into place and ruin the economy. Americans expect him to fix it in one year while society took decades of bad decisions to get here.

Social justice through activism is a theme running through both BFT and CRT. Black feminist thought challenges exploitive, oppressive, and discriminatory behavior in society by surviving the intersecting forms of oppression. Autobiographies, counter-stories, poetry, songs, etc. share the daily experiences of the oppressed as they experience discrimination. From these experiences, a common theme or grouping of shared experiences take shape. Empowerment from the stories of these women assists the BFT movement. CRT “contains an activist dimension...[that] not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better.” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3) In a time when dominant society is calling for a colorblind look at race, people of color bring the issue into focus – to fight racism, one must look at race to address issues because one cannot create policies for “all” because these types of policies continue to perpetuate the inequality and injustices inherent in society because these policies continue to uphold the dominant race as superior while ignoring the culture of

people of color. One of the main goals of CRT is to include the voice and works of people of color to fight against racism. Critical race theorists utilize narrative that possess a common trend or theme or through storytelling to illustrate their experiences with racism.

Although both BFT and CRT advocate for social justice, CRT began in the academic arena with race as the central issue then progressed to the courtrooms across the nation through critical analysis of the existing laws; whereas, BFT, which also has race as an issue, began with the ordinary individual then encompasses all walks of life to begin an theoretical framework with gender as the central issue but also with issues of class, sexuality, religion and nation. BFT pulls all experiences to form or create a common theme while CRT looks at the law and experiences with racism and discrimination within the legal context. “Critical race theorists have built on everyday experiences with perspective, viewpoint, and the power of stories and persuasion to come to a better understanding of how Americans see race” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 38). The narrative analysis and legal storytelling exercised by critical race theorists has helped to debunk the ‘white-washing’ of African-American history, as well as the history of other ethnic groups of color, in the U.S. and thus advance the CRT movement toward social justice. The narratives also help the stories or the history of the oppressed to be written and told.

My fiction will be based on my life and those of close female family members (aunts, sisters, cousins, and mother) and friends. Our stories, collected around main themes, will be accurately retold utilizing a composite character to support the themes. Our shared experiences will provide insight into our lives – as women, as survivors, as

God-fearing women (meaning we believe in God's grace and punishments), as mothers, as sisters, and as educators (for our children). The narrative will provide cultural understanding that is addressed in sweeping and ambiguous terms. The issues are seldom addressed head-on. Until they are, they may continue to be a problem with the Black culture which affects the classroom and all other aspects of the lives of Black children.

My inquiry, I hope, will add to the dialogue of issues of women in the South – their culture and traditions, and their survivability. It will, I hope bridge the gap between theory and practice. There is little research that bridges the gap between theory and practice. Academic works written by teachers or professors are normally theoretical in nature and far removed from the classroom to be practical. The works that can be applied in the classroom, such as Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2009), *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* which provides teachers with some guidelines or ways to deal with students are good guidebooks for teachers to use. There is much theorizing about education of Blacks in the South by whites and others not from the South. To me the South is not like any other part of the nation – I have lived in various parts of the U.S.; so, I feel comfortable with this statement. What some see as slow backward thinking communities can more often conceal fast-thinking but slow acting societies. Black feminist thought connects my autobiographical stories to the educational system in general and my experiences in particular to a system of patriarchal oppression both from society and from the Black community – especially for the female who is doubly oppressed. My traditional Southern upbringing of hard work, family traditions, and Baptist religion instilled in me certain values and ethics that are sometimes uncompromising – although I often was conflicted by what I was educated (at home and

in school) to believe and what I actually experienced. Those conflicts became another dynamic of my personality that I had to analyze and come to terms with.

As a teacher in an urban setting, I must analyze who I am based on my experiences, my preconceived notions and their effects on how I teach my students, and also how I have been socialized to be oppressive rather than empowering in the classroom. A lot of what I see young Black girls going through in school I can identify with as once being a young Black female; but, on the other hand, some of what they experience, I have never had to experience. I survived some of what they currently live daily, I bear witness that exploitation can be both family and socially created. I have never critically looked at myself or experiences as an aid to others until now, and I think my personal autobiography and the biography of others and the sharing our experiences will provide another voice to the charge for social justice in education. Exploring and analyzing the history while sharing the life stories will, I think, shed light on oppression and exploitation of young Black females. To analyze the educational policies and practices that track and exploit African-American students, critical race theory provides the proper framework; but, when gender is also at issue, Black feminist thought is best for this critical study. As an educator, I think many of the practices and policies, while purported as beneficial to the Black community, further prepare, I think, to send our children to the welfare rolls or to the penitentiary. For years, I have struggled with not being able to effect much change; but, through this program of study, I am finding that change begins with one voice that will eventually progress to a movement if it is worthwhile. This type of research has already begun; therefore, I can only hope to add to the discourse in such a way as to propel the movement forward for education reform.

CHAPTER TWO

PREPPING THE ROWS FOR SEEDLINGS: LITERATURE REVIEW

Rotting Bulbs: Rape, Incest, and Molestation

The literature on these phenomena (incest, molestation, and rape) in the Black community is not included in mainstream research. This phenomenon has been and continues to be a “touchy” and taboo subject. Some literature concentrates on the individual abuse while others group all abuse into one category. There are studies that focus on the religiosity of the abused and their parents. Both the community and religiosity of women can play a role in acceptance of abuse. There are those in the Black community who advocate silence and hiding the true facts about the rape of Black women and girls by Black men and boys (Morrison, 1998; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Women who opt to report the assaults are sometimes considered traitors to the race and often ostracized which furthers the abuse and disgrace these women suffer. Understanding this dynamics of the Black community will be a long time in coming – even for those of us who are part of the culture. Knowing and understanding Black ideology and history in the United States are necessary to understand why Black women’s experiences are both parallel with and different from those of the other races. Slavery and its byproducts are still felt in the Black race today. Rape originally applied only to White women – a Black woman could not be raped according to the law.

. . . it has been the Negro woman, more than anyone else [American Indians, Poles, Jews, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, labor groups, anarchists, and so on], who has borne the constant agonies of racial barbarity in America, from the very first day she was brought in chains to this soil. The Negro woman through the years

has suffered (and endured) every sexual outrage (with all of the psychological ramifications) that a “democratic” society can possibly inflict upon a human being. The sexual atrocities that the Negro woman has suffered in the United States, South and North, and what these atrocities have done to her personality as a female creature, is a tale more bloody and brutal than most of us can imagine. I believe it was a Black woman who first uttered the words: ‘Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.’ (hooks, 1995, p. 123)

What hooks posits is profound in that it points to the fact that these women are forever changed and continue to suffer the effects of the atrocities heaped upon them when they are least able to protect themselves and when they should feel the safest. Black women suffered abuses heaped upon them by Whites with a resilient strength – being bought and sold as property; having their families torn apart when husbands and children were sold off; rape or the threat of rape; bearing children from rapist; (Takaki, 1993) and then suffering some of these same atrocities from Blacks men (father, brother, husband, etc.) who should have been protecting them. “The development and socialization of African American women have been molded and understood within the framework of perceptions and agendas of members of the dominant society” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 20). The fact that Black women had nowhere to turn, either in White or Black society, has been internalized as a given for many in today’s society. For decades Blacks kept to themselves as a survival mechanism; but, the cloak of secrecy also keeps the dark and sinister nature of the race hidden from mainstream society. Another byproduct of slavery, Blacks have been indoctrinated with and internalized the oppressive and patriarchal beliefs (Takaki, 1993) as well as the religious double-standard of the dominant society –

belief in a merciful God who would allow pain and suffering of the weakest in society. My family viewed religion as more than worshipping God. Religion, for most – even those who do not attend church regularly, is the lens that they view their lives through. God gets the credit and the blame for life events.

“ . . . [O]ne common ground [most] women. . . had was the belief and trust in a power higher than themselves. An old saying, which has been passed down from generation to generation, is: *God, will not give you more than you can handle*. What I took from that lesson was that I should not complain about my lot in life because if I was going through it then God was either leading me to something greater or was leading me through hard times to teach me a lesson for making a decision earlier that I probably should not have made (reaping what I had sown). Our spirit has always been able to sustain us as women. Spirit has paved ways for many, opened doors for others, and even allowed some to cling to life when it seemed impossible” (Daniels & Sandy, 2000, p. 32). There is also the staunch belief that no matter how bad things are one must always maintain the appearance of “living right” and showing the world their best side or face rather than giving society yet something else to talk about. Daughters, no matter how hard they try to be different, many times emulate their mothers and mimic their attitudes and beliefs (Doswell et al., 2003). When the mothers blame rather than sympathize with their abuse, some children feel doubly betrayed – by God who should not have let it happen and their mothers for lack of support while other begin the healing process through their faith in God. How can a good, merciful, and forgiving god allow something so horrible and life-changing happen to a good and faithful believer? According to Webb & Otto Whitmer (2003) and Gall, Basque, Damasceno-Scott, & Vardy (2007), children

who are victims of incest can sometimes come to think of God as a punisher rather than merciful and loving. These victims of sexual abuse sometimes have difficulty forming the religious link with God because of their anger, have experiences of alienation and guilt for their feelings toward God, and will seek other religions to attempt to re-establish their faith in God. Those who begin healing by relying on their faith look for meaning in their experience and survival. Women may not only question their beliefs but also their very being or belonging to a race or culture that protects the villains. When the community (male and female) denigrate victims who would report or talk about the abusers as “traitors of the race” or opportunist who only seek to “bring a brotha down,” the stigma of being a traitor and the further abuse from the community make many victims reluctant to report rape and abuse; thus, furthering the perpetuation of oppression.

There are counseling programs and treatments for girls after the abuse; but, few resources are available to prevent the abuse from occurring especially when the mother is an unwitting accomplice to the abuse. According to Gilmartin (1994), parental reaction creates the trauma for the child more than the actual abuse. If the parents overact by becoming hysterical or attacking the abuser, the child may feel guilty. Other things that can negatively affect the child or have them feeling they did something wrong to deserve the abuse include such things as: parents attacking, berating, belittling, punishing, or forcing the child to tell officials that they (the victim) lied about the attack. Most often, a mother has the most influence on a daughter’s view of sexuality and abuse (Doswell et al., 2003). Mothers who blind themselves to the abuse - they see but refuse to see what happens to their daughter, refuse to believe there is abuse – most often believes the abuser rather than their child and allow turn a blind eye to the abuse and keep the man

rather than be alone. Others who know and accept the fact that there is abuse will often seek retribution through the court and penal system and counseling for their child. Many times, if the mother is being abused, she may unwittingly pass this legacy on to her children (sons and daughters). The lessons learned during their childhood become a family legacy – the victims repeat their mother’s life by remaining in abusive relationships (Champion & Kelly, 2002) or becoming abusers.

The schools [at least the two I have worked in for the past few years] are experiencing a rise in the number of violent episodes from Black females. Teachers are in position to experience the lives of their students in ways no training can prepare them for. “You never know what other people are dealing with. You never know how your actions may affect another person. You never know what driving forces were present during someone’s childhood or formative years” (Williams, 2000, p. 7). When questioned or counseled, these girls are revealing a life rife with abuse and neglect. With the number of studies into all aspects of our society, one would think that the studies on rape, molestation, and incest would be exhaustive; but there are few studies to deal with this issue. To look for studies on African American teens is even more so. There are many studies on the African American male and his plight in society; but the African American female who is one the most marginalized of the marginalized and the most oppressed of the oppressed. “African American girls are at greater risk of early sexual behavior . . . because they experience pubertal development earlier and may appear older and sexually desirable to older males” (Doswell et al., 2003, p. 56). When these men molest them, they have limited avenues for protection. Not only is she marginal in the mainstream society but also in the African American society as well for she is relegated to one of the most

unimportant class in society – African American female – the triple marginalization that Chesney-Lind (2001) identifies as age, race, and gender. She may not feel she can turn to society or her community for help without incurring the wrath of both and either.

Gilmartin (1994) discuss how abuse manifests itself in the lives of abused girls.

Young female victims are sometimes blamed by their mothers for breaking up the family to which the victim may respond in various ways – she may feel betrayed, shocked and have a negative reaction; or, she may feel guilt for inviting the offense in some way, and wonder about her reputation and marriageability (how others will view her). If the assault was violent, victims may display hysteria, shock, feelings of hostility towards the offender, question what she did wrong to warrant the attack, display a grief-like reaction, or lose self-confidence. They may become self-destructive and delinquent (Chesney-Lind, 2001) abusers, addicts, or advocates (Doswell et al., 2003; Edmondson & Zeman, 2009; Green, Russo, Navratil, & Loeber, 1999; Hammond & Calhoun, 2007; Inderbitzen-Pisaruk, Shawchuck, & Hoier, 1992; Lev-Wiesel, Amir, & Besser, 2005; Morrison, 1970). Other manifestations of the abuse include: self-loathing, violent outbursts, obesity, depression, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, and prostitution (Lev-Wiesel, 1999; Lev-Wiesel, Amir, & Besser, 2005). The number or percentage of victims who do not report their abuse is not known; but, whether they report or not, victims usually show some sort of manifestations. Victim response to abuse cannot be predicted. The victim may respond negatively or positive and there is no way of predicting which.

Many young ladies struggle with the abuse in silence because the silence is accepted – both at home, in the church, and in the community as a whole. In some cases it is not an issue of hints or alluding to keeping quiet – girls are told to lie (say she was

lying and he [the perpetrator] did not molest her) or to just be quiet because as long as she is not “really” hurt she will be okay. Some mothers do not want the stigma of being a “race rat” or betrayer of the race while others focus on keeping the man at the expense of their daughter’s well-being. The messages these behaviors send to daughters are numerous and varied depending on how these girls respond. Some, not all, churches take the stance that keeping quiet about such issues is a good thing because it keeps the Black man from looking negative in the media. They may also preach forgiveness of the incident and the perpetrator because God expects it. This religious stance can leave the victim with feelings of worthlessness as well as shame.

Sexual abuse of children – especially in incest (the most taboo of the group of sexual offenses) – is not a subject most parents of victims want to talk openly about. Even if the perpetrator is not a family member, they are sometimes reluctant to discuss the issue. Many parents do not relish having their child rehashing the experience. Studies show some parents feel guilty for not protecting their children and others really care more about things other than the abuse of their children. For a race that prides itself on overcoming its harsh history and demands that society confronts its atrocities rather than hiding them, the African American people need to also address this harsh reality and history. Until these issues are addressed in the Black culture, there is not a real chance to break the silence and heal the wounds – many of which have also lingered since slavery.

Transplanting Seedlings from the Beds: What is My Culture?

As I read the words of Derrida (1996) “I have one language and it is not mine,” I think about my culture, race and identity. I never really thought of what these words actually meant and considered them to mean the same thing. My racial identity does not

fit neatly into one category because I have mixed blood and ancestry – Black and White. My cultural identity has become adulterated with my lived experiences. My identity is skewed because my race and culture are not definitively categorized – I have one culture and it is not mine or do I have a definitive culture at all?

What is race? What is culture? What is identity? How are they related to each other? How important are they to the education of Black Americans? There have been countless essays on these issues. The discourses and debates continue. It is my aim to focus briefly on each issue and how they relate to the education of Black youth in America. I believed race and culture could be used interchangeably, but the negative connotations associated with race makes culture a better term. I will attempt to look briefly at the issue of racial and cultural identity and how they relate to education of Blacks in America.

I use the term Black because African-American will not include the diverse populations of Blacks in the United States such as Haitian-American, Cuban-American, Jamaican-American, etc. The diaspora of the Black population created a new race of people made up of an array of multiple cultures, races, and experiences. Their common struggle through slavery forced them to create new customs and traditions by adopting the Western culture and merging it with their background. This was not difficult for them because they were from a fairly advanced civilization.

Culture is “a tightly bounded set of linguistic, aesthetic, and folkloric practices specific to a particular group; group identity is seen as the true self within the collective association” (McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, & Park, 2005). This group shares common customs, institutions, and achievements. Wittgenstein (1980) says “culture is like a big

organization which assigns each of its members a place where he can work in the spirit of the whole” (p. 6e). Although members of a culture are individuals, their common lived experiences are what make up the group. Wittgenstein (1980) goes on to say that “[i]f you want to see a . . . description of a whole culture, you will have to look at the works of its greatest figures” (p. 9e). For much of America’s history, most of the Black history and contributions have been oppressed and marginalized to the point of being inconsequential. However, there is now a rich assortment of Black artifacts - authors, artists, linguists, poets, musicians, philosophers, scientists, leaders, etc. who illustrate a rich history. Why don’t more Black students know of these people and their accomplishments? Simply because the history of the Black race is not taught in school as part of the curriculum, talked about in the homes as important role models, or publicly acknowledged – you cannot talk or teach intelligently about a race or culture you know little or nothing about.

Theorists have had a difficult time defining race – some argue that race is a social construct while others argue that it is not real or is an illusion – the definition is constantly changing (Omi & Winant, 2005). Some theorists feel that the word *race* should be avoided, because of its associations with the now discredited theories of 19th-century anthropologists and physiologists about supposed racial superiority.” A “difficulty in writing about race [is] that a national discussion it is always raging on while one is trying to figure things out. . . [This] can foster the feeling that one is chasing an ever-changing phenomenon, an elusive animal that escapes every grip” (Steele, 1998, p. xiv). Race was first viewed as a way to categorize different groups of people without the negative connotations. As time passed the issue of racial superiority “raised its ugly

head,” anthropologists and physiologist have opted for more politically correct terms such as: ethnic groups, community, etc. According to Omi and Winant (2005), “race is a relatively impermeable part of our identities” (p. 5). Blacks see themselves as others see them (mirror image); so, race is an intrinsic part of Black identity. People normally see skin color before they see anything else when meeting (it’s obvious what color a person is – not necessarily the ethnicity); so, Blacks see skin color before seeing anything else too. Carter and Helms (1988) believe culture is a social process rather than hereditary. They posit:

. . . the cultural integrity or integrativistic perspective, Black culture and personality are best explained through an understanding of the complex and varied reactions individual Blacks have had to the socialization process. Adherents of the cultural integrity model believe that identification with one's ascribed racial group (i.e., racial identity) represents a reference group orientation which is not determined by other reference groups such as socioeconomic class. Racial identity attitudes represent the extent to which persons hold positive, negative, or mixed attitudes toward their own racial or cultural group and their place in it (i.e., their attitude regarding their racial or cultural identity). (Carter & Helms, 1988)

Within their discourse, Carter and Helms discuss the cognitive developmental model proposed by W. E. Cross in which an individual passes through stages to reach their racial identity:

[1] One begins in the Pre-encounter stage where one's racial identity attitudes are primarily pro-White and anti-Black. That is, the individual devalues his or her ascribed race and racial group in favor of Euro-American culture. [2] The Encounter stage is hypothesized to begin when the individual has an experience which challenges his or her view of "Blackness." [3] The next stage, Immersion-Emersion, involves learning and experiencing the meaning and value of one's race and unique culture. [4] The internalization stage is the stage of racial identity in which the individual achieves pride and security in his or her race and identity. The racial identity or cultural integrity model . . . suggest[s] that Blacks in different stages and or who hold differing racial identity attitudes have responded differently to their sociocultural environment. Racial identity attitudes appear to represent a psychological orientation which reflects one's personal reaction to his or her psychosocial experiences. . . .

Researchers cannot assume automatically that if one is Black one identifies with Blacks or Black culture, or that if one is middle class or upper class one does not identify with Blacks or Black culture. . . . Racial identity attitudes appear to be related more to internal functioning than to external forces. It seems that this developmental psychosocial process is more a result of an individual's interpretation of his or her socialization experiences and personal development than it is a reflection of actual external conditions imposed by social class (Carter & Helms, 1988).

“Identity is a new term, as well as being an elusive and ubiquitous one” (Gleason, 1983, p 910). Identity is “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is, the characteristics determining this, or a close similarity or affinity – from the Latin *identitas*, from *idem* ‘same.’ According to Erickson (1968) who is credited with popularizing the terms identity and identity crisis, the more we try to define identity, the broader the definition becomes. Erickson believed he could:

. . . not interpret these themes [*invisibility, namelessness facelessness*] as a mere plaintive expression of the Negro American’s sense of “nobodyness,” a social role which . . . was his heritage. Rather, I would tend to interpret the desperate yet determined preoccupation with invisibility on the part of these creative men a supremely active and powerful and to be heard and seen, recognized and faces as *individuals with a choice* rather than as men marked by what is all too superficially visible, namely, their color. They are in a battle to reconquer for their people . . . what Vann Woodward calls a “surrendered identity.” I like this term because it does not assume total absence . . . but something to be recovered. . . [to become] a bridge from past to future. (1968)

For slaves, identity was closely tied to education rather than race because education was more than a symbol; it was freedom. Because literacy represented freedom for the people [Blacks], those who were literate felt obligated to teach others to read in order free all the people. Their unselfishness was based on the village concept of community well-being from the traditions of their homelands. “In oppressive regimes, everyone needs everyone else. That is part of what makes the master-slave dialectic so vicious and corrupting for

all who participate” (Garrison, 1997, p. 165). Four generations later, I find that the village concept is replaced with a concept of self-preservation and “forget thy neighbor.”

I identify myself as an intelligent, strong, and Black women – the opposite of most stereotypes which portrays us as loud, brash, unsophisticated, and “ghetto” – although I can play that role really well. “Resisting the stereotypes and affirming other definitions of themselves is part of the task facing young Black women in both White and Black communities” (Tatum, 1997, p.57). I see many young Blacks (male and female) who have accepted rather than resisted the negative images. Some of them have no positive role models within their world and deal with racially biased “teachers [who] unwittingly reinforce stereotypes and prejudices about students based on race, class, and gender” (Gordon, 1988, p.). In many instances, these educators are white females who ascribe to the identifying a “them” and “us” which further reinforces stereotypes involving gender, class, identity, and power. For years Blacks have been portrayed as less than desirable as people, citizens, neighbors, and parents. My professor, Dr. William Reynolds, once posed a question to our class that was thought provoking (as he intended). He asked the questions: *If they [Blacks] were so undesirable, why would whites entrust them with their children to nurse and to rear? Would anyone in their right mind entrust their most valuable asset [children] to undesirables? Was it because maybe they did not value their children?* This is one of the many contradictions of the Western culture and how Blacks were viewed.

I’ve come to the conclusion that race, culture, and identity do not mean the same thing and should not be used interchangeably. Culture is common features while race is a group sharing common features or language; therefore, race only one component of

culture. Trying to define one's race and culture can be quite daunting. What makes a person Black? What does it mean to be Black? According to Tatum (1997), "the parts of our identity that do capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us" (p. 21). We see ourselves as others see us and "the concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts" (Tatum, 1997, p. 18). Negative "mirror images" that Blacks see eventually seeps into their definition of their Blackness.

Black as an identity or race is a bit of a misnomer. "Every racial identity is unstable." (Omi & Winant, 2005, p. 6). For most Blacks, skin color is where the similarities end. Although slaves shared the same struggles, they were often not from the same place. The first slaves were from the Caribbean Islands. The African slaves came later. They were often from tribes that did not share the same language, culture, or values. This "hodgepodge" group of Blacks was only classified as Negro – not Jamaican, Swahili, Zulu, etc. It mattered not what race they identified with – they were all dehumanized and subjugated. Their "racial identity . . . [was] mediated . . . [by their experiences and these] . . . multiple identifications defy neat racial divisions" (Tatum, 1997, pp. 18-20). They were taken away from everything they knew, transported to another country under trying circumstances, and forced into slave labor. This created the first issue of racial identity – the question: *Who am I? What is my heritage?*

I think about what my historical racial identity is, what my beliefs are, and how all of this ties in with my family history and traditions. What I believe today is not what I was raised to believe. My experiences and my behaviors are far from what my family's are. I have abandoned (gradually over time) most of the teachings of my youth. This is

not to say I have become a bad person – quite the contrary. I think I have become a better person by further cultivating or incorporating my varied experiences with my historical culture. From a young age, I rebelled against some of the family teachings so it is no small wonder that I have created my own reality. Although I have moved up to what is considered the middle-class, I have not become one of “The New Negro” (Gordon, 2005) who have lost the connection with my people – I know from where I came.

Education was stressed but not a top priority for my family – getting the crops planted and harvested was more important than anything else. We made our living farming. If farming meant missing school, not completing homework, or failing a grade; then, as my grandfather would say, “fodder” [cannon fodder – expendable]. I did not mind the hard work on the farm – it was a part of life and most times fun (spending time with family was most times an enjoyable time because we played while we worked); but, I loved to read and I loved school. Although my family did not let education interfere with farming, my great-grandmother had already awakened in me, at a very early age, a thirst for knowledge and all it could offer. I was labeled a “nosy” child because I asked incessant questions. Books were my escape into a world totally foreign to me – they were my gateway to the universe. I later joined the military to “see the world” I read about.

My love of knowledge for knowledge’s sake placed me in a position of “otherness or oddity” between two worlds (Black and white) and within my immediate world (Black). Enjoying education and learning is an anomaly seldom seen my family. To the dominate whites, I was a bright little Black girl who made straight A’s from day one of school – an oddity rarely seen. My Otherness was further exacerbated when, in fifth grade, I was separated from my friends and cousins and pulled out for Search class once a

week. I was the only Black face in the group. I had nothing in common with others in the group and half the time I had no clue what they were talking about during times when everyone was talking to their friends. Since no one in the group was my friend, I spent a lot of time sitting, looking, and listening. This was during a time when integration was fairly new and including Blacks in anything that enriched them was almost unheard of. It took me a while to realize that I was receiving enrichment rather than punishment for being smart. To my family, I was a bookworm who would rather stick her nose in a book rather than playing or eating – an oddity not seen in the family. Although my great-grandmother and my grandmother encouraged me to get my education, there seemed little reason to do so. Neither of my parents had finished high school. Family members who did finish high school still worked the farm. Businesses in town did not hire Black people.

I think about sitting with my maternal great-grandmother, as a young child, as she recounted some of my family history [African tradition was passed history down orally from generation to generation]. She recounted stories of how she was conceived when her mother was raped by her slave owner; the stigma of that violation that produced a mixed child from the Blacks and whites [like she really had a choice in the matter]; the different ways they [slaves] defied the slave owners in holding church in secret, meetings right under their noses, and learning how to read; and her belief that what was denied us [Blacks] was what we needed most – an education. She knew nothing of Africa - the country of our ancestors; but she had a deep understanding of the culture they brought from the “Mother Land” and passed down to her through her mother.

Our ancestors were of a farming group who had skills of weaving. My great-great-grandmother instilled in my great-grandmother a hard work ethic, family values that were both spiritual and superstitious, a love for the Earth and what it yielded, and a belief that peaceful coexistence with neighbors was essential. My grandmother tried to pass the skill of weaving down to us; but, my mother's generation did not inherit the skill, and most of my generation was either not interested or too unskilled to carry on the tradition.

Her attempts to teach us the craftsmanship of our ancestors, was to no avail – we did not have the skills or interest in learning the trade. I remember sitting with her for hours trying to learn the painstaking techniques until my fingers cramped and my back ached. I had to start over repeatedly. Although she praised my efforts, she went on to the next pupil (a sister or cousin) to try again. That portion of our culture died with my grandmother because no one ever mastered her skills.

Once, years after she died, a visitor from California was attempting to acquire one of the chairs she was famous for weaving (the back or bottoms with corn husks). He was willing to pay hundreds of dollars for a chair. The entire family was shocked that he drove so far and was willing to pay so much. He responded that he had seen my great-grandmother at a fair and purchased a chair from her. After fifteen years, the chair was still holding up and he wished to purchase one or two more as a gift for someone. He was shocked and surprised that that part of our culture had died with my great-grandmother. He actually lectured us on our culture and its importance. I recall feeling as if I let her down that day because I was not able to carry on the legacy and culture; but, it was not important to our day-to-day survival. I share this story to illustrate the different

perspectives and values on what was important to my generation and my great-grandmother's generation. It also illustrates how our family culture changed from generation to generation instead of being passed from generation to generation.

My family has gotten away from the traditions with which we were raised and had opted for more of the Eurocentric culture. Why? We know that to become productive citizens and to “be anything we wanted to be” in this society we must assimilate the dominant culture and integrate it into our culture instead of blindly accepting the dominant culture – much as our ancestors did during slavery. If accepted at face value, the world provides the opportunity for us to change our destiny; but the pervasive racism and prejudices of many in places of authority in this society keeps us in our place of subordination and subjugation where we are still subjected to the whims of the dominant society. Have we been successful in making any inroads? Yes, but there seems to be an invisible wall that many of us cannot get past. Some have made it to the middle-class status that makes them seem rich to the others while still others have made it to the highest social class. What each person had to determine for themselves is what it means to be rich – is it money or something else that determines wealth?

I had two such conversations that occurred in my high school classroom that were so absurd that they will forever be vividly burned into my memories. Christmas, a few years ago, a Black parent came into my room at the end of the day bearing gifts. She apologized for giving me such a small gift (a gift basket with candles which I thoroughly liked because I collect baskets and at the time I was creating displays with them). When I thanked her and asked her to explain, she told me that her son told her I was rich because my son wore the latest fashion to school every day. After assuring her that nothing could

be further from the truth – my son had a job and bought his clothes and I truly lived on a teacher’s salary, she then apologized for the misconception and any offense. I was not offended and told her so; but, I thought what an odd way to see someone as rich. On another occasion, one of my students remarked that I was rich because I had three cars and a house. My first thought and question was: How did she know that information? – She did not live near me. Her response was that she had observed that I had sometimes driven them to work and she knew I had a house because I lived near the school, hence, no apartments nearby. She thought that I was being humble and joking when I told her that cars and houses did not make one rich – just in debt. I explained to her that my husband and I both had car payments and a mortgage while the third vehicle (which we didn’t trust to go far) was used when one of the others was broken down or in the shop for repairs. After further questioning her reasoning, she explained to me that her group of friends based wealth on the number of cars a person possessed.

Being a lower-middle-class Black who grew up “dirt poor” on a working farm, I did not get the reasoning because I had not ever made that connection of material things equaling success – even when I was poor. This mindset is still pervasive in the minds of many young students to our (society) detriment. Young girls and boys look to role models who have a lot of “stuff” and see them as successful. They seldom question how they get these things or they try to mimic them by figuring out ways to get “stuff” which often leads to criminal or unhealthy lifestyles and values. The work ethics that created the Black middle- and upper- class eludes them. Although the middle-class for Blacks was growing at one time, those numbers are decreasing and many Blacks still make up for a large majority of the poor and underprivileged of this country. Some of us who have

“made it” to the middle-class do not forget where we came from for two main reasons: there is a feeling that you need to do more by working harder and the fact that the others [less fortunate] will not let you (at least this has been my experience). I have traveled the world only to sometimes feel as if I have returned full circle to where I started from.

I have lead men and women on crucial military missions without losing anyone, managed millions of dollars worth of equipment without losing any, and planned or played war games with the “powers that be.” People in the position I retired from are often wooed into various companies around the nation. Most of my counterparts [white males] move from our positions into mid- or high-level managerial positions because of our connections and experience. I, on the other hand, am now a divorced mother of three who teaches high school students business classes. Part of that is because I refused to compromise my values and principles and partly because I am a Black female (or at least I think this). I don’t envy any of these people because I am happy in the trenches of public education – I enjoy going to work to my classroom every day. There seems to be an invisible wall that most Blacks identify with but have been unable to get over or around. I feel Black females have a wall that is doubly high for them to navigate at times. There are two strikes against us – being Black and being female. We have a history of being the strong backbone of the family unit. Slavery and separating family was a way to control the population. Black women had to be strong because they were often the only parent when partners and children were sold off. That legacy is still evidenced in today’s statistics on two parent households. Although a problem, this is not our [Black] culture or race.

Anthropologists see an end to race in America and wonder if the end to “culture” is imminent. Their findings indicate race is not a biological but a social construct. Gonzalez (1999) discusses the “elimination of racial categories in federal data. While race, as AAA [American Anthropological Association] suggests, may not exist, there is no doubt that racism does exist.” The mere existence of racism illustrates the negative connotations and uses of race. How do we, as a nation, use this knowledge and understanding to educate our youth in a way that is culturally responsible? How long will it take us to catch up? Furthermore:

. . . if culture is scrapped as a theoretical construct, how can we approach issues of schooling in a productive and respectful manner? If hybridity is ubiquitous, if we all draw on multiple knowledge bases in negotiating social life, and if the boundaries between groups are blurred and permeable, how do we conceptualize difference? . . . With the foregrounding of identity in educational discourses, can we ask, Have “culture” and “identity” come to signify the same referent, and is our culture our identity? . . . Certain theorists would certainly have us believe that ethnicity and identity are two sides of the same coin. Other theorists, however, offer a more nuanced version of “identity,” rendering it, like culture, to be mutable, multiple, and ever in process (Gonzalez, 1999, pp. 432-433).

I believe understanding the individual and understanding their circumstances and how they view the world and others [different groups] is crucial in unlocking the secret to educating all children of today. When I talk about understanding, I do not mean the

sensitivity or diversity training in which stereotypes are often perpetuated, but immersion into understanding the culture by performing self-analysis of personal beliefs and prejudices [pre-judgments and biases]. Although difficult and daunting, recognizing one's presuppositions, dealing with them, and making a conscious effort to see people as individuals rather than a stereotypical race or culture is beneficial to society as a whole (dominant and minority).

According to Sizemore (1990) the American curriculum addresses one group – “the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), who are epitomized as the model or ideal group.” This mindset combined with the mobility of and the diversity of today's society creates further problems in education today for all races and cultures. “When one human being is suffering, we are all suffering. When can we begin to understand that whatever is done to the children is a reflection of what a society values?” (Reynolds, 2003, p. 50) American society values its children; so, it stands to reason that their lack of a proper multi-cultural education is not valued.

New discourses in Critical Race Theory provides an alternate way of analyzing racial issues in society and their relationship to and impact on education. According to Borradori (2003), Critical Theory's “focus is emancipation, regarded as the demand for improvement of the present human situation. . . [This] requires belief in principles whose validity is universal because they hold across historical and cultural specificities.” Education aimed at increasing the success of minority students will, I think, provide for a better educational experience for all students. One of the most progressive attempts to educate Black children was the Black Panther Party [BPP] Movement and its Liberation

Schools. Although touted for their Black Power, anti-government, and anti-white sentiments, this group was progressive in thoughts of education.

They [BPP] advocated community schools that educated the whole child; community control of public schools; and sought improvement of mainstream schools to include a history of Blacks. They published a ten-point plan that called for 1) control of their communities; 2) employment for the people; 3) end to capitalistic oppression of the people; 4) decent housing; 5) a decent education that taught the “true” history and role of Black; 6) free health care; 7) end of police brutality and murder of Blacks and people of color; 8) end of wars of aggression; 9) freedom for Black and oppressed people in jail and fair trials; and 10) “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice peace and people’s community control of modern technology” (Black Panther Party [BPP], 2001). These ideals were admirable, but they created much controversy when taken in a political context. The BPP was investigated by the government for “terroristic” tendencies evidenced in their rhetoric. The initial attempts to open schools met with resistance and immediate closure of schools within minutes, hours, or days.

The Liberation Schools that did manage to survive long enough to open provided transportation to school free breakfast programs. The first schools had few Black students – the majority was Brown (Hispanic). Students learned about the history of the oppressed U.S. from the Panther point of view. Much of the Black Panther rhetoric was political in nature and these revolutionary ideologies did not go over well within the communities they sought to serve – they had misjudged the community. Parents objected to the political content – “off the pigs.” The only surviving school was the Oakland Community School. It survived because its school leaders distanced themselves from the rhetoric,

hired certified teachers, and established a standard curriculum in an effort to legitimize the school. (This is evidence of the adaptation to dominant society). The school used Blackness as the starting point to begin learning about and understanding global oppression. Many Black scholars have long argued Black children should be educated with an understanding of their Afrocentric culture instead of adopting the dominant Eurocentric culture with its inherent colonial notions of superiority.

In its efforts to educate the whole child, the Liberation School of Oakland provided “three meals a day, busses to carry students through dangerous neighborhoods to the school, books and supplies, and transportation to medical and dental services” (Williamson, 2005, p. 146). A model similar to this is being considered in rural towns across the U.S. today. In an effort to educate the whole family, effectively utilize limited funding, and continue with the small town mentality, some districts are attempting to provide “one stop” educational centers which house schools, doctors, and other resources in the same location. How do we educate the whole child while meeting its needs culturally?

We start by clearly addressing the issues of white dominance in education and strip away the blinders that portray minorities in negative light. We stop blaming people for their circumstances and using that as an excuse to render them invisible or unworthy. According to Sleeter (2005):

. . . a paradox of white consciousness is the ability not to see what is vary salient: visible markers of social categories that privilege people of European ancestry. Racial boundaries and racial privileges, highly visible and ubiquitous in the U.S. . . . One had only to turn on the TV or drive

through the community to see people of European ancestry dominating mainstream institutions and the most desirable resources, while people of non-European ancestries were clustered in the least desirable spaces and rendered through media as either invisible, or satisfied with or deserving of their lot. White people usually seek to explain persistent racial inequality in a way that does not implicate white society. (p. 246)

Since some people see the world through European eyes, they may believe Blacks and other people of color are responsible for their plight because they have the opportunity to work hard and better their lives. What these critics fail to take into account the fact that the highest unemployment rates are among people of color; they fail to take into account or are blinded to the fact that the Blacks continue to suffer from the oppression forced upon them during slavery. Some common responses whites make today about slavery and its effects include: *that was generations ago, I never owned any slaves, I had no part of that time in history, or I'm not a racist I have Black friends*. Well to that, I say – “Who cares? I was never a slave and I never picked cotton; but, the oppressive side effects still exist. The Middle East is still dealing with the issue of betrayal [Jacob stealing Esau’s birthright] and continues the fight. Let’s remember the past, not sweep it under the rug, and get on with changing the plight of America’s youth.”

It doesn’t matter who committed what atrocities. We have to recognize there is a problem, attempt to either slow or reverse the effects of history, and deal with what is happening today. We do this by first learning about the history of the “Other” instead of denying it every happened or existed – “you have to walk a mile in my shoes to see where I have been.” Many white teachers cannot understand why many Black youth do

not associate their history with being descendants from Africa. First of all many of them have never been to Africa, know nothing about Africa, and live in America. It should also not surprise them since African-American history gets only a few pages in the history books. This serves to free whites from the dreaded “slavery” lessons and to “gloss over” the ugly period in American history while, at the same time, these textbooks deprive all children of a true picture of their history and heritage as Americans.

Next, we [educators] get back to what worked before integration – the community taking ownership and responsibility for educating its youth – and integrate it into our pedagogical practices. Reclaiming one’s culture via the Black Studies Cultural Model which counters hierarchical views and proposes that being human means having a human species without gradations of subordination and superiority. Humans relate as if they are related. This concept of family, clan, or village is a critical foundation in African culture (Gordon, 2005). African Americans practiced the tradition of the village being a family—responsible for the wellbeing of the whole. The concept - “it takes a village to raise a child” - was the way of life for African Americans during their early years of freedom and education. The Black community supported the schools in all their needs – financial and otherwise. The schools became community institutions that were heavily invested in pursuing education of the youth as a way to improve their lives. Although many people did not share the same attitude toward education, they did share community values that encouraged them to come together to provide for their children. They felt that educating their children would improve their lives. These schools addressed the psychological and sociological needs of the students because they were community-centered (value system of the community members instead of the individual). This created a foundation and

respect for the educational process. Although there were many benefits to integration, many Black students lost this foundation when segregation ended. Because most communities are diverse, more community involvement in the education of its children should allow students to begin to reconnect with what was lost to them and the experience of learning about other cultures through changes in educational policies.

We need to also find ways to help students to better construct a culture for themselves that allows them to see the importance of education. Popular culture, although viewed by many as unimportant and faddish, can be a means to this end. I see popular culture as a way for students to express themselves while “giving the finger” to those in authority. Our curriculum has become so “standards-based” and “testing-based” because society wants a “quick fix” to improve how U.S. students “stack up against” other countries that education is somehow left out of the equation. Teachers who have been in the trenches for a while begin to see education fly out the window and see testing and scores take the lead. As a new teacher starting out [as a second career], I pulled students’ permanent records to “get a feel” for the student in my class. I knew something about every child in my classes and every effort was made to address the needs of all students. By my third year of teaching and after drastic changes in the system, all of that changed – we were no longer required to pull records and who had the time. After twelve years in the system, we [teachers] did not have time to pre-plan prior to school starting. We received our schedules a week before students showed up [I had never taught two of my five new classes that year and my new classes did not have textbooks ordered], spent the entire week of pre-planning in meetings across the district, and had to adapt to totally new district-wide changes in a newly overcrowded school. Not only do teachers rebel,

but students begin to rebel against this form of “abuse” or neglect. Many do not see the relevance of what they get in class to what they will, in fact, be doing in life. I agree with them. Rather than being dismissed out of hand, popular culture should, in some instances, be used as a teaching tool because it helps students to bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world. The state of education has not maintained a steady pace with society.

The belief in the African-American community that education is the key to success may indeed be an illusion that makes a proper and equal educational opportunity unattainable. Public education in our society is segregated – some believe more so than prior to *Brown v. B.O.E.* The achievement gap between Black and white students is not closing at a profound rate. Drop-out rates are atrocious and in some cases continuing to rise as Black students become disillusioned with the systems in place. Resources are becoming scarcer in education; so, urban and rural schools lose more than they are gaining. More Black students are being taught by non-Black teachers – the majority of students in public education are Black while the majority of teachers in public education are white. Fewer Black students are getting in and graduating from colleges; and, even fewer are becoming professors – the door to academia is closed to many. The list of disparity goes on and can encompass many areas of unequal discrimination – prison populations, housing opportunities, business ownership opportunities, fair employment opportunities, etc. The “key” to free Blacks from the bottom of society (education) has been used, in many cases, to lock them into their role in society because the system is designed to inadequately educate our children for success – it has had the effect of

educating them for subordinate roles in society (the cradle-to-the-prison) because many doors are closed to them.

Whites, for the most part, determine how children of color are educated and the policies that discipline these children. Many of the policies associated with public schools force children of color onto the fast track to the penitentiary or into the special education system. Although the “system” seeks to find ways to close the achievement gap and address the problems of educating the children of color, it rarely seeks the advice or voice of those affected – a throwback to the plantation life (we will take care of you because we know what you need better than you do).

Society, in its efforts to become “color-blind” continues to deny racial, cultural, and identity of other people of color in America. These three concepts, although difficult to define, are empirically embedded in and tied to the educational system of the U.S. The dominant race, culture, and identity can subjugate and dismiss other races to the point that they become invisible and unimportant. According to Howard (2006), “White educators . . . have a unique opportunity to help shift the tide of racial dominance” (p. 139). As the dominant race slowly becomes the minority race, a shift in thinking is taking place in society due mainly to the cry for justice from the minorities. “There is so much that White educators must *unlearn* regarding . . . assumptions of rightness and the easy ignorance that has comforted Whites for generation in [their] position of social hegemony . . . to turn the full force of . . . privilege and power toward dismantling the very system that has granted . . . historical advantage (Howard, 2006, p. 140). Other races must play a role in the white struggle to change the system.

We [teachers] must return to teaching students to think rather than passing tests for the sake of a statistic. Kozol (1990) said it best when he talks about how the schools are designed reproduce the societal status quo. He further talks about how districts name and create schools that serve to segregate and prepare students of color for a life of subservience to dominate society many times because the students are not aware of other options available to them (Kozol, 2005). The insensitive, seemingly uncaring youth of today are products of the educational system and a society that places little value on their ability to think until they graduate high school. Once they reach this age and enter the world without the proper skills, the society, which has a strangle-hold the education system, blames the education system. Wake up America! We have, without intending to, raised a generation who questions everything:

Seeking to know how they fit into America, many young people have become listeners; they are eager to learn about the hardships and humiliations experienced by their parents and grandparents. They want to hear their stories unwilling to remain ignorant or ashamed of their identity and past (Takaki, 1993, p. 15.)

Many utilize their critical thinking skills to assess their past and options. Thinking should be applauded – our children are thinking and questioning (critical thinkers?) as we often say we want them to. Instead, many children and students of color are denigrated when they ask questions as being disrespectful and rude (especially if the teacher/parent does not know the answer or the child has a valid criticism). When children do what we expect them to do (think and question) we

as parents and teachers should not be shocked or pernicious – we should celebrate their efforts and challenge them further.

Fair or Foul Weather: What's God Got to Do with It?

Well everything and nothing of course – with a little assistance from cultural beliefs and practices. Missionaries and colonist used spirituality to “civilize” the heathens of the world to a Christianity that often had them accepting their roles as servants to their dominators. “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ” (Ephesians 6:5). Their plight of oppression was/is viewed as being spiritual and Godly. Spirituality is central to a lot of African American cultures – even for those who do not regularly attend church. God gets the blame from the victim for allowing the abuse and God also gets the glory for giving them the strength to persevere; but, many often follow their teachings that to suffer through any challenge and hardship is the “Christian” thing and, although they may not understand it, God has a greater purpose for them because God is the creator of all things; God won't give you more than you can handle; when you at your lowest, look up; God will allow you to go through [trials and tribulations] to make you stronger on the other sided; to God goes the glory – and the litany goes on.

From birth, we heard these over and over again until they are ingrained into how we lived our everyday lives. My composite character Marie joined the church and was baptized at the age of thirteen (the age the adults felt children were able to recognize and understand the meaning of accepting Christ as their savior). She is molested shortly after this. Forget faith for just a moment and follow my train of thought: Marie (the victim) concluded that God created these monsters or abusers who have mistreated her. Then, she

takes further – this God that she believed in and loved deserted her as her family had. One could also assert this was a test of this young Black girl's (and others in the same predicament) strength to overcome the tragedies heaped upon her to make her a stronger woman. Well, many families and communities follow this latter logic (flawed or not).

The statistics on the number of abused Black females is not accurate – many of the cases go unreported due to the feelings of alienation within the family or community, shame, or other personal reasons. Some Black females suffer for reporting (especially if the offender is a Black male). The Black communities can sometimes focus so hard on the downtrodden Black man that it forgets to uphold and protect its women. Some churches and society as a whole support this position – if she is Black and female, she must have done something to make him (the offender) do that to her. To the people who blame the victim, I simply ask these questions – How can an 8 year old child do anything to deserve being raped by her 21 year old uncle? How can a 5 year old defend herself against a 35 year old man? When your father climbs into bed with you (at age 5) who or what in society has prepared you to defend yourself? What type of animal could commit such crimes against children?

In the process of devaluing, a person becomes an “it,” an object of use. . . . An “it” easily loses worth and can be treated as an object – or depersonified”. . . Too often children become an “it” in their homes and their humanness is devalued. . . . [T]he same attitude. . . can lead to the sexual and physical devastation of children (Weiner & Kurpius, 1995, p. 8). Some courageous Blacks who try to bring these issues to light are often publicly ridiculed and denigrated as “race rats.” When I hear some Black leaders and organizations trying to address this very issue, I applaud them. When Oprah first began

airing her story of sexual abuse, she was, at first, depicted as a “man hater” by many in the Black community – many even stopped watching the show. Mike Tyson was accused of beating his famous wife, Robin Givens, and she was portrayed as a nagging, spoiled, and “high-maintenance” shrew. Mike Tyson, also accused of raping a young lady – the question became: Why was she in his room at 2 am if not for sex? Kobe Bryant accused of rape was applauded when he purchased a \$4 million ring to save his marriage. The list of publicized misbehaviors by Black men can go on. Tyler Perry, one of the most popular entertainers today, uses spirituality and comedy to illustrate Black culture. Each of his stage plays has several messages to address issues inherent in the culture and customs or traditions that are endemic and celebrated within the race. Although he uses comedy to convey the messages, the messages truly illustrates different issues in Black America. Many Southern preachers stand in the pulpit and denigrate these crusaders (especially Tyler Perry) for showing the Black male “in a bad light.” This attitude is an insult all Blacks should not stand for; but many do without challenging this attitude or by accepting it as “the gospel truth.”

I contend abuse – sexual, verbal, and physical – is a problem in many neighborhoods and communities. A lot of Black victims do not report instances for various reasons; but, I think, many of those reasons, no matter what they are, are based on the spirituality inherent in the culture, self-reliance practices found in the culture, and a desire to adhere to oppressive practices of protecting the Black male at all costs – even if it means sacrificing the lives of our daughters. The Black female is not only marginalized in American society, she is in many instances also marginalized in the Black culture and society. In the past, some Black men used rape as a means to control Black women much

as white plantation owners (and later during Reconstruction whites in general) used rape and the threat of rape to keep female slaves in line. I think some of this was similar to the concept of the abused later becoming the abuser or similar to how children of abusers later become abusers even if they only observe the abuse and are not themselves abused. Sommerville (2004) posits that “the widespread racist assumptions among white Southerners about the innate promiscuity and licentiousness of Black women may have been internalized by some Black males” (p. 157). Some Black males and females have internalized these racist, sexist, and patriarchal beliefs as right and just – this mindset still exists today and rears its ugly head from time to time. In accepting these beliefs, we as a culture, have practices that harm rather than uplift our brothers, sisters, and children. When enlightened Blacks attempt to bring these oppressive practices to light, they are often denigrated as traitors to the race by other Blacks – the most public critics can sometimes be the clerics from the pulpits. For a race that strongly believes education leads to enlightenment, Blacks denigrate some of the same people who would educate the public on such issues for fear this will further alienate us from other races and show society that Blacks are degenerate and depraved animals they have been painted to be. No longer will the myths that there are certain things Blacks will not normally do suffice if these dark proclivities were publicized.

Many Black mothers raise their daughters to be strong females – a byproduct of slavery. This strength (most oftentimes from spiritual beliefs and/or cultural tradition), can become a weakness. Slave women suffered their fates and bore the transgressions with strength and fortitude. They survived rape, separation from children and family through force and violence, and carved a new way of life here in the America. Whites

justified maltreatment of female slaves by depicting them as subhuman. Black women were viewed as wild animals that were carnal by nature. Many of these women were blamed for their rapes because they lured the men to their bodies in some way. During this time in history slaves could not legally be raped (only white women could). Although these beliefs are closely associated with slavery, they have created a mindset that still persists in the society today because the same attitudes have been internalized and adopted within many of the Black communities. Some Black women suffer in silence because they believe no one wants to hear their complaints – some believe their pain and suffering is often viewed as whining of an ungrateful race of women by many in American society.

I have been a teacher for 15 years and been witness to many changing dynamics of Black students; but, none is more evident than the number of abuse cases we have dealt with in the last couple of months. The main focus of many studies on African American students is the oppression of the male and their fast track to the penitentiary. The Black female appears to be lost in the shadow of the males – she is not only oppressed by society as a whole but also by the Black community. Many of the young ladies we have had to provide assistance to lately share some commonalities or background – molested or raped by family members; mothers who do not believe they have suffered the abuse or mother who decide to keep the molester around while placing the child with others – they appear to really not care; and the inability or resources to comprehend and deal with the situation. In addition to these issues, the young women also face the stigma of being promiscuous rather than raped and against the race for trying to “bring a brotha down” if they choose to report the abuse. Their well-being

seems less important than maintaining the secrecy of abuse and protecting the Black male – no matter how abusive he is or what kind of abuse he is doling out it is critical that that negatives are not aired. Young ladies in today's society are courageous enough to defy the status quo and report more and more on a daily basis.

Fallow is the Field - the Changing Face of Education

When I applied to the new district high school, it was with the hope of finally getting to teach in a small learning community to students who wanted to be there. The student population I came from had almost 50-50 Black to white population when I began teaching there 15 years ago. Over the years, due to white flight, the population has steadily moved toward a majority Black population that is middle to upper-middle class. The population I was transferring into was over 90% Black in an intercity urban environment that was comprised of the poorest students in the county. Urban settings did not disturb me – I am Black, grew up in poverty, and fit into color wise. I envisioned students willing and able to learn with less baggage for us (teachers) to contend with because we identified somewhat with their circumstances. My reality was quite different. In the first few months, I had at least five meetings with the counselor and the principal about girls who were acting out due to problems at home – all of them sexual in nature: two abused by the boyfriend and stepfather (one the mother was pressing for jail time and the other the mother kicked the daughter out in favor of the husband), one soliciting sex with older men in public places (she took pictures on her cell phone and sent to friends), and two leaving school to rendezvous at various houses to have sex with different boys (their excuse was they didn't think there was anything wrong with having sex with different people).

According to the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA), a woman loses her value as a woman when she is raped. The questions for this study become – what does a child lose? How do we, as a society, help them to really survive? Abuses that were once private and rarely reported are being reported more and more as

young girls are beginning to be better educated on their options. Young women of today who seem confident, hard, and cold-blooded often hide the confused, timid, and victimized young woman who has nowhere else to turn and no outlet for her anger except in the public school system. Teachers are mandated by law to report suspected abuse. They even receive training on recognizing symptoms or signs of abuse; but, very few are taught to deal with these students in the class when they finally reach the boiling point and the abuse manifests itself in other ways which are usually negative. I think teachers should be better prepared for what they face in classes across the nation in viewing the whole child – warts and all. Although religion has been taken out of schools, it (in many instances) has a bearing on what type of child sits in the classroom. Since no one religion is universal and most people (including) teachers have different value systems, educators must find viable ways to assist these young women in coping with the tragedy that is sometimes their life.

Having an open mind to the concept that not everyone has the same or even pleasant home life needs to have new meaning for teachers. They need to truly understand this is a reality not just some distant obscure concept. A conversation with a white classmate a few weeks ago opened my eyes to how uneducated some teachers are in what it is to be Black in America and in the African American culture – how the different cultures are sometimes poles apart. We (Black and white) sometimes take for granted that the other has some idea of our culture until the dialog begins and we find that we are totally ignorant on some issues. The conversation with my classmate went something like this (in reference to a comment made by bell hooks about how her father denigrated her brother):

This white teacher said, *“Do you all know what she meant when she mentioned how the Black parent was talking to their child. I don’t understand what she meant when she was talking about how the Black parent talks to the child. I can’t imagine talking to my child like that or allowing anybody else talk to them like that for that matter.”*

All the Black women at the table looked at her and responded that we knew exactly what she was talking about. After many comments back and forth, I finally explained that some Black mothers will talk to their child in the most abusive manner; but, they will not tolerate anybody else talking to them in any kind of derogatory manner. This teacher looked at me and said as if she were totally amazed, *“If you guys were not here to tell me this, I would not believe it. How are we [whites] to know and understand something like this? It’s just preposterous to think of.”* This, although not unheard of in some cultures (there are parents of all races that may not treat their children like the gifts they are and who may abuse them verbally, physically, or emotionally), it is also not a systemic or normal practice in African American or any other culture.

Takaki (1993) discusses the slaves and their plight and discontent. He talks about the limits to freedom granted to the slaves and the circumstances they often found themselves in – freed versus enslaved, oppression, and abuse. He goes a step further to discuss the oppression of slave women. *“Sexual exploitation of enslaved women was widespread in the South. The presence of a large mulatto population stood as vivid proof and a constant reminder of such sexual abuse”*. The consequences of the sexism and abuse that took place during and after slavery are still being felt in society today. Some of the myths perpetuated by whites are still thought to be the truth when referring to the portrait society paints of the Black female. *“Understanding the African past is critical to*

dispelling myths about what it means to be Black, a woman” (Richards & Lemelle, 2005, p. 25). In the last portion of their essay, the authors are discussing Audre Lorde and her global recognition and push for the Black Woman Movement. Lorde believes that myths must be dispelled; but, to do that, societies must understand the mutual past of all Black women of African descent so that generations would continue to struggle for a change.

This study will, I hope, open more eyes to the truth of what the Black children in their classroom lives on a daily basis. I also hope to add to the dialogues that deal with female Black issues in life and in education. Abuse is manifesting itself with the number of young Black girls facing disciplinary repercussions in public school increasing. In a time when Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) depends on the number of “at risk” students who are disciplined, these numbers begin to take on a new meaning for teachers and administrators. No longer can the focus be solely on Black male – the number of female delinquents and inmates is increasing at alarming rates and the institutions that house them are finding sexual abuse at the root in many instances.

Planting Seedling: Black Women

As a society, we know very little about the psychology of Black women . . . The way they experience the workplace, the complexities of their romantic lives, the challenges they face as mothers and grandmothers, their spiritual and religious practices, these and so many other aspects of their lives are largely unknown to the wider community. Being ignored and poorly understood likely explains why so many Black women today still feel profoundly unhappy about their place in society. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 2)

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) describe a “shifting” (or code switching) as both internal and external Black women do in their daily lives. Blacks in general use code switching as a survival tool in daily situations in society as they transition from home or community into white society. Black women may have more switches – not only do they switch in these situations, they also switch in personal interactions with others (friends, older adults, Black business, white business, etc.). Their research analysis also shows a shifting or switch that eventually leads many Black women to lose self or “sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 7). This loss of self can sometimes become overwhelming and depressing; but the need to survive can often overshadow the depression lurking beneath the façade of “having it all together” and being good at keeping it together in spite of dire circumstances.

The attitudes and values of the mothers are sometimes catalysts for their children to succeed and sometimes they or their attitudes and beliefs are contributing reasons for their children to fail especially in single-parent homes where the father is not present. Understanding the traditions and culture, the oppression suffered by Black females, the role the Black mother is playing, and how spirituality is viewed in the Black household; administrators and educators will have a better understanding of how to meet the educational needs of their students. Many policies in place continue to perpetuate the racism inherent in society and do not address the needs of the Black students. The predominant attitude is that more testing, more money, more programs that continue the cycle will fix the problems plaguing schools and close the achievement gap between the races. This gap, I think, will close much faster if the teachers and teaching changes. The silence prevalent in the Black community needs to be broken in order for healing to take

place. Parents need to “raise a ruckus” to get their children what they need to succeed. They need to ensure what they say and do are positive reinforcements to break the cycle of denigration and destruction of the race. Too often, I have seen parents become complacent when they should be raising hell and raising hell when they should probably be shutting up. Take for example the closing of our two year old school. It was in its infancy and just beginning to thrive when it was abruptly closed without prior notice or warning.

The first hint we had of the school closing was when it appeared on the front page of the local news paper. To say it was a day of shock would not do justice to the way the faculty and students voiced their upset. I was dazed and mad as hell for most of the day. The lack of respect for us (faculty and staff) to the point we were not given the news in a timely manner as was usually done when major changes were about to take place. Our students had a school that had structure and caring staff – they were thriving and active academically and with extra-curricular activities. Another thing that ticked me off was the fact that I had worked ten and twelve hour days for two year to ensure the school was a success only to have it shut down as if my time was not important (time I could have been spending with my daughter). We were outraged; but as employees of the district, we had to walk a thin line; whereas, parents, we thought, could better express our feelings. The reasoning for the closing was that budget cuts forced them to find ways to save money. When the district was advertising the fact they were opening two more new schools during the following year, I felt the weight of their hypocrisy dragging us all down. We were a small school designed to help intercity students succeed. I think, the surprise was the fact that we were showing success and therefore became expendable.

The surprise, for me, was accepting the fact that the parents did not really care as much as we did – the parental outrage was lackluster and lacking at best. There was a petition with less than half of the parents signing it. When it was time to challenge the board and to plead for the school to stay open, only about four parents showed up (two of which had just graduated their children) and about six or seven students showed up to fight for their school. As I sat in the audience, I realized a couple things – one was the decision had already been made long before the story appeared in the paper and a school with such little support (as shown by the number who voiced their displeasure) deserved to be closed.

Rich and Fertile Soil– Exemplary Works

Toni Morrison (1970, 1973, 1976, 1987, 1988, 1993, 2003, & 2008), bell hooks (1981, 1984, 1995, & 2000), Alice Walker (1983, 1989, 1997, & 2006), Patricia Hills Collins (1998, 2000), and Maya Angelo (1986) are the works that most influence my work. I also look at Jonothan Kozol (1990, 2006), William Watkins (1993, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, & 2006), Sandra Richards and Sidney Lemmelle (2005), and Takaki (1993) as they talk about issues involving Black women and education of Blacks. Although Morrison uses fiction, she is true to issues affecting women in America. Bell hooks (1981) uses narratives to address the issues affecting Black women. She is considered a Black feminist in some circles. Alice Walker, a fellow Georgian from a small town, is credited with first defining womanism. Her work is widely used in theological research although many theologians do not consider her work appropriate for Christian circles. Many have found ways to select what is pertinent to their research while disregarding her discussions on religion or non-belief in religion. Katherine Wing (2003) sheds light on

the issue of Black feminism and oppression of Black women in her writings. Richards and Lemmelle' (2005) essay, *Pedagogy, Politics, and Power: Antinomies of the Black Radical Tradition*, looks at works Marcus Garvey, Julius Nyererer, and Audre Lorde (1984) who are considered Black activists and how their works serve as text to educate through revolutionary lens called Black Radical Tradition. Lorde strives to further the cause of the Black Feminist Movement. Takaki (1993) looks at the history of multicultural America. In his book, he discusses the slave and their discontent. William Watkins (2001) provides a profound histology of African American history and the way the system was designed to perpetuate racism, classism, and sexism in his *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954*. His *Black Protest Thought and Education* (2005) is comprised of nine essays where various authors explore the "relationship between Black political thought and education" (p. ix), an area of little literature and research, this book brings the issue to the forefront and attempts to sparks a new conversation. There has been literature (Black protest literature) on oppression, slavery, and injustice; but, there is little protest literature on the education of African Americans. "The guiding theory of this book holds that education is politics. . . It acknowledges the marriage of education, politics, and protest" (p. 2).

Toni Morrison, Pulitzer Prize winner, writes about many aspects of the Black family. I have looked at how she tells the story – she often identifies or explains the main character, their situation or issue; tells their story with some flashbacks; and resolves the issue. Using one or more issues, she creates a story that brings life to different problems and issues faced in the Black community (incest, rape, homosexuality, Black identity, supernatural, etc.). Most of the central characters are women who suffer some sexism,

oppression, or dilemma unique to the culture. She strives to bring to the forefront issues not widely addressed by other authors. Her ability to humanize the otherwise tragic story was the basis for my selection of narrative and fiction as vehicles for my writing. In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison weaves a story that accurately recounts the story but with embellishment that creates a riveting and humanistic story rather than just a story of a slave mother killing her children. She brings each character to life to explain why the children were killed and what the mother was feeling before, during, and after the incident. The issues of slavery, sexual abuse, family relationships, family dynamics, and spirituality are all infused into the story. She also incorporates the supernatural into the story. Some African culture is rooted in superstition. To this day, I will not walk under a ladder, 'split a pole' with anyone, speak ill of the dead without the prerequisite disclaimer, allow a black cat to cross my path without performing the ritual of forming the cross and tossing a piece of paper, etc. In *Love* (2003) Toni Morrison creates a spell bounding story of victimization of the young Black female by an older Black male and how this abuse affects all the innocent females involved. The issues she addresses are sexual abuse and exploitation of a minor, greed, family relationships, and oppression at the hands of a Black man rather than whites. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a story about how Black children see themselves through the eyes of others, victimization of a young Black female, the feelings and stigma of homosexuality in the Black community, Black spirituality (church and superstition), and Black perceptions of other Blacks based on class system (Blackness the color, socioeconomic status, and peer evaluation/pressure). *Sula* (1973) is a story of one woman who is so evil that she brings out the good in everyone (even the sinners) in the town and they all band together in their

hatred of her. Without this common enemy the Black community would probably not band together for anything – they would have to face the worst in themselves.

Bell hooks' (1981) *Ain't I A Woman?* is an analysis and study of the status of Black women in America. She uses slave narratives to provide points to reinforce a reality that is seldom written about or discussed – how Black females are sexually oppressed by every other group (Black and white males as well as white females) (Wing, 2003) as well as racially oppressed by whites. The title of hooks' book says it all – throughout history the Black female has been seen as anything but a woman. She is considered the mule of society (hooks, 1981). The characteristics attributed to her serve a purpose – to dehumanize her and cast her in the most negative light that any human being can be cast as – sub-human, animalistic, whorish, and manly – any negative thing that happens to her is because she somehow caused it to happen. Hooks discusses treatment of the Black female while in Africa to the journey from Africa through the slavery years to present day America. She uses critical race feminism to give voice to this marginalized group and to promote the need for broadening the feminist movement to include the sexist oppression of Black women. Hooks also uses the narratives to paint a true picture of the Black female plight and of their frustrations in a society that first exploits and mistreats them and then blames them for the deplorable circumstances they find themselves in.

In her *Killing Rage* (1995), hooks discusses the rage against white society. As a teenager watching *Roots*, I had this rage upon returning to school the following day as did many of my Black schoolmates. The rage was for no particular incident or slight – it was for the injustices suffered by our ancestors. Many White students did not come to school

the day after the first airing of the movie for fear of retaliation. Bell hooks (1995) talks about rage at the colonized white supremacy of Blacks...I agree with her assessment of the situation of being so enraged that the Black youth of today do not know what they are angry for; but, who explode on the world. I have also experienced that anger she speaks of for no apparent reason...I now know that a lot of my anger was because I had no control over many of the traumatic incidents of my youth...I was angry at the abusers, at my mother for not protecting me, at myself for being helpless. As an adult, I have often felt this blind rage toward a person or situation after a very trying experience. The feelings of helplessness left me with uncontrollable rage at times.

Sharing rage connects those of us who are older and more experienced with younger Black and non-Black folks who are seeking ways to be self-actualized, self-determined, who are eager to participate in anti-racist struggle. Renewed, organized Black liberation struggle cannot happen if we remain unable to tap collective Black rage. Progressive Black activists must show how we take that rage and move it beyond fruitless scapegoating of any group, linking it instead to a passion for freedom and justice that illuminates, heals, and make redemptive struggle possible. (hooks, 1995, p. 19)

Many Black students of today seem angry at the world and the circumstances that they often find themselves. Finding a way to channel or diffuse that anger into something constructive may be one way to put our youth on the right path to graduation and beyond. I think, students should be angry at not receiving the type of education that TEACHES them something. They should be angry that their culture and history are missing from the curriculum. They should be angry that they are STUCK with sub-par teachers, without

adequate resources, and without support from the state or district levels...but they are not or at least they do not appear to be. Bell hooks arouses the social activist in my while Alice Walker makes me want to stop, think, and reflect.

Alice Walker, who is born in Georgia, writes from a Southern perspective. Her work embodies her relationship with the Earth and Southern way of life. Her writings depict various periods in her life and take on the theme of what issues were important to her at specific periods in her life. In each of her books Walker creates fictional characters, events, and situations whose lives parallels real events. Walker is credited with extending Black feminist thought with womanism which provides a way for all women to address gender issues without attacking African American males and males in general. Womanism focuses on the survival of the entire culture – male and female. This extension does what the original feminist struggle failed to do – recognize that the struggle has no color, gender, or class boundaries when it comes to oppression of women and to bring all the different feminisms together under one umbrella. She provides the space for this “sisterhood” to take place. I think her ability to create this space comes from her multicultural life (growing up in a struggling family in the South, marrying a white Jewish lawyer, living in the South as a bi-racial couple, activism for civil rights, raising a bi-racial/bi-religious daughter while not being religious herself, issues with facial disfigurement, etc.) Walker faced oppression and discrimination on more than one level while crossing more than one cultural line. Her womanist theory is used in much of the theological studies although she is not a “Christian” in the traditional sense of the definition and constantly struggled with suicidal tendencies.

In *Meridian* (1976) which means in the middle, Walker places the main character in the opposing position from her own life – she lives her life in the middle (as a buffer between Black and white society). She (the main character) is left to survive her life choices while the man she loves goes “to the other side” and marries a white female. This ultimate betrayal leaves the character with a life-journey that also plays out for her with physical ailments. She dares to be bold and different. During her journey to self-discovery and self-forgiveness, Meridian looks forward to death as a welcomed friend (much like the struggle Walker talks about in her personal life). She is caught between the man she once loved and the white friend he married. He wants her love which she cannot give while the wife wants her to get out the middle of her marriage so that she can have her husband back. Meridian spends her life taking care of others by helping them to resist and fight in cunning ways while preparing for death. When the couple who are her friends suffers the loss of their daughter, Meridian takes care of them both in their perspective homes. Again, when they are on the verge of giving up on life, she gets to her own place of peace and self-forgiveness and is able to release them each to find the peace she has come to know. Meridian finally suffers a death of sorts of her past life and a birth or renewal of life. The Black former lover is left in her house to begin the journey she has just completed while the wife is drawn closer to her husband when he lets her know that he loves her (but differently) and wants to be friends – much like he had been friends with Meridian for all of those years. Their positions in life had completely switched. The reader realizes what Meridian learned from her journey of self-discovery and is left with guessing what the others will face on their personal journeys. Walker’s portrayal of the issues of oppression and discrimination suffered by her main character depicts issues for

Black women in the South and how they often feel betrayed when their men “go to the other side” or marry outside of their race, how some Blacks can use cunning and guile to flout society’s restrictions upon them, and how each person has to live their life according to what they each need.

Maya Angelou’s poetry and short stories tell of a life of abuse, turmoil, struggle, and survival. She lifted herself out of prostitution and abuse to become one of the world’s heroines in the Black community. Rather than dwelling on her past, she used it to rise and to celebrate being a “phenomenal woman” and role-model for Black women to emulate and respect. Her contribution to and work in education has also been an inspiration.

CHAPTER THREE

PLOWING THE FIELD: METHODOLOGY

Harrowing the Rows: Fiction

I use fiction that is created, compiled, and harvested from personal experiences, experiences of others that I personally witnessed, and experiences relayed to me over the years by friends and family to illustrate some of the experiences of Black females in the South. Although many of these experiences are not widely discussed or addressed neither in society as a whole nor the Black community in particular; they do tend to permeate all areas of their lives including filtering into the schools and classrooms across America. I create a composite character (He, 2003), much like those created by He for her auto/biographical narrative inquiry and Toni Morrison and Alice Walker when they are writing fiction. Morrison and Walker create characters that break from the expected sexist and racist molds to follow a different path than the one they are destined for (Roberts, 1999). Many women are victims of some sort at some point or time in their lives. Some will have the love and support from family and friends while some will not have a support system in place to help them through the abuses heaped upon them. They must recognize and deal with the fact when faced with critical other, more important issues such as unemployment, the economy, etc. that their community as well as society may not see their plight as dire or important. Many would rather believe and perpetuate the unfounded stereotypes that keep them silenced and marginalized.

To reach students who bring baggage into the class room, you must have a clue about the baggage they bring with them. While this is true, I also consider one aspect that is rarely talked about – how the women in their life and what they teach them at home

impacts their education. Most studies look at the community, socio-economics, and family history as it pertains to generational issues such as drugs, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases; but, few look at what impact the education (outside Black curriculum) these students receive before coming to the educational environment.

I use childhood experiences to debunk the popular held beliefs and provide an authentic portrayal of a Black female child. I intend to illustrate family traditions (beliefs and culture), personal history, and some widely known (and not so widely known) family secrets that many Black females encounter on a daily basis through vignettes to provide the reader with a better understanding of these issues. Because many of the stories are graphic and personal in nature, I will use fictional characters to protect the privacy of persons involved. The areas I propose to look at are: lessons in survival which delves into lessons Black children learn to adapt and survive in their family, community, and school; strong Black women which covers some of the characteristics of the strong women in the family, a bit of their history, and the why/how of why they are seen as strong Black women – I attempt to use the story to explain why their strength is not cultural but a by-product of survival in slavery; and some of family relationships I experienced as a child – some of these were devastating relationships that have had lifelong repercussions; others were positive relationships that often turned negative. I look at how life experiences could have been a repeat of lived experiences, why it did not, and why some women have constant struggles to break the cycle of their circumstances. Most of my childhood was both happy and painful at the same time while my adult life and choices are directly linked to that childhood. I have carried “baggage” with me for many years (many of us do) and not left it anywhere – it is part of me; but, by sharing it, I hope to be able to

release it and to assist teachers in understanding some deep-seated issues in many families. By sharing our personal and family history, I wish to shed light on traditions (good and bad) that could help in explaining some student behavior. The Southern Black female voice is not widely published. Many studies that do include the Black female are usually grouping her with the white women (feminist) or the Black male (racism). This story is intended to give voice to the Black female sans white female and Black males except as periphery characters.

I hope to also provide insight into the oppression of Black females, their acculturation of the oppression, and their effects on their lives and the lives of their children. This story will also provide a Black portrait of a Southern Black woman. My work also looks at how the three areas I identify (Black women, traditions, and family) as composing southern Black curriculum (unofficial curriculum) might affect the formal educational process in the classroom. Central to curriculums is the family relationship, traditions, and spirituality. Although this study is regional to the Black rural Southern community in which I grew up, the issues addressed can be national in that they are not indigenous to the South but to all races of women. Black women who live in the north have many of the inherent Black traditions and issues found in the South. Daniels and Sandy make my point in their collection of essays in *Souls of my Sisters* (2000) based on the premise that “Black women have many of the same kinds of experiences in their lives no matter who they are. That experience is shared regardless of whether we’re rich or poor from Trinidad or from Kentucky.”

The main character is a female from rural county whose stories are intertwined with her sisters around similar or the same experiences. They are from a farming and

religious (Baptist) family. The underlying theme running through the story will be farming – sowing seeds, nurturing the seeds, and harvesting or reaping the crops planted (literal and spiritual tones). The issues inherent in their culture include a combination of cultural traditions, spirituality, and societal forces. Although told through fiction, the stories are not fictional. “Fiction is fabrication. Fabrication is itself, of course, an ordering or rearrangement of selected materials from the actual world” (Dillard, 1982, p. 148). Fiction is also defined as “literary works of imagination – novels and stories that describe imaginary people and events; untrue statement – something that is untrue and has been made up to deceive people; or pretense – the act of pretending or inventing something.” Fiction has been used to make autobiographical works more interesting (Dillard, 1982) and has also been used to entertain the reader by interpreting the world and to give the author the freedom to tell the entire truth under its guise and protection (Rainer, 1997). The use of fiction in research has sparked heated debate and discussion within the research community.

Traditional research engages in “voiceless discourse of academia, presenting knowledge as concrete and factual, based wholly on objective method and on logical reasoning processes which would seem to lead to the same conclusions for all observers” (Kutz, 1990, p. 345). This discourse is static and for the most part unchanging. Little if any further information is added to the conversation – there appears to be a continual rehashing of the same information and little room for individual thought and interpretation. “Researchers from the range of theoretical standpoints utilize a variety of methods, approaches, strategies and techniques in the full confidence that their work is rigorous, legitimate and totally justifiable as research” (Clough, 2002, x). All theoretical

frameworks have standards and research must adhere to a standard of what is acceptable within that framework to be valid. Using fiction as a vehicle for the final product does not necessarily make the work any less rigorous, legitimate or justifiable – just a different medium of delivery. Finding a theoretical framework that fits the research can be a difficult task for research that may fit into more than one category. For years, many marginalized and oppressed researchers have adopted the research and writing style of the dominant culture or canon in order to be viewed as “legitimate” researchers much as Seiler (2006) talks about in her study of Canadian immigrants. The immigrants in Seiler’s study adopted the Canadian culture to “fit into the mainstream.” These Nordic immigrants embraced the dominant Canadian culture but maintained their strong Nordic heritage and culture to create something that was a combination or mixture of both cultures. African American history is not as “pure” as that of the Nordic immigrants. Slaves were brought into America from many different tribes, traditions, and cultures. They were punished for practicing their language, traditions, and customs to prevent insurgency or revolt. In other words, slaves did not have the option of whether or not they would adopt the dominant culture or not...they were forced to accept and live within the confines of it without maintaining much, if any, of their native culture. In their search for legitimacy, I think, many Black female researchers have either lost sight of how important experience is or not fully incorporated their lived experiences as they relate to curriculum studies. Some have lost or denied the part of their culture (storytelling) that defines how life lessons, information, and history was once conveyed in order to fit into what is considered authentic and worthwhile or “legitimate” research as defined by the

dominant society. Does the research written as a story make the research less valid? I don't think so!

Writing lived experiences as historical narratives is “an ethically and intellectually responsible gesture that disrupts those frozen memories in order to address silences, challenge absences, and assert women's contributions to public life” (Glenn, 2000, p. 389). These missing pieces will help to create a more well-rounded American history. Curriculum studies is calling for new thoughts and research into areas once only hinted at. “The way things are is not, can never be, the way things will always be. The dance of the dialectic is underway and ongoing” (Ayers, 2008, ix). If the field of curriculum studies is to attract younger intellectuals and scholars who are considered “other,” it must broaden its position on and/or definition of what is acceptable research. One of the most recent eye-opening experiences for me in recognizing this was at the American Educational Research Association Conference 2010.

Because a lot of the current research is a part of my studies as a graduate student, I was really interested in seeing and hearing as much as possible. As I ventured from session to session, I quickly realized that the majority (over 90 percent) of the presenters of Black issues were white. This “whiteness” explaining what it is to be Black has been a constant problem for me throughout my studies at Georgia Southern. Although these researchers had good data and information, it did not always ring complete – something was missing in connecting the theory with the practice. In other words, how can a white person completely explain a Black experience? The few conference sessions that had Black panels talking about Black issues were overcrowded and more realistic. I easily saw the realism because I live it and work with and can recognize and connect with the

content whereas a listener of another ethnicity or social class would think that those experiences as expressed could not possibly be true because they sounded too outlandish.

These things that seem outlandish and crazy to others can be the reality of what really happens in some families. When I explained this to my colleague (Caucasian), she looked at me as if a veil had been lifted and asked me how whites were supposed know the truth (we had been in many of the same classes so I thought she had learned the same things that I had). My response was to read the work of Black authors especially the autobiographies – not with a view of skepticism but to learn something new about their culture and lived experiences. The field of curriculum studies cries out for new research and more research from the oppressed and marginalized groups of society. For many years their story has been told by the dominant group of researchers – white men. Too often these researchers decided what was important for Blacks and the world in general to know about them (people of color) and their history from their white perspective. These renderings have become the history of Blacks in America.

As people of color began writing more about their true circumstances, they began to also challenge the way the information was relayed to the reader. The staid narratives left a lot out of their stories because their stories were incomplete. They began to critically study their lived experiences in such a way as to debunk many of the long-held stereotypes and myths about them throughout the dominant literature.

The determination of what constitutes legitimate curriculum research is a question of power operating to exclude and marginalize those voices raised in creative and imaginative struggle to think alternatively...The first criticism of alternative

modes of research is that they are not research. This is the political tool of dismissal. (Reynolds & Webber, 2004, pp. 5-6)

To further their cause of sticking to the traditions of the field many traditional theorists use the guise of not accepting research that uses fiction as valid or true. I posit that, for minorities or the other ethnicities, history (theirs and the dominant society) is written by whoever is in charge and thus is also fiction. A lot of the history of the other is left out which makes the written history one-sided, suspect, and fabricated. They sometimes assert their dominant theories by pointing to the prevailing theories of what is proper for the theoretical framework. What many of them fail to recognize or know and want to maintain the fact that they are reinforcing the theories of people like them – not the marginalized or other. The marginalized are slowly finding their way to the center and breaking through the walls that have kept them silenced for so long. By using fiction, some curriculum theorists (the marginalized and/or the other) have the opportunity to create these “lines of flight” or opportunities to disrupt the current system in place as described by Reynolds and Webber (2004) to effect changes in what is accepted or acceptable in curriculum studies. Using nothing (fiction) to express and illustrate much (lived experience) as a researcher-participant who is passionate about the research is an inquiry methodology that is taking hold.

Some curriculum theorists are fighting this transition into different types of research while others embrace or at least attempt to broaden the field to tell the story of the “other” by . . . break[ing] old barriers and break[ing] new ground (Ayers, 2008, x). The researcher who uses autobiography and fiction is afforded the opportunity to “overthrow the current orthodoxy of what counts as research, and provide guide posts

into a dazzling terrain overflowing with life” (Ayers, 2008, x) through the use of an inquiry that is personal, passionate, and participatory (He & Phillion, 2008). The fact is that the use of fiction and autobiography in narrative inquiry is being used more often and accepted in other theoretical areas. I think one of the reasons for the shift in this direction for researchers of color is the fact that storytelling and/or oral history is a part of their culture – is a way of expressing themselves and relaying their family history. As a young child I spent countless hours sitting on the porch with my siblings and relatives listening to my great-grandmother as she told stories of family history, slavery, and life in general. We also listened to stories from the adults in the fields as they worked and/or as a teaching point when we did something wrong – I thought having to sit and listen to the stories was more tortuous than getting’ a beating.

I remember once as a college student having a conversation with a history professor at Armstrong State College (now Armstrong Atlantic State University) who was from Africa. He reminded me of those days with my great grandma. When he asked how history was passed down with Blacks in the South, he assumed it was passed orally from generation to generation like in Africa. The majority of the class which was white had no clue as to what he alluded to; but, I did. My negative response that we did not pass our story down orally, however, astounded him – he was from Africa and the people continued to pass history down through storytelling. His belief was that this practice survived slavery and was still practiced with Blacks in America, especially in the South, where he saw families gathered around on porches. He was wrong – although the family listened to stories from great grandma, they were not the historical-lore he thought they would or should be but only snapshots into great grandma’s past. The stoic way of

presenting research is not the most natural or conducive way to relating my life history as it pertains to curriculum – I think autobiography/biography and fiction are better suited. It allows anonymity for relatives, friends, and acquaintances who want to remain anonymous and for re-creation of the stories in a way that represents the truth which is often dark and unpleasant in a way that is focused on the specific topics of discussion and more enjoyable and/or palatable for the reader to read. Using fiction in research has been a contested tool that many researchers choose to avoid.

Kamuf (2005) posits that instead of asking what fiction is, one should ask - what does fiction do?

Shape, fashion, make, feign, contrive, invent...a kind of doing...something without substance...Fiction refers to something that does not exist . . . the sort of “infelicity” [or inappropriateness] that can characterize performative utterances can also affect the way a statement does what it is supposed to do, which is to refer, reliably, to a true or real state of affairs. (Kamuf, 2005, p. 139)

Fiction gives the researcher the total freedom to tell the unvarnished not inappropriate truth from composite and varying viewpoints and/or experiences (Dillard, 1982; He, 2003). By using “fragmentation, . . . [the writer can] identify important segments of his work and skip the rest” (Dillard, 1982, p. 30). He/she can shape or fashion a series of life events or experiences into a narrative that reliably illustrates the real or true state of events. It makes sense of the senseless. “Perhaps the chief difficulty that researchers who choose to use fictional approaches face is that of having their work accepted as a legitimate form of social inquiry” (Clough, 2002, xii). Fiction is needed to give voice to the voiceless, bring to center the marginalized, and freedom to the oppressed.

“Everyone’s fiction is almost autobiographical. What makes it fiction, usually, is its degree of disguise” (Haynes, 2009, p. 169). Encarta defines fiction as literary works of imagination – novels and stories that describe imaginary people and events; untrue statement – something that is untrue and has been made up to deceive people; or pretense – the act of pretending or inventing something. Webster’s dictionary defines fiction as something created or imaginary; nonexistent. The use of fiction in research has sparked heated debate and discussion within the research community because of its meaning. It has yet to be widely accepted by curriculum theorists while other disciplines accept it more. The use of fiction to relate actual events will not use imaginary events or people, will definitely be true and not deceive, and is not a pretense or invention. For this reason, the argument that fiction is literary instead of historical is inaccurate and will not suffice.

Historical value based on the lived experiences of the participants should not be doubted or questioned as to their importance. In *“Fictions” and the Experience of the Other* Peggy Kamuf (2005) discusses the meaning of fiction as it relates to curriculum studies as hollow or void of existence – “without substance and without subject” (p. 144). She determines the meaning of fiction as it relates to research to be “irreducibly suspended between the world of presupposed referents, which it can never fully suspend, and this same everything-of-the-world, everything-in-the-world from which it hangs suspended” (Kamuf, 2005, p. 144). Fiction can be everything and nothing at the same time – it cancels or neutralizes itself. She posits that another word be used in the place of fiction because the research may be something of importance that should be viewed as valid inquiry; but, the inquiry is often viewed as invalid based on the fact that it is fictionalized work (a lie, fabrication, made up, etc.). “One need not take fiction or the

possibility of fiction into account in order to construct a valid theory of how truth is to be made, known, or recognized.” Kamuf believes to fictionalize a lived experience is to shift the experience of the subject to the experience of characters through which the reader can experience subjectively. “Literary theory takes fiction seriously...[I]t prizes literature’s display of the fictional operation and isolates it as a lever with which to shift a number of theoretical assumptions” (Kamuf, 2005, p. 137). The problem with this, according to Kamuf, is the fact that literary theory, when deconstructed and analyzed, neutralizes itself also and is also invalid – anything can be literature and fiction.

Philosophers and historians are more accepting of literature and fiction in research as a way to convey their work to their audience or readers and historical researchers are beginning to use more fiction in their work.

Literature is broadly defined: a performative utterance will . . . be in a peculiar way hollow and void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy” Theater and poetry are cited precisely because they are exemplary of the hollowing or voiding of utterance that we recognize as the consequence of fiction’s operation. (Kamuf, 2005, p. 138)

Fiction in literacy is defined as “literary works of imagination – novels and stories that describe imaginary people and events; untrue statement – something that is untrue and has been made up to deceive people; or pretense – the act of pretending or inventing something.” “Philosophical discourse makes out literary fiction in particular but all so-called representative art in general to be essentially dependent or parasitical on, therefore secondary to the whole presumed realm of ‘non-fiction’” (Kamuf, 2005, p. 137). Fiction cannot stand alone on its own merit. It depends on something real – much along the lines

of art imitating life. The varying opinions on the use of fiction in research have sparked heated debate and discussion within the research community. Historical value based on the lived experiences of the participants cannot be doubted or questioned whether the researcher chooses to utilize fiction or not.

Historical narratives sometimes use fiction to fill in the gaps for missing information. Although some historians are using it more, historians, who are critics, see fiction in research as being more of literary work than actual historical work. Fiction for some scholars takes away from the historical value of the narrative; while others see fiction as a way to humanize the experience to make the history more interesting. “So the demand for plausibility is less exacting in science and practical life than in fiction, since the creative writer has no laboratory in which to reveal surprising truths... The writer knows better than anyone that ‘truth is stranger than fiction’” (Harris, 1952, p. 7). Fiction requires the writer to construct the narrative in such a way that the product is believable and credible – art imitating life. Some researchers have conducted oral research and autobiographical studies that is not fictionalized. The slave narratives are the most famous type of oral history and they tell many stories about the day in the life of slaves but are not grouped in any specific genre – they are stories in which the interviewer has asked a question and the ex-slave just answers the question by recounting as clearly as possible their experiences. These narratives express a reality that is foreign to many history books; but, they lack cohesion and sequence. Although Toni Morrison based her novel, *Beloved* (1987), on a slave narrative in which she humanizes an inhuman event and gives voice to the demons the mother must have had after killing her child rather than have them return to slavery, critics classify her novel as literary instead of historical.

Literary narrative may or may not be based on actual events and it may be partly or entirely created narrative whereas historical narrative fills in the gaps to make history more readable – much as Morrison does when she adds the thoughts and emotion to the story.

Pihlainen (1998) looks at whether historical narratives are inherently fiction by using the works of Hayden White who over the past twenty years has become widely known for his opinions of narrative theory in history. White believes historical narratives have more literary value than historical value (history as literature); but, he introduced the notion of fictionalization to allow the historical events to be shared (history of science). Filling in is filling in; thus, he contradicts his own argument. Steinberg (2003) discusses how Calhoun uses fiction to “fill in” the missing parts of the slave narratives. He discusses how the fictionalization makes the narratives impure historically. He also points out that the other narratives (peoples’ stories) may be fiction that became historical records. Mikkonen (2006) discusses the recent theories of fiction, their differences, and the fact that fact can become fiction and fiction can become fact. She believes that:

...not only can texts originally written as history or as philosophy be fictionalized (that is, converted to fiction) but that “at a later point in cultural history’ the text’s “fictionality and actuality can be relatives to a cultural perspective”...[where] the author and the reader may assess differently the relation between the actual world and the fictional world (Mikkonen, 2006, p. 291).

History is his- or her- story as written by him/her or for him/her about events – the story may be fact or fiction. “The past few years have brought forth in Europe and the US a stream of works intended to popularize philosophy and make it accessible to the non-

professional” (Ziolkowski, 2001). The intent is to capture the attention of the young to lure them into otherwise dry and boring areas of study. Ziolkowski (1997) discusses how works by various philosophers has been fictionalized to make the material more comprehensible and interesting to the reader. In his *Philosophy into Fiction* (1997), Ziolkowski had his main character, Sophie, “apply logic to everyday problems and to tidy her chaotic room” (Ziolkowski, 1997, p. 549). The author also uses different types of media to teach philosophy: produced a

. . . video with a tour of Athens and a conversation between Plato and Aristotle. Illustrates different situations by dressing and playing the part to suit the occasion in informal lectures: to discuss the medieval scholastics, he dons a monk’s cloak and meets Sophie in an old stone church from the Middle Ages; to introduce her to the Renaissance thinkers, he wears hose, knee breeches, and a jacket with padded shoulders and invites her to his attic apartment, which is filled with furniture from the fifteenth century and decorated with antique bric-a-brac; and the use of a computer program to illustrate Descartes’ views on the relationship between mind and matter . . . uses everyday life and constantly challenges Sophie to respond critically or dialectically or . . . negatively (Ziolkowski, 1997, p. 549).

One would tend to think that if fiction is an appropriate tool used in the philosophical studies, it should therefore be an appropriate tool available to curriculum theorists. Fiction, however, continues to receive mixed reviews in the curriculum studies arena. I think it would, if widely and properly used, be a positive tool in the curriculum field. It would allow for enrichment and aid in adding to the ways in which research is conducted to allow for more progressive and inclusive work.

Hoing the Rows: How Does Fiction Fit into Curriculum Theory?

Whitlock (2007) discusses meaning of curriculum theory in terms of what is allowed and not allowed as valid research; and how the canon is controlled by conservatives who deny access in many different areas of curriculum theory. She believes that the field must expand to allow different voices into the canon created by the dominant white male society in order for the field to advance intellectually. This intellectual acceptance of the other would allow fiction (which has on occasion been rejected as a research method) to fit squarely into the canon by allowing my work to be counted as valid and worth knowing. McCutcheon (1982) defines curriculum theory as “an integrated cluster of sets of analyses, interpretations, and understandings of curricular phenomena...in which researchers must be able to refute or support the theory through studies...[that] have a strong value base...[for researchers on] a quest for curriculum scholars[hip]” (p. 21). How these two (theory and fiction) can co-exist is a philosophical discussion for another time; but, how fiction can add to curriculum theory and autobiographical research is an issue that has gained momentum and a greater prodding for acceptance within the field.

Curriculum scholars whose work is largely outside the classroom, who may not have seen a school in years (except to drive by it), cannot understand matters from the teachers' view. Teachers involved in action research or collaborating with outsider researchers could publish their research and their theoretical work. This work might help outsiders understand the nature of many curriculum matters. Teachers must also develop personal theories appropriate to their personalities,

beliefs, values, and unique situations, to guide them in their daily decisions and actions. (McCutcheon, 1982, p. 21)

Teachers have complained for years of being left out of all equations when it relates to their profession – education. If one is ill, they ask the professional – the doctor; if one needs a house built, one asks the professional – architect or contractor; and if one needs financial or legal advice, one asks the professional – the accountant or the lawyer. Why then is the professional in education, the teacher, not asked? Businessmen and politician with their expertise in making a profit and saying all the right things everyone needs to hear (respectively) seem to have the expert knowledge that many seek when it comes to education. The reasoning behind that is still as yet unclear. As many practicing educators enter the research arena, autobiography . . .

has become not only a principal methodology for studying school and classroom culture, but a means of changing that culture-both by teaching students to use ethnographic methods so that they can become actively involved in their own learning and by engaging teachers as researchers in their own classrooms . . . For teachers, there is too often a reliance on unexamined past experience and an accretion of strategies and techniques in response to particular problems, without a coherent theoretical framework. (Kutz, 1990, p. 341)

Books written by teachers for teachers are usually practical guides not a theoretical work that quotes the philosophical theories – they probably would not read that anyway. Many teachers look for what is going to work right now today, this week, this marking period not what may work based on some philosophical debate or argument.

Very rarely do teachers analyze past experience to effect changes in curriculum studies – their reflections are usually aimed at improving the environment for the student(s) who needs their help at the time. “Truths about educational issues and concerns can be told through consciously and explicitly fictional devices...[F]ictional stories can make public those experiences and perceptions that other methodological approaches and research techniques are unable to reveal” (Clough, 2002, xii). Most people enjoy a good story. Autobiographical works provide the understanding of what happens with curriculum at the lowest level (in the classroom) rather than what disassociated researcher may observe, analyze, and theorize about. Observational research, although valuable, can be equated with what many educators have been saying for years about testing – the actual test is just a snapshot in the day in the life in a short span of time not the true picture of what a student knows or in the case of curriculum studies what goes on or what needs changing within the curriculum. Some educators call for authentic assessments for evaluating student knowledge because it looks at more than one facet of student knowledge. I think autobiography accomplishes the same thing – teachers as researchers have first-hand knowledge of how their personal beliefs and theories affect the curriculum and areas in curriculum that require further study or discussion. “Teachers, students, and researchers often feel themselves shackled, bound, and gagged” (Ayers, 2008, x) by what one of my professors often calls the “braugh, braugh, braugh” (M. F. He, personal communication, Spring, 2010) or more of the same theory, theory, theory written by the dominant culture that is found in curriculum studies and that has been the foci of many studies thus far. We “do research ultimately to improve some aspect of curriculum-related matters not merely to theorize or describe it in a detached fashion”

(McCutcheon, 1982, p. 19). What is left out in the theory is the “reality” or heart of what the focus needs to be – those personal narratives that fills in the gaps between theory and practice. Fiction gives the autobiographer the creative freedom to “break old barriers and break new ground” (Ayers, 2008, x) to write true-to-life stories that are enjoyable and with the anonymity necessary, in many instances, to protect identities while allowing the writer the freedom to more accurately depict or illustrate their lived experiences they would otherwise be reluctant to share. Teachers working in school districts do not normally have the freedom to express and write as they please without suffering either covert or overt repercussions that may include such things as informal reprimand, ostracizing, or loss of job – the moral turpitude, denigrating the district (sometimes construed as insubordination). There is sometimes also a prevailing attitude that you must be unhappy and wish employment elsewhere if you publicly speak out against the district or school in which you work. There is “*no you must be unhappy clause,*” but, it can seem so for teachers who have tried to speak out on issues. Teachers do get together and discuss issues; but, many do not often share with the outside what is happening on the inside – and there is often a lot to share. In addition to these concerns, Southerners are, in many instances, rigid and uncompromising in their beliefs in what is proper and not proper to share with the public. Teachers may not only get backlash from the school district but also from their family and community as well especially if they are speaking out on topics that are deemed inappropriate or embarrassing.

Autobiography is personal, passionate, and participatory (He & Phillion, 2008) for the researcher rather than just static, observed, and logical. This new methodology of research also allows for feelings or emotions, thoughts, and perceptions to be included in

the narrative of the lived experience via fiction and non-fiction. Although life stories are read based on the popularity or notoriety of the subject, no one life story should be more important than another – all should have a place in history to create a more well-rounded view of what happened in any give situation. Feelings and viewpoints vary from observer to observer. Re-recording and overturning hundreds of years of history to correct omitted or under-represented segments are heavy jobs. Accepting different arguments and embracing progressive thoughts in curriculum theory are difficult adjustments – hence the slow and gradual move from one theoretical movement to another over the years. In most autobiography, normally the rich or famous person was the object of study, has been the staple that history was predicated upon. As researchers perform critical analysis of their lives and continue to write and publish, they effect changes to re-right and re-write history. As Shakespeare would say – what’s in a name? Valid research and analysis no matter what you call it is still valid research and analysis. Although the word “fiction” may not be the best term to use to describe the research being conducted in autobiographical or narrative inquiry today, traditional theorist should look at solving the problem of naming the research instead of continuing to discount it as invalid or acceptable because it is called fiction. This denial of the work because of what it is named is another form of silencing the marginalized instead of giving them voice. Thus far not many critics have discounted the research based on the study or research. Many are attempting to discount the research because of the form the narrative is written in – fiction. After being used in historical and philosophical research areas for over twenty years, fiction should by now be either totally accepted within certain parameters or totally unauthorized or accepted in research. “Times have changed.

Curriculum scholarship is now an inclusive conversation” (Reynolds & Webber, 2004, p. 6). The lived experience of the marginalized other has joined the discourse. Under the guise of keeping the research and the field “pure” the dominant society will continue to silence the voices that need to be heard and theory will not cross the gap to merge with practice. While “anything goes” is not acceptable approach to take to research neither is “let’s keep things the way they are.” Somewhere in the middle is where curriculum theory should aim. Recognizing other forms of research and expanding the dialogue through alternate means (fiction included) should be basic tenets in curriculum studies rather than something to be struggled with and for. Research does not necessarily need to sound like a science project or lab report to be valid and interesting. Curriculum theorists who aspire to this thinking should adapt and shift to keep up with changes in the education field because curriculum studies is or should be a progressive thinking field that strives to address changes in education and to remain current in issues and discourse.

“Historically, storytelling has been a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 16). Rather than “hitting the wall square on,” many Black writers use narrative to express their point of view while deflecting the reader from the “wall” of racism and issues of oppression in such a way as to show them the wall that was there in the first place. It makes the bitter pill go down a little easier. Historians are beginning to use more fiction in their work. The use of fiction to relate actual events will not use imaginary events or people, will definitely be true and not deceive, and is not a pretense or invention. For this reason, the argument that fiction is literary instead of historical will not suffice for this study. Its historical value based on the lived experiences of the participants cannot be doubted or questioned. Historical

narratives use fiction to fill in the gaps for missing information. Although they are using it more, critics sometimes see fiction in research as being more of literary work than actual historical work. Although Toni Morrison based her novel, *Beloved* (1987), on a slave narrative, critics classify her novel as literary instead of historical. She humanizes an inhuman event and gives voice to the demons the mother must have had after killing her child. Literary narrative, on the other hand, may or may not be based on actual events. Literary fiction may be partly or entirely created narrative.

Fiction for some scholars takes away from the historical value of the narrative; while others see fiction as a way to humanize the experience to make the history more interesting. Pihlainen (1998) looks at whether historical narratives are inherently fiction by using the works of Hayden White who is widely known for his opinions of narrative theory in history. White believes historical narratives have more literary value than historical value (history as literature); but, he introduced the notion of fictionalization to allow the historical events to be shared (history of science). Filling in is filling in; thus, he contradicts his own argument. Steinberg (2003) discusses how Calhoun uses fiction to “fill in” the missing parts of the slave narratives. He discusses how the fictionalization makes the narratives impure historically. He also points out that the other narratives (peoples’ stories) may be fiction that became historical records. Mikkonen (2006) briefly discusses the recent theories of fiction, their differences, and the fact that fact can become fiction and fiction can become fact. Ziolkowski (1997) discusses works by various philosophers has been fictionalized to make the material more comprehensible and interesting to the reader.

This study is best served by fiction because it is a history of one person's recollection of events through memory of their lived experience and experiences of other close to them over the years. It serves as a way to document and preserve a life story. Historical texts, I think, are stories or narratives of how the writer interprets and puts together that information for others to read based on lived experiences or documentation pieced together to produce a coherent text. Although they will easily recognize themselves in the narratives, I chose fictionalization as the methodology to protect the identities of the people involved and to provide an avenue to make the participants more realistic. The actual participants are well-known to the community; but, some of the experiences are not well-known to outsiders. As I continue to delve into my topics, I am finding that the experiences, although personal, are by no means specific to my family. Black women around the world have similar stories to tell – have a similar history to relate. Much has been done to study and research the negatives found in our culture; but little has been written about the “roots” of our problems. I intend to unearth some of those issues so that they can blossom into a healthy discussion that many can harvest and reap the benefits of the new dialog. The narratives are personal, graphic, and historical from the viewpoint of the women involved.

The focus of this fiction will be on experiences with oppression (sexual and racial), survival of the oppression, religious beliefs, conflict with reality and religion, views on the educational systems (formal and informal), and views on how life experiences have shaped me into who I currently am. The experiences will be retold and fictionalized from a historical standpoint to give the audience a better understanding of the “baggage” and cultural issues taking place in a Southern Black family from a female

perspective. Rather than using a story to weave a fictional narrative to personalize and humanize it (much as Toni Morrison does with her novels), I intend to use real experiences to weave a personal humanistic story. This narrative will, I hope, be enjoyable as well as educational to the reader.

The narrative is also intended to provide educators a better understanding of some deep-seated issues associated with the main character's traditions, customs, and spirituality, as well as personal baggage that some teachers unknowingly bring to class with them in their encounters with Black students. Although the central male figure in the Black household is crucial to child development, the mother figure, I think, defines how students see authority figures and respond to the educational environment both positively and negatively because in most Black households she is not just the dominant figure but the only figure of authority in the household. My intent is to add to the dialogue of oppression and education of Black students.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HARVEST: NOVELLAS

In the following pages, I am presenting my stories that demonstrate, illustrate, and show some of the culture, traditions, and experiences that tie into my previously discussed research. I begin with an introduction of the main character followed by chapters that focus on various times in the life of this composite main character. Each chapter depicts a phase or time in her life. Each chapter begins with a prelude that introduces the reader to the setting, time, and events about to take place in the life of the main character. As I progress through the period in the life of the character and move from story to story, I utilize subtitles that clue the reader into what the story is about. I end each chapter with an Interlude in which I attempt to explain or analyze what happened in the chapter.

THE RUNNING ROSE: Introducing Marie Sincerely Lucky

Marie grew up in a single-parent household with her mother and five other siblings. She is the second oldest child and the oldest daughter. Her mother expected and demanded that she was like a second mother to her younger siblings. She was expected to assist with cleaning, cooking, and teaching her younger sisters anything her momma didn't feel like repeating such as what to do when the menstrual cycle began and how to take care of your body during that time of the month. Mamas taught her all these and other things that she was supposed to then later teach her younger sisters. Her childhood was sprinkled with love, abuse, and domination. Her early years were marked by physical and emotional abuse. Her haven during those years was her grandparents who provided the love she was often missing. Eventually her haven became her living hell as she

experienced abuse of another nature altogether - sexual. She lived with her step daddy, momma, brothers, and sisters in a rental house across the woods from her cousin from birth to five. At age five they moved first with her grandparents and later into a house built for them on The Hill.

The Hill, the main place of Marie's upbringing, was located at the end of a long and winding dirt road. As one rounded the sharp curve leading into the homestead, they were met with an impressive view of houses in a hodgepodge asymmetrical layout. Marie's house was the first house around the curve. It was the only house without inside plumbing. The house was box shaped with four rooms – the living room, a bedroom to the right, the kitchen through the living room, and a bedroom to the right of the kitchen. Except for the front and back doors there were no other doors in the house. In the middle of the living room was a potbellied stove that heated the house and served as the stove when the gas in the outside propane gas tank ran out. The back porch had a faucet with a shelf to put buckets or pans to get water. Out back a few yards from the house was an outhouse that smelled to high heaven during the summer. It seemed as if people put their houses next to who they liked the best with no thought of any grand layout design.

From the moment one rounded the corner, the vision of a working farm met the eye. By northern standards, the houses would probably have been considered dilapidated; but, from her point of view, they were well maintained pieces of property. Yards with spots of well-kept grass and flower beds provided a natural aroma of mixed sweets from magnolia bushes, rose bushes, honeysuckle trees, plum trees, and peach trees that tickled the nasal senses. The houses (mobile homes, boarded structures, and one block structure – the main house) contained members of the family (sons, daughters, and grandchildren).

Behind the homes were fields, crops, and woods for miles. There were crops of some sort in the fields all year round. They were rotated by the seasons of the year – some crops were for spring, summer, fall, and winter harvesting. These fields, although huge in area, were called the garden because their main purpose was to provide food or money for the families. They grew cabbage, greens (collard, mustard, and turnip greens), rutabagas, tomatoes, peas, beans, potatoes (white and sweet), okra, egg plants, cantaloupe, watermelons, and sugar cane. Anything they did not eat, can, freeze, or preserve was sold either at the farmers’ market or to local families – her grandfather outfitted and redesigned his van into a traveling vending truck. He drove through the back roads of the county selling his produce to other families. There were also tobacco fields. These were the family cash crops and were treated with their proper respect and delicate care. Of all the crops they planted, tobacco was the one that was most delicate when pitted against the elements. If the tobacco crop is not good, the family will not make enough money to settle up debts and purchase necessities.

Women and girls were expected to carry themselves as ladies - no matter what - in public, children were expected to be seen and not heard, and the man was the man of the house – what he says is gospel and everyone is expected to follow the gospel. The children were taught early on to defer to adults in all situations – even when they [the children] knew they [the adults] were wrong. To appear meek and subservient was a plus - children never looked adults in the eyes, talked (sass) back to adults, or talked while adults were speaking. That, for Marie, was a hard pill to swallow because she gradually learned to stand up for herself as she grew older...even in the patriarchal family she was fated to be born to.

Marie's mama was often sickly. Her heart condition and anemia had her taking strong medicines. She also took water pills to make sure she did not have fluid buildup in her body and she had to also take blood pills. Sometimes she would go into the hospital or be at home resting for a while. During those times Marie and her sisters and brothers had to stay with their grandparents until they were old enough to stay by themselves (that time came when Marie was about ten). She and Terrell made sure the other youngins got up for school and had food to eat. Her grandma or cousin Elvira would check on them periodically. Her granddaddy, the patriarch who ruled with an iron fist and the whip he carried with him, was industrious and always looking for ways to make money to support the family other than just the farm products. The best way to describe her grandfather would be dictator/tyrant. Everything was done his way no questions asked or there was hell to pay! His house, the lone block structure, was the center of the hill. Behind the main house, were the pigs, goats, the sugar cane grinder, the pump house, and the smokehouse. Families worked their yard like they kept the fields. Saturday mornings were spent mowing spots of grass and raking yards. Everyone assisted in raising all the children (adults and older children alike) – someone was always cooking so there was no need to go hungry; some adult was always on the Hill so supervision was not an issue; and playmates were everywhere so there was no need to be lonely unless one chose not to eat, wander off in the woods (as Marie and her brother often did), or be alone in a private spot. Everybody knew everybody else, what they were doing on any given day, and watched out for each other's kids. Marie had to watch everything she did in public for fear of getting in trouble and getting a beating. Each beating she got for something she did wrong in public, if someone else caught her, resulted in them beating her, her

grandma or granddaddy beating her, maybe an uncle or aunt too before her mother finally got to her. By the time mama got to her it was not about what she did as much as embarrassing her in public. Everyone knew everyone else, and all of their personal business – some may have seen this as looking out for your neighbor, but Marie always thought of it as other people being rather nosey – it sometimes seemed as if her family had their own soap opera going (any time the women were home and could get the station to tune in, they looked at the available soap operas religiously).

Marie and all the other girls were allowed to watch as long as they stayed quiet. All the beauty, lying, and sinning was addictive to watch. At other times, on scorching summer days when it was even too hot to stand in the shade, all the children, rather than playing outside, would in the sittin' room (informal living room because they were not allowed in the formal living room) watching cartoons. There were usually about ten of 'em in there (her cousins, her brothers, her sisters, and Marie). Their time was interrupted once. This particular incident left a distinct impression on the young girl. Although they laughed in all the appropriate places, they kept pretty quiet cause the grownups were in the next room. All of a sudden there was simultaneous and instant group awareness that an adult had entered the room. Her mother and two of her aunts walked into the room and just looked at them. They all immediately jumped up, turned off the television, and ran outside. The women did not say anything to them. They didn't have to. Everybody knew what to do or what would happen. All the children thought it was not fair to have to sit out in the heat; and boy did they have a lot to say about the situation to each other about how unfair it was to have to leave when they were in the room first as they sweated outside in the sun. The children, however, often found other fun things to do on the

outside since the only time they were really allowed to do anything on the inside was when the grownups were not in the house at all.

Marie's childhood turned her into a watcher. She would often listen to what was said; but, she would also watch what people did in addition to what they said. The shadows became her friend as she would often stand quietly outside the doors and windows to listen in or stand in the corner out of sight to see and hear what was going on. People did weird things when they felt nobody was listening or watching. She also kept her own counsel and felt that no one ever really knew her. Marie was not close to too many people during her lifetime. Marie spent a lot of her time playing with her older brother Terrell and her cousin Gina. The two of them were the closest to her for most of her childhood; but, they were not her confidantes. She rarely confided in anyone. For most of her life she was a solitary soul. She was good at people watching and listening without being noticed. Marie was smart but had common sense too which meant she knew a lot of stuff that she was not supposed to know and did not repeat everything she heard...she knew a lot of family secrets.

Inside each one of us is a beautiful flower garden.

This is the garden of the soul. With each lesson

we learn, the garden grows. As we learn together,

our individual gardens form a tranquil paradise.

- Sri Chinmoy

NOVELLA 1:

PRODUCTIVE FIELDS: LIFE HAPPENS

Prelude

. . . Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up; Some fell upon stony places where they had not much earth; and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth; And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some and hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.

Matthew 13:3-8 (King James, Bold Text Edition)

Marie's story begins at the end. She has reached a crossroads in her life and needed to make some decisions and changes. Much had been sown into her being – some she had control of some she didn't – and she was reaping her harvest at the time. She was tired both physically and emotionally and depressed because she feels she has few options. Entering a new phase of her life, Marie feels she has wasted some of her best years on things that she now sees as not important. While in this depressive funk, she must do some real soul searching and make some drastic changes that she is hesitant to make.

Checking the Almanac: Looking Back Over the Years

Marie knew listening to depressing music while you are depressed is not a good idea; but, she couldn't help herself. As the lyrics sounded through the stereo, Marie really took in the words:

Looking back over the years

I guess I shedded some tears

Told myself time and time again

This time I'm gonna win

But another fight, things ain't right

I'm losin' again

Takes a fool to lose twice

And start all over again. (Pendergrass, 2007, verses 1-2)

Well she had been that fool who lost twice and started over again to come full circle. Now she was at the end of her rope. Marie sat on the side of the bed. She had spent the night alternating between despair and hope and rejuvenation. She knew she was about to enter another period of depression. Over the years, she had to battle it from time to time – alone without medical diagnosis or assistance. Here she was at forty-one about to retire from the military, enjoying her teaching career, and with a new husband and she felt entirely alone in the world. Not that she was – it just felt like it. Renita, her closest relative and best friend died suddenly a few months ago and nothing her new husband or anyone else could do was helping with her depression and grief. She knew she was not in the right frame of mind to make major decisions; but, that didn't stop her from making them.

Chris, her husband, had been his normal non-talkative self during their argument the night before. His refusal and inability to hear her message to him left her angry and resentful. For the past few months they had arguments about his daughter Callie and her ability to live in filth – she refused to clean anything as if Marie was her maid. Callie was

an adult who should have gotten her own place once her mother put her out – that much was obvious; but Chris refused speak to her about cleaning or moving out and refused to allow Marie to speak to her. The last straw was finding her feminine napkins (used of course) lying on her three year old daughter’s bed – Marie had had enough. Her choices were clear – either shut up and put up with the situation or pack up and move back to her house. Their discussion ended with Marie screaming at him and him in turn sitting in stony silence letting her rant and rave – thus making her even madder.

While Chris slept soundly thinking the matter had been settled because he refused to discuss the situation, Marie lay awake contemplating her choice – she had already decided to leave. This was her third marriage and she knew from experience staying would only make the situation worse not better. Before marrying Chris, she had decided that relationships and marriage were not something she was good at; but, Chris convinced her she was wrong and to agree to become his wife. They had been engaged to be married in high school but separated because he cheated – she actually caught them together by actually tracking him to where they were. This should have been a clue to his character. They went their separate ways and reunited twenty-five years later. Both had been married before (once for him and twice for her) and had adult children (three adult daughters for him and two adult sons with one minor daughter for her). The families had originally meshed with all children behaving as brothers and sisters. Why the issue with cleaning? It, for Marie, was a basic thing that all girls learn from the time they were born on the farm – girls should always be clean and everyone was responsible to ensure that the home was maintained (especially girls).

After moving back into her house, Marie sat down to contemplate how she had gotten to the end of a relationship once again. Her moments of solitude were infrequent and short. Caring for her three year old daughter left her little time for anything else. She sat thinking about a conversation with Darnel her 17-year old son as they were packing their things to move back to the house.

He said rather bluntly, *“I think you, and I don’t mean no disrespect, that you are not the kind of woman who should be in a relationship or at least gettin’ married.”*

“Why do you say that?”

“Cause, you don’t take no shit. You kick a nucca to the curb real quick. He ain’t got to do nothing but piss you off and out he goes. I don’t mean to make you mad, but dat’s how I see it.”

“Really? I think you might be right and no I ain’t mad at cha. My bullshit meter is set on low. Besides it don’t take long to figure out it ain’t working. I think one of my main problems is not being able to work through issues. I just keep moving. I can do bad by myself – why do I need to be with somebody to be miserable. I think you right dough. I probably need to be single and unattached.”

Darnel’s comments made her think of different reasons she was intolerant in relationships for a few weeks after the conversation. She began looking back into her personal relationships to analyze how she had become the intolerant person that she was. Then it hit her – the seeds sown in her youth (family traditions, abuse, role models, and church) had been cultivated with some love and disappointments to produce the woman she became. Her experiences and relationships with her mother and relatives were deeply imprinted onto her soul and her being. Marie had, from early childhood, felt that her

mama did not like or love her. She felt like she did not belong in the family she lived in...a constant oddity and outsider. She would later reflect on those experiences and feelings to analyze how this affected her and her ability to form relationships with and teach her students in the classroom. She was at a point that she was getting tired of the day-to-day job of teaching. She had lost her passion for teaching in general and life in particular. She, however, did not have the luxury of self-pity or depression...there was too much to do and too many bills to pay.

She had read the research on how minority students are harmed by the educational system that does not take their culture into account with the teachers are nonminority and of the dominant oppressive race. She began to wonder: What about minority teachers of the same race? Can they do more harm than good or do they automatically understand and identify with the minority child? What happens when a Black teacher of Black children is not Black enough to meet their needs? She began to reflect to try to visualize answers to some these questions she had. Her thoughts were that maybe if she could figure this out for herself, she could help others from making her mistakes.

Interlude

Marie was experiencing many trials and tribulations during this time in her life and she felt tired down to her soul: her best friend and cousin had just died, she was a full-time student beginning to work on her doctoral degree, she was trying to make a decision about really retiring from the Georgia Army National Guard, was commuting over 100 miles a day, and trying to be a good wife and mother to her husband and children while at the same time being a good stepmother to three ungrateful adult girls. With all of this going on, Darnel, her youngest son, began missing days of school because

he would not get up after she left the house to go to work; but, she felt she didn't have a choice because she did not want to transfer him back to his original school in the middle of the semester. At times, Marie felt like her head was spinning and was gonna just fly off; but, she continued to hold it together. Ensuring her children grew to be well-adjusted adults was paramount to her; so, falling apart was not an option.

Marie was having a period of questioning her very foundation. At a time when everything was going wrong she had the hard choices to make for the sake of her family, children, and her sanity. She could have sacrificed herself for all of their sakes; but, she had to make the hard choice(s). No longer was she the type to starve so that the children could eat – she had progressed beyond that point in her life and was unwilling to return to it. This is also a time when she is looking at her life and making the decisions rather than just responding to and accepting what life handed her.

Viewing this novella through a Black Feminist Thought / Womanist lens one sees the struggle to empowerment Marie is suffering through. In her quest for survival, she is resisting her natural urge to quit and give up. The phrase “tired down to her soul” says more than she was exhausted – the connotations suggest that she feels totally helpless and is at a point of utter defeat and giving up on life – to let it take her over. She also realizes she is entering a depression – something she has felt before. Chris exercises his domination by his utter silence and refusal to engage in conversation or argument is in essence telling her that what she says is not important. This frustrates her more because she wants to be heard and valued. These feelings and situations are not generic or systemic to any race or culture. Any person (male or female) can have these experiences.

NOVELLA 2

PLANTING SEEDS OF EDUCATION

Prelude

In the first selection of novellas I explore some of the lessons learned in the life experiences of my main character during her early childhood (ages 3 to 5). The years were 1967 to 1969. Although Marie was born during the civil rights era, she saw none of the struggle. Her rural community remained segregated and isolated although the schools were desegregated. Interaction between whites and Blacks was limited to the fields or places where Blacks were subservient to their white neighbors. No one was pushing for equality or equal rights...they were stuck in a time warp of servitude and survival. In each vignette, the main character (Marie) experiences some direct lessons as well as some subtle lessons in life and survival of her circumstances. She begins life with lessons learned in surviving physical abuse and lessons of surviving in a rural household.

A Sprout Is Born

Marie momma loved to tell the story of Marie's birth. As the story goes, Marie was the cheapest chil' her ma had...she cost 27 dollars (the cost to cut the cord and clean her and her ma). She was born in a new 1964 Cadillac enroute to the midwife's home. Marie and Terrell were born out of wedlock to the man she wanted to marry (her childhood sweetheart). Because her granddaddy, Raymond, felt her real daddy was not good enough fo' her mama since his ma owned a juke joint, he ran 'im off with his shot gun as dey was tryin' to run off and git married. When Marie was a few weeks old she had been forced to marry this man who was twice her age with grown chil'ren older than

she was and who she later had four other youngins by (the first arriving nine months after Marie).

Marie's earliest memories from childhood are of the first few years of her life spent with an abusive stepfather. This hell lasted until she was about five years old. One event stood out vividly in her mind...the day her step daddy beat her for something her sister did (she felt she had to be about three years old). Marie and Terrell had been forced to sit on the steps while her younger sisters played in the yard. Denise threw something that hit her daddy's car. He flew off his chair on the porch behind Marie and Terrell, grabbed Marie, and gave her a beatin' of her life because Denise almost broke his car window. At night she could hear her mother and step daddy arguing and fighting across the hall from the room they slept in. The next morning her mamma would have the marks to prove who won. Her mama took the beatins while lettin' her two oldest youngins get beat too. Marie's ma finally had enough and fought back when Marie was five.

Seeds of Education

Marie's Southern curriculum or Southern education (unofficial) began at an early age (at age three usually but as soon as she was born it sometimes seemed). Her mother began instructing her in what to do or say and what not to do or say in public. The formal home training began at age five. Saturday was a time for chores and learning new things. The first major lesson was how to shoot. Early one Saturday morning, Granddaddy came to the house with his guns. Momma said everybody would be shooting that day. The morning was clear and the air was crisp without being cold – a perfect day for this pastime. Momma and granddaddy set up targets for them to shoot at.

The first gun they took out was the shotgun. Marie's momma shot the gun at a target set up in the field beside the house and hit her target. Marie was the first one of the kids to try. Her momma gave her the gun which was longer than she was tall. It was heavy in her arms. As she directed her how to aim at the target and pull the trigger, her momma said, "*It kicks so hold it tight in ya arms.*" She then stood Marie in front of the big tree on the side. When Marie squeezed the trigger, the blast lifted her off her feet into the tree behind her. After picking herself up, she realized that she had hit a part of the target and began swinging around with the gun still in her hands. All the adults shouted for her to stop which she immediately did. A quick scolding from them let her know the rules of guns: point only if you plan to shoot, guns are not toys, and NEVER swing a gun around (loaded or unloaded). Marie would not forget that lesson and it served her well in the military.

During the week, Marie and the other children found ways to occupy themselves while Momma cooked and in between doing chores. Marie and Terrell were the only two who did chores of any kind. Terrell was two years older than Marie and the other kids were just too small to really help. The house they lived in had a huge room that Momma kept their toys in. When it rained, she let them play in that room so they didn't have to get wet. Every morning Marie and Terrell had to empty the pots, draw water from the well, and get wood for the fireplace. If they had food, Momma would cook something for them to eat. If they didn't, Momma would do something with the government food so they had enough to eat. Marie didn't mind most of the stuff they had to eat; but, she hated the buttermilk...she could not force herself to drink it. Momma would put it in front of her and expect her to drink it without question. At a young age, Marie put her foot down.

“Momma, I don’t like this milk. It tastes sour. I can’t drink it.”

“Well, ya ain’t gonna get nothin’ else so ya better drink it.”

Marie finished all of her food; but, she did not drink the nasty milk.

“You can sit here all day if you have to; but, don’t you move until ya drink ya milk!”

Marie sat at the table for a couple of hours before Momma got the milk, put it in the refrigerator, and allowed her to get up. When Momma fixed their plates for lunch, she put the same glass in front of Marie to drink. After finishing all her food, Marie again just sat there. She knew the drill... *don’t get up til ya drink ya milk*. Only problem was she couldn’t drink it. After a couple more hours and before her step daddy came home, Momma let her get up from the table and poured the milk out. From then on, Momma didn’t give her buttermilk to drink; Marie got water from the well instead. She was glad she was not going to go through the buttermilk ritual over and over again and that her step daddy didn’t know about it ‘cause she knew he wouldda’ made her drink it all or beat her or Momma. Marie didn’t want to get Momma in trouble and normally did everything she told her to do but drinking buttermilk was not something she was able to do.

Saturdays often found Marie on the back porch washing diapers or inside the house cleaning or mopping. Her younger sisters were too young to help and Terrell spent time with his friends that rode their bicycles over to play with him. Marie was only five and not old enough to go to school and have friends while Terrell was seven and in the second grade. One Saturday as she was scrapping the dirty diapers out of the diaper pail before washing them on the washboard, Terrell’s friends came over looking for him.

Marie quickly put the dirty diapers back in the pail waiting for them to leave. She did not want them to see her sticking her hands in the dirty diapers. She busied herself doing other things like pretending she needed to go to the well for more water and moving the tubs around on the porch; but, they kept riding around the backyard talking to Terrell who had joined them.

Momma stepped out onto the porch and said, *“You need to hurry up! I have stuff for ya to do in the house; so, get a move on.”*

“Yes ma’am.” Marie knew she couldn’t put it off any longer and all the older boys would see her washing dirty diapers; but, if she didn’t finish, she would be getting a beating from Momma for taking too long washing and hanging the diapers. It seemed like this new baby was going through diapers like they were going out of style. As the boys continued to ride around the yard, she put her head down as if she did not see them and began scrubbing the diapers. She was so caught up in her embarrassment that she did not notice when they finally left the back yard. As it began to get colder later in the year, she washed the diapers in the house and only took them outside to hang. It was about to be Christmas when she and Terrell got a surprise.

Marie’s daddy and stepma had come to visit from Chicago to see her and Terrell dat year right after Christmas. Instead of it bein’ a happy time, it was hell. This was the first time she met her real daddy. As her real daddy tried to coax her to come to him, her stepdaddy tol’ her to stay where she was which she did. Then he made her an’ Terrell call him daddy in front of her daddy. She could tell her real daddy was mad; but, she did what she was tol’ to do. Her daddy lef’ dat day and she didn’ see him agin’ til she was twelve. Marie’s stepdaddy would pay a few weeks later as her ma was cookin’ supper.

Momma was fryin' squirrel for supper when he came in an' tol' her to put some gravy on da meat. Mama said she wanted it fried and whatin' gonna put no gravy on it. Marie stood silently by as the two argued back and forth which was unusual cause dey most times went to dey room to argue. Den he hawled off an' slapped Mama. Marie watched when her ma slung de hot grease on her step daddy. He went screamin' out de back do' and runnin' cross the field to her cousin house. Her ma got dem together an' walked all of 'em to her ant's house until her granddaddy came to get 'em. It was a hot walk an' got hotter as dey set outside waitin' to be picked up. Dey waited most of de day til Granddaddy finally got there. Marie vowed dat when she got big no man would ever beat her like her mama was beat no matter who he was.

A few days after they had been living with granddaddy and grandma, step daddy showed up all bandaged up around the head. Marie sat quietly in a corner and listened while her granddaddy and her cousin tried to make mama go back with him. Mama was crying but kept saying no she whatin' going until they left her alone. Marie was scared they were going to make 'em go back and he would try to kill all of 'em. When granddaddy couldn't make mama go back, he built a house down the road for her.

Interlude

Marie was abused physically by her stepfather. She was expected to take care of younger siblings and do household chores on a daily basis. Learning to shoot a gun was also paramount to her education and survival in her rural community. Getting assistance from the food lines was not considered shameful...it was a part of survival. Her biological father was not around and was pushed out of her life when he did appear for the first time. It would be many years before she saw him again (about seven years).

Some valuable lessons she learned during this time helped her later in life. What one must do in analyzing his or her life is to try to discern what the experience taught them.

Marie worked from an early age. Did that mean she would have a good work ethic? Not really but the chances were good that she would. She was abused. Did this mean she would be an abuser or a victim the rest of her life? Studies show more than likely she would be one or the other. What she actually learned was that she did not have to stay in abuse. Watching her mother almost kill a man was not terrifying to her – having to return to the situation did. The family was poor enough to qualify for food supplements but the child did not recognize her life as such. Why? Because there was no stigma attached to getting food and fed.

Marie helped with the household chores while her brother played in the yard. This, as well as the scene with the father and stepfather, was an early lesson in gender roles – the man is the master to be served and obeyed and those in charge of you got away with mistreating you. Marie is fairly young but has a spark of defiance that her mother did not challenge or correct effectively during their battle of wills. Her mother became her co-conspirator by not forcing her to do something against her will and not telling her stepfather.

Looking through the Black Feminist Thought lens the oppression is evident where the sex and gender intersect. Men have established roles of domination and superiority over the women – boys play while girls work taking care of the house and, knowing his daughter is being beaten, the granddaddy still tried to force her to return to the situation. Both Marie's and her momma's sparks of resistance gave them the means to resist and survive their ordeals (buttermilk for Marie and domestic violence for her momma).

NOVELLA 3

THE HILL

Prelude

Leaving the abuse behind, Marie now enters a time of hard work and childhood fun. From ages 5 to 12, she sees but does not understand a lot of what is going on around her. She learned lessons how to cook and was expected to have the noon meals ready when the grownups returned to eat. If food was not ready, the penalty was severe because they had to be back in the fields. Her responsibilities began growing at age five. She began to learn the lessons girls had to know to do their part in making sure the farm day was not interrupted.

From Harvest to Feast: Every Girl Should Know How to Cook

Marie learned how to cook, began working the fields, and babysat younger children. At age five and after they had moved to the house her granddaddy built for them, Marie began cooking and going to the fields. On days she was not in the fields weeding or fetching things for the adults, she was in charge of all the younger children and havin' dinna' ready at noon for everybody in the fields. At first, she was so excited to be growing up and being allowed to go to the fields with the grownups but the elation did not last long. Marie had to get up every morning around four in the morning to walk to her grandparents' house. The mornings were always cold and dark. She had to dress in the dark so as not to wake anybody else up. They had not been in the house that long...only a few weeks and she still had not got used to walking by herself down to the big house. She had been training for the last few weeks . . . learning how to make one

dish at a time until she learned them all. Today she had to cook the whole meal by herself under the tutelage of her grandma.

This morning was colder and darker than others. She hurriedly washed her face and put on her clothes in the dark. She closed the door quietly behind herself, looked as best she could in the dark. Seeing nothing, she started down the dirt road to her grandma who would be waiting at the back door for her. As she started walking, she heard something. Looking around, she could not see anything. Normally the moon would be out for her to see; but this morning, there was no moon and it was pitch black. Terrified, she began to run. When she jumped onto the back porch stumbled and fell, the door was immediately opened by her grandma who asked: “*What’s da matter?*”

“*Nuttin.*” Marie lied. “*I jus’ hurried up an’ ran.*” She didn’t want her grandma to know she was scared coming down the dark road by herself. After that, her grandma looked at her like she knew she was lying but started telling her what to do in the kitchen. Marie spent the next few minutes going back and forth from the sink to the stove until she finished cooking breakfast. She had to keep hoppin’ down and climbin’ back up on the chair her grandma had pulled up in front of the stove. As she was finishing, her granddaddy came in to sit down at the table. She had to bring his food to him. She stood silently behind him as he ate his food. His judgment would be her making or breaking. She would either finish making this trip every morning or have to keep coming til she got it right. When he finished, he said, “*Dat was good. Ya cook better dan ya gran’ma. She can burn water.*” Happy as she was about doing good, Marie didn’t like anybody talking about her grandma – even her granddaddy. They had had to throw out a few pots and pans that her grandma had left on the stove with water boiling; but, that didn’t mean her

granddaddy had to remind everybody. Marie shared a special relationship with her grandma. They spent a lot of time talking and her grandma showed her how to do a lot of things. In this moment, she just looked at her granddaddy without saying anything. She should be used to it by now anyway. He was always putting her grandma down. As she began clearing away his place setting, her grandma told her to go wake her three uncles up.

Their rooms were off the kitchen – one on each end of the room. She stood in the doorway and called them. She went to the room that had her two youngest uncles first. After shaking and calling them for a while she gave up and went to the other room to wake her other uncle up. He got up, got dressed, and came to breakfast. When Marie told her grandma that her two youngest uncles would not get up, her grandma filled a pot with cold water and walked to the doorway. She threw the water to the ceiling and it splashed over both beds. Marie laughed herself silly as they shouted and hopped out of bed. Grumbling, they finally came out for breakfast before going out to work. When they left, she sat down to eat before washing the dishes. Later, she helped her grandma strip the beds and hang the covers out to dry.

As close as she was to her grandma, Marie did not want to be like her at all. Marie also learned early on that some relationships were not worth having while others needed cultivation and nurturing because they were important. She was not close to her momma. She spent a lot of time with her grandma and her cousin Elvira who would care for them when her momma often left them without food as she worked the fields. There were days they didn't have any food except for the spam, peanut butter, cheese, and buttermilk they got from the government. Those packages marked with USDA were a welcome sight

when they were hungry. Before they came to live on The Hill, Elvira would come over to check on them and bring them goodies or fix something for them before she left. Marie idolized her...she was always dressed up and going out to fun places her young mind could only imagine.

Elvira's momma had run off to get married when Elvira and her two brothers were young. Elvira was the middle child; but, she bossed her brothers like she was the oldest. Her momma didn't tell anybody she was leaving and did not come back for her children. Grandma and Granddaddy raise them. Elvira was the only one spoiled – the boys did not get away with anything near as much as she did. She always had money to buy all the clothes (the latest fashions) and stuff she wanted from the store. Granddaddy wouldn't even fuss at her for staying out as long as she wanted to; but, the boys got in trouble.

Playing in the Dirt: Work and Playtime

When Marie recalled her childhood growing up on The Hill, she fondly remembered a few carefree years in her childhood (five to twelve) with balmy days, hot sand on her bare feet (sometimes so hot that she would dance and skip around to find a grassy or shaded spot to stand on), and backbreaking work days spent in the fields in hundred degree temperatures (in the shade). She spent all of her childhood on a working farm on which every task served a purpose. There was no time for wasted endeavors – everyone worked to ensure they were able to feed and clothe themselves. There was no money for frivolities – food was grown, clothes were handmade, and everyone shared with each other when necessary. Work and play were both family affairs – everyone worked the fields all week; tended their houses and yards on Saturday; and went to

church, had huge family dinners, and played sports (usually softball) in the empty fields on Sunday. These were carefree and enjoyable times for the most part; but, there were dark memories that shadowed the happy times.

During the year, her day often began before daylight. She and her siblings did chores – feeding the animals – before eating breakfast which was usually about daybreak. During the summer, they either piled onto the back of a pickup truck or climbed into a ford car of some type to caravan to whatever field they were working in for the day be it corn, potato, watermelon, peanut, tobacco, etc. It did not matter what field they drove to. They all looked like huge tracts with never-ending rows of crops. Marie usually could not see the end of the row by standing at the beginning. Some days the sun was so hot beating down on her head that it felt like the brain was actually cooking. They often ate hog brains and grits for breakfast so she knew it did not take much to fry them. Her family often talked about how they ate everything on the hog from the “rooter to the tooter” or head to tail. Because most everything raised on the farm was for practical purposes, the summer months were not for vacations or fun but were for hard work and hard play when they did have time off. Marie and her sisters and brothers spent a lot of time barefooted during the summer months because money was scarce. Her momma was famous for saying: *“I ain’t got money to buy no shoes. Ya better take care of ‘em ‘til ya git ya nex’ pair. When ya come home ya better take ‘em off else ya gonna be goin’ ta school barefoot.”* There were six of them (two boys and four girls) and their momma brought two pair of school shoes per year for each of them – one at the beginning of the school year and one pair at Christmas to last through the remainder of the year. If they did not have shoes that fit during the summer, they either wore shoes too big that had the

toes stuffed with newspaper or cut the toes out of old school shoes that had gotten too small in order to have shoes to work in the fields.

Some days the children all stayed at granddaddy's house until the grownup came in from whatever field they were working. Some days their uncle Tony would watch them. Marie knew some of the things he did were odd (not how or what was happening) but not exactly what made them odd. Tony would make them take naps – something nobody else made them do. He would say they were too loud or got on his nerves. Her uncle Tony (while he was babysitting all the smaller kids) would then take her cousin, Gina, to the other room when they were supposed to be taking a nap. She knew something was going on; but, had no idea of what and her cousin wasn't telling. After he returned Gina to her pallet on the floor, he would wake the boys up and take them out to either play or hunt with him for a while. Marie would pretend to be asleep and watch what went on around her. Her turn to find out how twisted her family was came several years later. Since they did not have toys to play with, they thought of ways to entertain themselves. One such activity was playing with the telephone and another was stealing candy from the freezer. During those times, they played on the telephone rather than watching the television when the grownups were not at home and when they got tired of that, Terrell would open the freezer for them to get candy until they almost got sick from eating so much.

The telephone system was a party line that was shared with a lot of different people. They listened in on conversations on the party line [some of the people they knew and some they did not] between housewives (most of them white) and men they fooled around with while husbands worked either in town or in the fields. They would hear the

children giggling and would report them to the operator who would call her granddaddy later in the evening to tell on them. Marie's granddaddy would call them in and yell "ya'll youngins been playin' on dat phone?" When they would tell him that they had, he would say something like "I done tol' ya'll ta stay off da phone." He did not beat them or say anything beyond that; so, they ignored him and kept doing it. They instinctively knew that he was not serious because anything he was serious about resulted in him resorting to his exercising his favorite part of the Bible "spare the rod, spoil the child" and beating the crap out of them with his whip – a whip that they had helped him braid. Some things they never got in trouble for because granddaddy didn't think they were smart enough to do it.

Granddaddy had a freezer on the side porch that had the candy that he sold on his selling trips. Terrell at age ten could pick just about any kind of lock even a combination lock. He would pick the lock, let everybody get all the candy they wanted, and then lock it back with nobody suspecting them. Granddaddy always blamed their older uncles for stealing from him. Marie and her cousins and brother would listen to Granddaddy hollering at them and threatening to beat them for lying; but, they stuck together and never volunteered any information...nobody ever asked them anything about it. They couldn't even figure out how the freezer was being opened...they thought somebody was getting the key (which Granddaddy kept hiding in different places). The kids didn't need a key; they all had Terrell and all the candy they could eat.

Self-Germinating Seeds: I Ain't Got No Daddy

At age 12, Marie had not had a daddy in a few years. As she was playing with the tether ball her uncle had made for them, Denise came running up from their house.

"Marie, yo daddy at the house! Momma said to come on!"

“Who? I ain’t got no daddy!”

“Yes you do!”

“No I don’t!”

“Everybody got a daddy.”

“Not me.”

“Well how you get born den?”

“I hatched.” Marie responded. Although she did not want to go see this man, she didn’t want Momma coming looking for her either. She walked slowly home. The man sitting in the living room (the front room which was also Momma’s room) did not look familiar to her. Terrell looked just like him; but, she didn’t think he looked like the daddy she remembered from years ago. Terrell was so happy he just kept calling him *“Daddy”* while Marie just stood silently by. All efforts to get her to talk were to no avail...she wasn’t saying a thing. When she did finally try to ask him something she felt weird calling him *“Daddy”* so she called him by his name. If he was mad, he didn’t show it. Marie would call him by his given name for another four years before she felt out of place being the only one not calling him *Daddy*.

The Root of the Problem

Marie’s family, although highly religious, were very superstitious too. They believed in voodoo or roots and witchcraft. Their beliefs were part of the African culture that had quietly remained with them. If they spoke about such matters at all, it is in hushed tones to select people in their circle (this may or may not be a family member because some family members did not share these beliefs). Marie once overheard two female adults (these two women on outward appearances were Bible toting Baptists that

believed God was the answer to every trial and tribulation or good and bad thing that happened) talking about finding an egg secreted under the house underneath the section of the house where her bed was located and dreaming of snakes – a sign that someone had voodoo roots on them. One of the two offered to take the other (“rooted” person) to the sister (the seventh sister of the seven sisters) to see who rooted them and why and to see about getting them taken off. The relative told her to get some sulfur and put it all around the house and that if she found it (some item connected to her such as hair bound in something hidden in a place she would either cross - usually under the threshold of the doorway - or be near) to not touch it but to get it and take it with her. How they reconciled their religious beliefs with the voodoo beliefs was not lost on Marie even as a child because they would tell the children that “roots” could not hurt you if you did not believe in them.

Exploring the Woods

When Marie and Terrell did have time off (which was more often than not Saturdays), they would spend it wandering around in the woods. There was a huge trash dump nearby they explored on a regular basis and huge tracts of wooded area to explore. Terrell showed her how to make a sling shot and how to shoot it. She was accurate enough with it to kill birds and squirrels on their outings. There was always some water around and they were able to clean and cook their prey out in the open. If they did not have to work, Saturday was their time to spend exploring. They would leave first light and return at nightfall. Terrell taught her how to hunt, track, move quietly, and live in the woods. She first started following him because they had nobody their size around on a regular basis to play with and they had learned at an early age to stick together – Terrell

looked after her and she was his playmate (the little brother since their little brother was still a baby). Marie was constantly trying to keep up with her big brother and often sought his approval. When they would hear people moving about in the woods, they would lie low so as not to be detected. The treasures they found could be recycled into toys they could not afford to have otherwise. No one looked for or worried about them being gone all day unless they did something to draw attention to themselves – they were allowed the freedom to see their small world.

Once, the boys challenged the girls to a contest of building the best house. After confiscating wood, nails, and tin that their granddaddy had stacked up; they each built their respective houses. The boys, being the males they were, thought it would be a hands down win over the girls. When each group was done, the girls had the better place, furniture, and food. The boys went into the girls' house and took all of their food for themselves. The girls were pissed but they could not beat the boys so they had to let it ride; but, it all came crashing down when their granddaddy realized what they had done.

Granddaddy called them all up to the main house after he went to town because he had seen their houses through the trees:

I saw something shiny through the trees that looked like it might be my tin that was out by the barn. Did you youngins get my plywood and tin?

Yes sir. They responded in unison.

Yall better get my shit and put it back where ya got it from!

Yes sir!

They all hurriedly dismantled their houses and put everything back. They then kept an eye on whether or not granddaddy did anything with the stuff. After about a

month of sitting there without moving, they ventured to get it again and rebuild their houses. This time it took him a little longer to miss the boards and tin and made them tear everything down again. They thought about putting them back up but got bored and gave it up. They had to settle for having their home sites as their place to play in the woods.

Parasites That Choke the Seedlings: The School Bus Bully

Once, when she was about eight or nine years old, an older high school student (Paul) picked on all of the children (Marie and her siblings) on the bus. Her brother Terrell was too small to do much against a bigger Paul who was in high school. The bus driver (who was an old white woman) was scared of this huge Black kid; so, she would not say anything to him. After repeatedly trying to get the school to do something, Marie's mother met the bus one morning brandishing her 22-pistol (which she kept in her bra). She was not "breasty" in fact she was and is small-chested; but, you could never tell that her bra was her holster. She also carried a long bladed pocket knife that she was really adept at using - she had almost sliced Marie's uncle in half with it once. The driver sat in stony silence as Marie's momma issued her edict "*If you can't stop him, I will.*" No one said a word as her mother stepped off the bus waving her gun and cussin' to the top of her lungs. The driver closed the door and proceeded to take everybody to school. She never said a word to Marie's momma or the school.

Back in those days, a parent had the right to protect their children (in the eyes of Black and white Southerners). Needless to say, Paul stopped picking on them and nothing else was ever said about it. With all the abuse to Marie and her siblings this was one time her mama stood up for them and she swelled with pride that her ma cared enough to do somethin' for them at last. As small as it was, it was a huge step for her momma to take.

She had stopped the bully and the torment they suffered through daily going back and forth to school.

Interlude

Marie learned at an early age how to tend house and cook. She was not allowed to cower and run away from her responsibilities no matter what was happening. During this time, she experienced the conflict happening around her – some she understood, some she didn't. Terrell, who was her idol, encouraged her competitive spirit and taught her to expand her horizons by showing her how to explore and survive in the woods and surrounding area. The adults in her life allowed children to be children – to roam and explore at will; but, they expected them to work hard without fail or complaint.

The Womanist view sees the life of Marie at this point as that of many other girls and women. The girl child began learning her role in the family and the community. She was expected to do the same work as the boys as well as “women’s work” of cooking and cleaning. Boys also learned their roles – manly jobs and leisure while the women worked to take care of their needs. The patriarchal community clearly left men on top in the hierarchy and women on the bottom. Most of the women accepted their roles without challenge or complaint. Those who dared to choose a different path were sometimes treated as an oddity in the family and ostracized in the community.

During this time period, Marie’s gender role is reinforced. She is of an age where she sees the odd disjointedness of action/words and beliefs/realities of her family. How would she come to terms with what she feels when she is not yet old or experienced enough to know much? Even in adulthood she has had difficulty in reconciling those very issues. This section of novellas also introduces the reader to the duality of superstition

and religion in the family. One should ask how they co-exist when they should normally not be able to. Some traditions or superstitions survive being taken from the tribes of Africa while others were introduced and reinforced by slave masters wanting to maintain as much control as possible over their slave populations, on one hand, while at the same time spouting Bible verses and the need to appease God at them. The children, although for a bad purpose, learned to stick together, lie by omission, and steal.

Through Black Feminist Thought, we see the children are very intelligent and adept at outsmarting the adults. The adults did not value the children's intelligence enough to even consider that they might be smart enough to steal the candy. The children in turn used this to their advantage to steal without impunity. How often do we as educators not give our students enough credit for being able to think? We often give them the answers sooner or later and the children have figured this out about us. They understand how adults think and will respond and use it to their advantage without remorse as these children did. What a child takes from a situation may not be what is intended.

Whether you tend a garden or not, you are the gardener of your own being, the seed of your destiny.

- The Findhorn Community

NOVELLA 4

SPROUTING WEEDS

Prelude

This section of novellas follows Marie's transition toward womanhood. The time period is 1977 to 1982 – the teenage years for Marie. It was a time of transition from

idealistic childhood to trial, tribulations, and another kind of abuse. She had been removed from an abusive step daddy to the family homestead where life was hard but fun until she began developing into a young woman. Life then took an unexpected turn for her – her life was turned upside down and her haven became her hell. People she once trusted to protect her became her abusers. Although she had little control of some events that happened during this time, she did begin to question life in general and blind loyalty/love in particular. No longer did she continue to believe in her family and their motives; everything in her caused her to be rebellious without being totally disrespectful. The values she had experienced early on in life was so ingrained, that she could not bring herself to disrespect her elders or run away from her problems. She was taught to grin and bear whatever came her way. As the years passed, Marie had witnessed things that Elvira and her uncles did and her young mind did not understand what was happening.

Sowing the Seeds of Religion

Marie joined the church and was baptized at the age of thirteen (the age the adult felt children were able to recognize and understand the meaning of accepting Christ as their savior). Marie was so happy. She had just got done praying in the closet – her mail order bible study said she must find a quiet place with few distractions and say the prayer of acceptance. In a four room house with seven people running around, finding a quiet place was neigh impossible; but, the closet met her needs. After saying the prayer, she felt warmth all through her body – she had been really communicating with God and was happy down to her toes. She felt she had just made a personal connection with God. She joined the church the following Sunday and was baptized the following Saturday. Life couldn't get any better.

Almost a month to the day that she accepted Christ, she had her first encounter with her perverted tormentor. The first time her grandfather touched her left her stunned, ashamed, and confused – she was shattered right down to her soul. She would spend the next year dodging groping hands and lewd comments. She began to stay home from church and no one questioned why. She started sleeping with her grandmother when it was her turn to spend the week with her to help around the house – no one questioned why. Her attitude and behavior became defiant and rebellious – no one questioned why. Marie still prayed to God as she struggled with her private pain to ask him questions she felt he should answer for her – *“Why me? What did I do to deserve to be harassed and molested almost on a daily basis? How could he (God) hate her all of a sudden?”* She knew she was not supposed to question God and when her questions went unanswered, she became bitterer. The love and faith she had once innocently believed in left a bitter taste in her mouth. She did not understand it at the time and it would take her another twenty years to get past the hurt and abuse to find her faith once more.

There were a lot of things going on during that time that the family kept quiet about – the rape of her sister by her two uncles (her mother caught one of them and did nothing), the rape of her toddler nephew by her pre-teen male cousin (again nothing was done and the family hushed it up), brothers sleeping with their brother’s wife, sisters sleeping with sister’s boyfriends or husbands – the list goes on. Airing the filthy secrets was strictly forbidden by the very people committing the sins. The mantra to keep silent was strictly enforced by all of the adults – no one aired the family’s dirty laundry under threat of the whipping of their life. She had adored and looked up to so many of the older family members to only see their ugly sides once the blinders had been stripped from her

eyes at the hands of her granddaddy. All family issues were presided over by the family patriarch (her granddaddy - the biggest sinner of all) and whatever he decided was the way things went. Marie really had nowhere to turn and no one to talk to about her problems. She felt totally helpless to change her situation. The den of hell she was living in had no escape for her. They had all ignored her silent pleas for help and the changes taking place with her usually vivacious personality – even God wasn't listening anymore. Marie (the victim) concluded that God created these monsters or abusers who had mistreated her. Then this God that she believed in and loved deserted her as her family had.

Sowing Rotten Seeds: Coming of Age

When she was thirteen and starting puberty, Marie's granddaddy called her into the room with him and grabbed her and began trying to touch her breasts and put his hands between her legs. She squirmed and ran out of the room terrified. Then every chance he got to get her alone was a new wrestling match. His favorite plea during those times was, "*Just let me put the head in.*" What made matters worse was that momma would sometimes make her go places with him to help him out and she still wouldn't tell momma what was happening to her.

Oh-oh she was trapped! How could she be so stupid? She wanted to go around selling food and visit the families around the country so bad that she forgot for a while what he was like when he cornered her. Now she was in the truck alone with him and she knew she was trapped. When she felt his hands touch her budding breast, first there was the pain (they were still coming in and still hurt) followed by shock that he touched her again. When he tried to put his hand between her legs, she slid all the way over to the

door on the opposite side of the truck as far away from him as possible. He continued to try to reach her while he drove and she continued to try to avoid his touch. She knew he could stop the truck and really grab her – she already had a plan: she was gonna open the door and run like hell (he couldn't catch her and nobody but Terrell could outrun her). Neither of them said anything as they waged this silent battle. When they got back to the house, she hurriedly escaped the cab of the truck and ran home. She did not tell her momma but she and her sisters talked about it. Because she was the oldest – a budding thirteen, she had to warn them to stay away from him. Elise reminded her, *“yall know momma ain't gonna believe ya so ya better stay away from him. Yall saw what she did to me when she caught Buddy doin' it to me.”* When Buddy raped her the first time, Elise was about eight years old and he was about twenty-one. When momma walked in and caught him, she didn't say anything to him but beat Elise within an inch of her life.

A few days later, granddaddy called Marie to the house to cut his toenails. She thought that was harmless enough – he wouldn't try nothing' with grandma in the house. Little did she know that offered little protection – he had something else in mind. As she bent over his foot cutting his nails, he used his other foot to try to rub her private areas. Not only was it was a shock; but it was disgusting his trying to put his foot where he had tried to put his hands days before – his foot would fall off before she cut his nails again without grandma being in the room too. As she neared her fourteenth birthday, he eventually stopped trying to do things to her – he must have got tired of her fighting him or found somebody else to play with; besides, she was getting better at dodging and fighting. She never knew what stopped him but she never looked at her granddaddy the same way again. Now she had to worry about Buddy.

He and Tony had both raped her sister by this time. She noticed he had been sneaking around the house lately every time momma left to go out on a date. When she first started going out, he would come and sit with them late into the night – she knew he was trying to wait until they went to sleep and he was gonna try something. All the girls sat up until he finally gave up and went home. Sure, they got in trouble when momma came home and they were still up, but it was a small price to pay to keep him off them; but it was only a matter of time before things came to a head. That time came a few weeks after momma had started dating her latest beau. Everybody was in bed asleep. Denise, who shared a bed with Marie, nudged her. *“Did you hear that?”* she whispered.

“Yea.” They both listened to try to figure out where the noise was coming from. It wasn't momma – she was still out. It was coming from the front room where momma slept. Somebody was trying to unlock the front door from the outside. They could tell they were trying to unslide the makeshift lock momma had put on the door when the doorknob could not fit on the new door. The hole where the knob would have been was big enough to put two fingers into and slide the lock to open the door (they had done it enough when momma locked them out to know).

Terrified now, Marie whispered to Denise, *“Hold on to me, I am gonna get the pistol, be quiet!”*

“I'm scared.”

“Be quiet and come on before he gets in the house!” Marie urged Denise to hurry.

The two girls crept out of bed and quietly crept to their mother's bed where Marie felt under the pillow for the pistol. Once she had it, she whispered to Denise, *“I got the gun, here's the light string, when he gets in pull the light on and I'll do the rest. Got it?”*

“Yea.”

A few moments later, Denise pulled the light on and Marie pulled the trigger before she thought about it. The gun was pointed right between her uncle’s eyes (Buddy) and it did not fire. He looked down the barrel of the gun. In that second she and he came to a grim understanding without words – he wouldn’t be making any more trips in the middle of the night because she would surely kill him. He turned and walked out the door. The girls were so terrified that they did not go back to sleep. They waited for momma to come home to tell her what happened. She took the gun from Marie who was still clutching it and looked at it. She said *“You forgot to take the safety off. Now go to bed and I’ll talk to Buddy tomorrow.”*

Well, the talk amounted to nothing. His lie was that he was coming to check on the kids while momma was out – which is what the girls expected him to say; but, they knew he wouldn’t be making any more midnight trips for fear of getting killed. Marie felt she could kill him with no regrets – he needed killing anyway like the dog he was.

Sowing Seeds of Rebellion: You Ain’t Gonna Hit Me

Marie was growing into a scrawny but strong teenager at age fourteen. She wrestled with her brother and other boys in the family. Pretty soon she was as good at huntin’, runnin’, and fightin’ as they was. Another time Marie did not, however, defer to an adult – thus beginning her defiance at the situation to which she was born. Her aunt was standing outside her grandfather’s house watching her daughter toss an object around. As Marie was walking up to the yard from her house, her aunt asked her if she had thrown something to hit the house and Marie responded that she had not. Both could see that her daughter was the only person in the yard tossing any object and it must have

hit the side of the house. The aunt then said she was going to “whip” Marie for it. After Marie’s response of “*you ain’t goin’ hit me;*” she walked off and left her alone. Marie was fully prepared to fight her that day – remembering the abuse from her granddaddy and step daddy had made her “buck” at some adults who wanted to unfairly punish her. Her belligerence was not how she was taught to respond to adults and it was not a normal; but, the contradictions she lived with on a daily basis made her lose respect for many of the adults in her life and to basically show her ass because she could. Later, when she told her mother what had happened, she told her “*Don’t worry, I’ll handle it.*” Whether she did or not, Marie did not know; but, that particular aunt could no longer discipline her (at least in her mind) and she never again tried. Marie suffered in silence at the hands of the adults in her life because that is what she was taught to do. By the time this incident took place, Marie was about fourteen and only allowed (yes I mean allowed) certain adults to discipline her and she could list them – her grandparents, her mother, and two of her uncles who she felt really cared about her in the right way. The rest of ‘em could go to hell.

Uncle James had just beat her, Terrell, and Keith the other day. Keith had just got a new mini-bike and was riding all over the place. He and Terrell decided to let her play with them because she had been following them around all day. Since Terrell had a bicycle, he could ride along side Keith if he pedaled fast enough. She had to run and they kept leaving her; so, Keith and Terrell thought it would be easier to tie the old lawnmower behind the mini-bike and pull Marie along behind. They tied everything securely and told Marie to get on. Trusting Terrell and knowing he would not hurt her, Marie climbed on without questioning the danger.

About half way down the dirt road, she saw Keith nod to Terrell who nodded back. She knew she was in some kind of trouble but not exactly what. Then Keith revved the gas to speed up ahead of Terrell. Next, he swerved from one side of the road to the next causing the mower to whip straight into the ditch. Before it pitched Marie into the air, it hit a deep rut in the road. It was a wonder the motor of the mower did not go through her; but, she was thrown clear. When she stood up, she was ready to fight.

The boys were laughing so hard neither would fight with her; so, she dusted the sand off her pants and tried to get it out of her hair. They tried to coax her back onto the mower but she declined. As they were headed back to the house, they all noticed Uncle James (Keith's stepdaddy) standing at the crossroad with his arms crossed. By the time they got back to the house, Uncle James was standing in the yard with a belt. He talked for a few minutes but Marie did not hear anything he was saying because she kept looking at the belt. Uncle James did not beat you for no reason but he didn't play when he had to give a licking.

First he beat Keith and then Terrell. He held their arms and gave them a good licking. Marie was the last. Marie was famous for running from a beating. When they would reach for her or after they thought they had a good grip on her, she would snatch her hand back and wriggle out of their grasp and run like hell. They usually had to send Terrell to catch her; but, Uncle James had not beat her before. When he reached out, she was putting her hand into his when he said, "*No. I don't want your hand. Give me your foot.*" When she hesitated, he took her arm then pushed her (so that she was sitting) to the ground then grabbed her foot. He still had a hard time beating her because Marie kicked him for all she was worth. In the end he was satisfied that she got the proper licking and

told them all if he ever saw them doing something that dangerous again, it was going to be ten times worse. Marie started to realize that Terrell and Keith were not always nice when they were together; but she still loved her brother. Marie also listened to her older brother (after all he was wiser than she was or so she thought); but, anyone else had to be ready to fight no matter who they were and Marie was pretty good at fighting by this time.

Stopping Seeds of Reproduction: I Don't Need Birth Control

Denise had been staying out later and later lately. Marie never missed curfew of twelve. Denise was not supposed to be dating anyway. Momma made her wait until she was sixteen; but, Denise who was a year younger was dating at fifteen. One morning Momma walks into the room and announced, *"You two have a doctor's appointment for birth control pills tomorrow at one."*

"Why do I need birth control? I ain't doing nothing." Marie asked.

"Well you the oldest and since I need to put Denise on somethin' cause she so hot in the ass, I'm puttin' you on 'em too."

"But I'm still a virgin and I don't like taking pills; so, I don't need none!"

"Well you getting' 'em anyway like it or not!"

After Momma left the room, Marie asked Denise; *"You really doing it?"*

"Dat ain't none of yo' business!"

"Yep, you doin' it. You so nasty."

"Shut up!"

"Who you tellin' to shut up? Tell me to shut up again an' I'll whup yo' ass...I dare ya!"

“Leave me alone befor’ I tell Momma.”

“Tell her an’ I will whup yo’ ass witch yo’ nasty self!”

As promised, Momma took them to be examined for pills. Not only was it embarrassing to have to put her feet in the stirrups but it was painful too. At the end of the visit, Marie and Denise had packets of pills and had been instructed on how to take them. As much as she hated taking any kind of pills, Marie took her pills religiously without fail. She felt like beating the hell outta Denise every time she had to swallow a pill.

Then one day as they were cleaning the girls’ room, Denise and Marie were moving the beds from the wall to sweep underneath when Momma walked in and began pointing to the floor. She began screaming at Marie, *“Why the hell you ain’t taking you pills? Why you putting them under the bed?”*

Totally shocked, Marie looked down to where her mama was pointing to and sure enough there was a pile of the birth control pills on the floor. *“Well they ain’t mine! I take mine everyday even though I don’t need to! I ain’t the one having sex Denise is! Those must be hers!”*

“Well she ain’t the one don’t like to take pills and yo’ ass better not get pregnant!”

“Since I ain’t doing nothing, ain’t no problem!”

Marie really felt like kicking Denise’s ass – first for making her have to take the pills and then not taking them and getting her in trouble. She knew her momma knew the pills belonged to Denise; but, rather than fussing at Denise, she was taking it out on her as usual. Lately, she was being blamed more and more for things they did (this reminded

Marie of her first step-daddy). She felt like crying; but, Marie never cried in front of any of them no matter how she felt. They would not have the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

Poison Oak: The First Time

Everybody knows poison oak is a tree to be avoided at all costs just as some things should be avoided at all cost or else you pay the price. Marie sometimes forgot that lesson and often paid the price. Marie was looking forward to her and Terrell's house party. Her daddy and stepma was letting them have the house; but, Momma didn't know they were – she thought the grownups would be there. She had met her new boyfriend on the last visit to her cousin's house in town. Everybody kept telling her he had a girlfriend but she didn't care 'cause he looked so good. He had been trying to get her pants off but she was too scared to let him get that far; but, she had made up her mind that she wanted him to be her first at the party because he had some experience.

She was so excited for everybody to see her man that she couldn't keep still. When he finally did arrive, he headed straight for the beers and her. After showing him off, she finally let him lead her to a secluded spot that she had previously chosen for the occasion. He was more than ready. Since Momma had her on birth control pills, she was NOT worried about getting' a baby. Marie had no inhibitions because of the beers and because he was good at what he was doing to her body. When the final act began, the pain was so bad that she pushed him up off her without allowing him to finish, got dressed, and rejoined the party. Between her legs hurt so bad that she could hardly walk. Needless to say, that was the end of the relationship and she did not care. She was not gonna let him do that to her again. He could keep his thing in his pants.

The next morning, she was bleeding. This really scared her because it was not time for her cycle. She thought she was being punished for having sex – that she was messed up on the inside somehow that was causing the bleeding. She also thought that her pills didn't work and that she might be pregnant. Not having anybody she could tell, kept Marie in a state of fear for a few weeks until her regular cycle came on. Sex was so bad she did not see how anybody could enjoy it. She thought she might try it again; but, it was not going to be any time soon.

Poison Ivy: Look Ma, Guess Who's Pregnant!

Leaves of three leave them be is the warning against poison ivy. In life, Marie felt the saying could be changed to say: if it makes three let it be. Denise who had actually been the one throwing her pills under the bed would soon learn this lesson. They had been in the tobacco field (the cash crop that paid all the bills) for a good four hours. Breaking the tops and plucking out the suckers that would kill the stalks was easy but tedious. They had done about half the field (six and seven rows a piece) while Denise was still on her second row. She kept stopping every few yards to sit down. When she did finally make it to the end, she would sit for a long time. Marie looked at her.

"You sick?"

"No...I feel okay just tired."

"You hurting? Yo' head, stomach, or something?"

"No...just tired."

Although Marie stopped the questions, she kept an eye on Denise for the rest of the day. When they got back to the house she walked into the house and announce to their Momma:

“Denise is pregnant.”

“No I ain’t! Stop lying!”

“She been tired all day and couln’ even do nothin’ today! I told ya she was the one throwing her pills away an’ now she pregnant!”

“You pregnant?” their Momma asked.

“I don’t know...I think so.”

A couple days later, the doctor confirmed that she was indeed pregnant. Abortions were not an option in the family so she would have to have the baby. Marie (now 17 and about to graduate high school the following June) knew Denise (who was 15 soon to be 16 and who could care less about school) got pregnant on purpose to trap Harold. She was so crazy about that boy that she would do anything to hold onto him. He was not a nice person to Denise; but, he was normally a nice person. Denise was so in love with him that she could not see that he wasn’t feeling the same.

Horseweed: Transplanted Father Figure

Momma married Marie’s next step-daddy when she was sixteen. Marie and her brother had been acting as the mama and daddy to her younger brothers and sisters for many a year. Her mama had a heart problem that she was born with and which had gotten progressively worse – so she couldn’t git upset or excited. She worked the fields like everybody else but tired easy and had to take more breaks than everybody else when she got hot. Marie’s youngest sister also had a heart problem but it didn’t stop her from doin’ anything anybody else did. Edmond, her step daddy, worked hard on the farm and drank hard on the weekend. He never bothered with telling any of the youngins what to do including Marie and her older brother Terrell. To them, he was momma’s husband but

not their daddy. The only thing Marie did not like about him besides the fact that he got drunk every weekend was that he would wait until Terrell was gone and try to beat her mama.

One weekend as Marie was at Cousin Elvira's house, Denise came running up and beating on the door. She was out of breath as she told Marie to come quick because Momma and Edmond were fighting at the house. Marie ran out of the door without closing it as she raced home with Denise at her heels. When she reached the house, Momma had her baton and was striking out at Edmond who was trying to reach her. Marie and her sister, Denise, had to get in between them. This was a common thing lately and each time they had to throw him out of the house. They did a pretty good job for skinny sixteen and fifteen year olds. This time was a little different. As they had stood between Edmond and Momma, Momma cowered behind them and made snide taunting comments to a drunken Edmond who then tried to lunge for her through the girls who thwarted his every effort while Momma would come up and strike him with the baton. If it wasn't so pathetic, it might have been funny in a crazy sort of way. All Marie kept thinking was "*why was her momma not fighting him and kicking his ass really good.*" Her momma could fight really good as she could attest to from the wrestling match they had had in the yard last week when her momma almost broke her arm and back; but, when it came to fighting for herself, here she was cowering behind them taking pot shots at him with a baton. Marie lost a little respect for her momma that day. All of the beatin' on each other, the fussin', and fightin' came to a head a few nights later.

As the family sat around the house eatin' supper, Marie was fussin' at Jeremy, her youngest brother, as was usual since her mother was not physically up to any type of disciplining. All of a sudden, Edmond interrupted her:

Leave dat boy alone. He don't belong to you.

Looking him in the eye, Marie responded: *Well ain't neither one of us belong to you.*

You two need to stop! Marie mother screamed – she knew Marie had a quick temper and smart mouth to go with it.

I will whip yo' ass! Edmond said.

Well come on din! Marie responded.

I said shut up both of ya! Marie's ma screamed but it was too late. Both Edmond and Marie had put their plates down and circled each other. As he reached to grab her, Marie scooped him up and slammed him to the floor.

Edmond, embarrassed by the thinner smaller Marie, picked himself up off the floor and shouted, "*I'm leaving!*" as he began grabbing his clothes.

You want some help? Marie began throwing clothes at him to help him leave faster. Marie was really proud of herself until her mother slapped her. *Whatcha hit me fo?* She questioned as she rubbed her face and sat down. For the life of her she could not understand her mama wantin' to stay with a man that beat her. She had not forgot about her first step daddy and how he beat them (mamma, Marie, and Terrell). Didn't she know beatins hurt? Times had changed from when granddaddy beat grandma. Grandma told them of a time when a husband could beat his wife and nobody was gonna say a thing.

Most people – men and women – encouraged it. Granddaddy had even told Cousin Elvira’s husband to beat her cause she was running around. Her husband didn’t do it but that whattin’ the point. The point was that her granddaddy had tol’ him to do it. Marie was glad she didn’t grow up then. Marie’s memory later became her guide when faced with the abuse of her sister Denise by her boyfriend. When she told her momma about Denise getting’ beat up, Denise lied and said Harold never hit her. After that Marie learned to mine her bizness although her private motto was: “Love that comes with a fist is not love. Hate me and leave me. If I’m gonna get my ass beat you best believe he gonna know I was there. Ya gotta bring ass to git ass.”

Edward returned two weeks later after Momma begged him to come back. He began drinking more and more; but he had stopped trying to hit Momma. He and Marie were now cordial but he did not ever again try to interfere with the family. Momma and Edward did not stay together more than a year after these events. He started going out to the local liquor house and Momma started to hear stories about him messing around. She eventually put him out for good and they divorced.

Wood Sorrel: When Love Goes Wrong Join the Military

After her disastrous first encounter with love, Marie began dating Chris during her junior year of school. He was a year older and went to a different school. A country boy, he and she shared many of the same values and the same lifestyle. Marie felt she would love him for all eternity. He took her to the prom and they made love in his car. She had no qualms about this time because she was on birth control pills and was not as scared as she was the first time. Not knowing what sex really meant, Marie did not know what she was supposed to feel sexually. Sometime during the experience she only wanted

to push him off her; but, she let him finish because she really loved him. This later became their routine – he doing his business, she doing her best to get into it, and she feeling repulsed by the act. She didn't think she was scared of sex but it kept making her remember trying to get out the truck when Granddaddy was trying to touch her. Sometimes she could get past these feelings to enjoy being with Chris but other times she couldn't – not for lack of trying because she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

Marie and Chris had plans to marry after she finished high school. He had no wish to go to college because he had barely made it to graduation; but, he wanted Marie to go to college and he was going to pay for it. By this time, Chris was not working the fields unless he was helping his family out on the weekends or his days off; he had a job working in town. Chris promised Marie that she would not have to work as long as she was married to him unless she wanted to. Marie thought life couldn't get any better and she was on top of the world. Her rude awakening came by happenstance.

Marie and Denise had been plotting all afternoon how to get Momma to let them have the car. They had stopped by Marie's grandma's (daddy's momma and not Denise's grandma) house earlier on the way back from the store for Momma. Grandma who was bedridden began crying when Marie walked in.

She said, *“Baby, I am so glad you came by today. They moved the phone so I couldn't call you. God must have sent you by today.”*

“Who moved the phone?”

“Them two jackasses. Nothing but the devils. I'll tell you!”

“Who?”

“That Harold with his no good ass. He calling some floozy about meeting and taking her out and he got Chris stupid ass going along with him. Just no respect. I give him a place to stay and dey disrespect my house like this!”

“Okay Grandma. Who they meeting and where?”

“I didn’t hear all of dat; but he was talking to dat Stewart girl. I am shole glad you came by. I was trying to figure out how to get in touch wit ya; but, I couldn’t get to the phone.

“Well, how they gonna get ther? Chris’ car is in the shop and Harold doesn’t have one.”

“That’s the worst part...dey using ya daddy’s car. I don’t think he know what dey doin wit it. Somehow dey got his car.”

After talking with her grandma a little longer, Marie and Denise left. They were really pissed at their men. Terrell had left with his best buddy and didn’t use the car so they felt they had a chance if they played their cards right.

“Momma, can I use the car tonight?”

“No. Your sister is too far along and she could go into labor any time.”

“Well, I’ll take her with me. I can always drive to the hospital.”

“Where you trying to go?”

“Over to Veronica’s house.”

“Okay. Take her with ya and don’t stay out too long.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Marie and Denise got dressed and left the house. They headed straight to Veronica’s house because they were the only Stewarts in the area and supposedly their

friends. Marie pulled up and blew the horn. Veronica's little brother was in the yard playing and promptly told them, "*them ho's gone to the club.*"

"*What club?*" Marie asked.

"*The Two Spot.*"

"*Who dey went wit?*"

"*Harold and Chris.*"

"*Okay. See ya later.*"

The girls left. When they came to the end of the road, Denise asked, "*Where we goin?*"

"*We going to the Two Spot!*"

"*Oh-oh. Come on now we going get in trouble if Momma find out.*"

"*No we won't. I didn't lie...we went to Veronica's house and she whattin home. Besides, she didn't say we had to come straight home...she just said don't keep you out too late. I ain't taking you home first cause she ain't goin let me have the car by myself. You may not care what Harold does but I will deal with Chris.*"

"*Okay...don't say I didn't warn you.*"

When the girls arrived in the parking lot of the club, Marie parked her Momma's car right next to her Daddy's car. She had seen heads in the car when she first pulled in; but then somebody jumped out and ran inside the club. She took her time getting out and tapped on the window. A grinning Harold rolled down the window and said, "*What?*"

Before Marie could say anything, Denise replied, "*You know what! And Chris we see yo ass down on the floor so get the hell up!*"

Chris made a show like he had been sleeping in the backseat by pretending to stretch and yawn. This combined with the fact that they were indeed in her daddy's car really pissed Marie off. For a second she just stared at him and walked toward the club. Veronica met them at the door...it turned out that she was with Harold (but Denise had broken up with him) and Chris was with her sister who was hiding in the bathroom terrified that Marie would beat the shit out of her. Veronica told them in detail how Harold had called to ask them out on a double date with Chris. Satisfied with what she heard, Marie and Denise headed back to the car to leave when Chris stepped in front of her to stop her.

"If you don't move out of my way right now, I am gonna nock the hell out of you!" Marie hissed.

"Can I just talk to you to explain?"

"What's to explain? You got your ass out here wit somebody else in my Daddy's car and you thought you whattin gonna get caught. Ain't nothing to talk about or explain."

As Marie continued to the car, Chris grabbed her arm to detain her.

"If you don't get ya hands off me, I will beat the hell outta ya with these shoes!"

The shoes Marie was referring to were wooden clog sandals popular during this time. Chris released her. She and Denise left and returned home. They didn't tell Momma anything about what happened; but the next morning she did go to her daddy's house to find out how much he knew and had to do with what happened. When they arrived, her daddy and step-momma already knew. It seemed Grandma had finally got a hold of the phone and called them. They thought the whole situation was hilarious and teased Harold

and Chris who were still there when Marie and Denise arrived. Although Marie laughed with the rest of them, her heart was crushed and broken. Her dreams had been stomped on.

Dealing with the faithless ass and the loss of her lover, put Marie in an uneasy stupor that forced her to put a smile on her face as if it didn't matter when all she wanted to do was to curl up and die. She soon realized that she was gonna have to make different plans for her future but she had no clue what those plans were. No longer was she gonna be making house with Chris and she did not have another plan. She was so sure of him and her being together that she couldn't see straight. She had not taken the SATs yet or researched places outside of the area all of which left her in limbo. As she sat on the couch a few weeks later contemplating her options and finding none, the telephone rang.

It was an army recruiter trying to talk to her about joining the military...as if the thought was something she was even thinking about doing. As he recited his spiel, Marie tuned out and ever so often said, "ugh huh" in all the right places. She was not so tuned out that she did not hear him mention college.

"Say that again about college." Marie asked.

"Well, since you scored in the top ten percent in the state on you ASVAB test, you qualify for educational benefits. This means the military will pay for you to go to college if you enlist for at least two years."

"Would I have to pay it back?"

"No. It's your money. You can take classes while you are in and then use your money after you get out. If you and your mom can come into the office, I can go over all the details with you."

“Okay. We will be there.”

Marie and her mom met with the recruiter at the appointed time. At the end of the meeting, Marie’s mom asked her what she wanted to do because it was up to her. Marie told her she was gonna sign up. The recruiter drew up the paperwork and had Marie and her mom to sign it. Marie left for basic training the following August, completed three years of active duty service before getting out and joining the national guard.

Interlude

Through Black Feminist Thought and womanism one could also assert this time period was a test of this young Black girl’s (and others in the same predicament) strength to overcome the tragedies heaped upon her (or them) to make her (or them) a stronger woman (women). Her resiliency at overcoming the challenges to her life and her ability to garner the strength to keep moving in a positive direction is evident.

Beginning womanhood for a young girl can be very tricky if not done correctly. It is a time of self-discovery and self-worth. What happens when burgeoning womanhood is interrupted and innocence is lost? Will this young woman become the harlot she is expected to become once she allows herself to be violated? Will she become a lesbian because it is safer? Or, will she be a survivor of sorts? When a mother puts her daughter on birth control, is she giving her permission to have sex before marriage? When a young girl so in love fails to have planned options and the main thing falls through, will she succeed or will she remain in a stagnant stupor of her unpreparedness? The answer to all of these questions is simple – you never know what the outcome will be until the crop is harvested so to speak or the young lady grows into her womanhood.

NOVELLA 5

STALKS AND STEMS SURVIVE THE WINDS: OPPRESSION

Prelude

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them (Matthew 7:16-20)

Survival is one of life's most basic instincts; therefore, it should not shock anyone that survival of circumstances beyond your control will sometimes force a person to find the internal reserves necessary to move forward through life. Although lived with gender and racial biases (which she does not always agree with), Marie continues to follow the rules laid down by family and society. She does not dwell on what she cannot change. Instead she tries to survive as much as possible to overcome her challenges with integrity and stubborn or dogged determination.

Hybrids: Racial Divide – Black (and White) Traditions

Marie's family had some very rigid rules that no one was willing to break as she was growing up: family always came first – no matter how mad you were at a relative, when it came down to it, family stuck together; everyone was civil (spoke to) to everyone – the common motto was “you can speak to a dog and it won't cost ya nothing;” when anyone went into public, they represented the family and were expected to act accordingly to maintain a positive family image; everyone was expected to “carry their

weight” by working just as hard as the next person; and above all else, everyone was expected to be honest and above board when dealing with others – the saying “word is bond” really meant that because when someone made a commitment or promise they did not renege or back out no matter how much they wanted to.

As she was growing up, Marie had few experiences mixing with white people except in school and when working with them in the fields. Even then, the situation allowed little mixing of the races. Marie remembered one childhood classmate and friend, Sherry, who had problems in math. She wanted Marie to tutor her and invited her to her house. Marie’s mother responded with “*what she want ya to teach her fo’? Why can’t she find somebody else?*” At first her mother was set against her going to some white girl’s house – what could Marie possible teach her anyway– but she relented and let her go. Her main concern after the initial shock was how Marie was going to get there and back because she was not going to drop her off or pick her up – this was a bother and burden she was not going to worry with. Sherry’s mom said she would pick Marie up and drop her off if it helped her child improve in math. Sherry never came to her house – Marie always went to hers (although she was the one who needed help). Her mother would pick Marie up, they would study for a while, her mother would serve them a snack, they would study some more, and then she would take Marie home. They did this several times; but, Marie never questioned why she had to go to Sherry’s house and the thought to invite her over to her house never entered Marie’s mind – it was a thing not done in the South or on the Hill.

Knotted Stems: Double Standard

Even as a child, Marie felt the double standards practiced in the South and her family – boys were allowed to do many things that girls could not. Her mother would respond (when challenged by the girls) that “*he is a boy*” as if that was the answer to everything. When Marie asked her mother to get the car to visit a friend, her mother said no that Denise (Denise her younger sister had gotten pregnant a few months before at age sixteen) was due to have the baby any day now. Marie had to promise to take her with her in order to get the car. Her mother then informed her that she needed to be home by ten. Marie thought that was unfair and said, “*You didn’t tell Terrell to be home by then. You gave him til twelve.*” Her ma responded, “*Well he’s a boy.*” To this day, Marie still does not know what that had to do with the conversation; but, for her mother it was the answer to everything. The girls were not allowed to discuss sex or watch the animals mating while the boys were forced to watch and seemed to enjoy the experiences. Girls knew men could rape them and do sexual things to them but it was not openly discussed. If a girl flitted around or flirted, she was called *hot in the ass or fast*.

Marie thinks back to her fair-skinned (what everyone called red) great-grandmother with fine hair who was the product of rape of her mother by the slave master. The stigma of that violation that produced a mixed child really bothered Marie’s great-grandmother and she rarely spoke of it. Once she said who her father was and how she was conceived, she said nothing else about it and no one could get her to say more. Her shame was tangible as if she really had a choice in the matter. Marie did not know if her great-grandmother was sent away from her mother or what her circumstances were – she just never discussed it. Whatever she endured, she never passed on – she took it to

her grave. She raised her three children on her own (two sons and one daughter – Marie’s grandmother). Marie did not have any knowledge of her husband or mate (she never knew which she had) as her great-grandfather was never discussed either. Hearing this particular story of rape instilled in Marie a terror of being trapped and raped when she was 13-years old and her granddaddy molested her.

Black girls had to be careful of men inside and outside of the family. Black girls learned early on which males not to be cornered with for fear of being touched or worse. Surprisingly, in Marie’s family, she and her sisters warned and watched out for each other, but never told their mother what they had to endure. One reason for that was the main person responsible for the molestation was her grandfather. His hands often tried to touch them in ways and places grandfathers should never touch their grandchildren. As Marie thinks about the incidents, she begins to think two reasons they never told their mother was because whatever their grandfather said was absolute and no one in the family defied him and because she always wondered if he did it to his own daughters.

All of his daughters except her mother moved away from the Hill. Her mother eventually left for the few years with her husband, returned after almost killing him, and finally left permanently after she and her father (Marie’s grandfather) had a disagreement. The story goes that Marie’s grandfather issued an ultimatum to her mother to either do what he said do (and no one knows what that was) or “get the hell off his land.” She left. Marie had left for the summer and was not at home when this happened.

Marie had graduated from high school, was spending the summer with her aunt before leaving for the military, and was not privy to the blowup. She had left without telling Momma and her Momma didn’t miss her for a whole week before she even asked

anybody where she was. During this time, her mother packed up and moved from the Hill to pay rent on a house less than five miles down the road – she really got far away. Her family still worked the farm but not as much – only when they really felt the need for money and her mother forced them to. Her older brother had joined the marines two years before she graduated and Marie had joined the army – they were getting away from the farming life. In retaliation and to ensure her mother did not return to the Hill, her grandfather tore down their house – the same house he and his sons had built for them when he rescued them from her abusive stepfather. Not one board was left. It was as if he were trying to erase that part of their history as if they had never been there. An aunt who had never lived on the Hill; but, who coveted that spot, later had her house moved to the spot. After Marie’s grandfather died, her momma later moved into town to live after all the children graduated and left home. Education can be liberating. For Marie, a world outside the day to day drudgery was what liberated her from the oppression she had grown up with. This was confirmed when she left home for the summer after her graduation and before she departed for the military. She had the opportunity to see a little of the world (Gainesville, Florida – also a farming community) outside of Statesboro.

Interlude

Daily life for Marie when viewed through Black Feminist Thought illustrates the racial and gender oppression many women of color experience. Marie was taught to be self-effacing. The adults in her family always preached and practiced the motto, “children should be seen and not heard” while white society expected Black children to be quiet at all times. Both Black adults and white society treated them as if they could do with them as they pleased with no repercussions. The children had to take whatever was heaped

upon them. To do otherwise was considered rude and disrespectful – something that resulted in swift and cruel punishments because this meant that they were not schooled in how children were to behave in public. This negative reflection of the family image was never taken lightly. Everyone had their roles to play: children, men, and women.

Women Work –

I've got the children to tend

The clothes to mend

The floor to mop

The food to shop

Then the chicken to fry

Then baby to dry

I got company to feed

The garden to weed

I've got the shirts to press

The tots to dress

The cane to cut

I gotta clean up this hut

Then see about the sick

And cotton to pick. . . (Angelou, 1986, p. 144)

Woman's work is never done – even when everyone else is asleep, she continues well into the night.

NOVELLA 6

DYING PLANTS: RELATIONSHIPS

Prelude

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6)

After three marriages and three divorces, Marie is finding that her feelings on the matter of love and relationships needed examining. Her family believed that mates stayed together whether either of them cheated or was abusive; but, then they never did stay together for long. Those lessons were hard for her to accept and abide by; so, she made her own rules. Love for her is categorized into three different categories: romantic, familial, and spiritual. Romance came and went for her; familial love did not really exist because she had few relationships with anyone in the family; and spiritual love evaporated when God deserted her. Each time, she felt like love would last forever; but, it never did. Her first marriage lasted four years, the second (relationship and marriage) lasted a total of thirteen years – ten for the relationship and three for the marriage; and the last only lasted two years.

Drought: When Blood Is Not Thicker Than Water

The first marriage was idyllic and they had dreams that together they could do anything as long as they were together. Marie met Danny while out with friends. They were both along for the ride on a night out clubbing in Darmstadt, Germany. Neither had much to say to each other until time for everyone to go home and everyone was deciding who was riding with whom. Danny and Marie wound up in the same cab and talked on the way back to the barracks. They hit it off and soon began dating and were married a

few months later. Marie had suffered her traumatic disappointment with Chris the previous year; so, trust with Danny was an issue although he was not aware that it was an issue. She always mentally questioned if he went where he said he was going or if he was with someone else. They began a family in the early stages of that relationship – her two sons were of that marriage.

Danny was not happy with the military lifestyle while Marie thrived and loved her job. After having their first child, Everett, Marie decided to get out of the service because they were in Texas away from family and she did not agree with the fact that if they were deployed, the baby would be put in a holding area with strangers until someone flew out to get him. Danny was supposed to stay in while Marie went to school and looked for work; but, as soon as Marie got out, he announced that he was leaving the military. Marie was pissed and told him that had she known he was thinking about getting out, she would have stayed in. When he smirked in response, she knew he had done it deliberately and timed it so that she would be a civilian and unable to just get back in.

Danny eventually rejoined the military because life was hard to readjust to for him. Marie decided to just stay with the National Guard so that she was there for the kids. When the relationship broke down – because he was out with his single friends and, Marie thought, fooling around; it devastated her but she tried to hold the relationship together. She knew it was time to get out when she woke one morning and found a hole punched in the wall. When the movers came to pack their household goods to move to post, Marie kept her clothes and most of the boys' clothes. Later in the afternoon, the lights were turned off; but, she was not worried because she had called Elvira and they were picking them up – no questions asked. After much digging and discovering the

other woman was her cousin, she did as any good Southern woman from her family would do – kept the knowledge to herself and filed for divorce. Any good Black Southern woman would have confronted her husband and his woman; but, Marie went on without either of them.

While waiting for the divorce to be final, Marie began working at the sewing factory. Her pregnant sister kept the boys for her while she worked. After about a month of working, she one day got a frantic call from her sister. The supervisor came to get her off the machine saying she had an emergency. When she called her sister, she got the shock of her life. Danny had kicked in her door and taken the boys. Not being particularly paternal, Danny (Marie felt sure) was only taking the boys to show her who was boss when she refused to stop the divorce proceedings, remain married, and live separate lives. By the time she made it to her sister's apartment, Marie was frantic. A call to his apartment revealed that it was disconnected. A call to his parents revealed that they didn't know what Danny was doing. A call to the police revealed he was not breaking the law because custody had not been awarded to either of them. A call to her lawyer had her waiting to get some definite news of his intentions. To say Marie was pissed and ready to kill would be putting it lightly; but, she did have a plan – she was gonna kill him on sight. She had thought of that while she was talking to his mother.

“Have you heard from Danny today?”

“No not today. Why?”

“He kicked in my sister's door and took the boys. When I find him, I'm gonna kill him where he stands.”

“If you kill him, neither one of you will have the boys.”

“I will eventually; but, his ass can’t take ‘em again. If you hear from him, tell him to call me.”

As Momma came in to check on her progress with the phone calls, Marie briefed her on her lack of progress and disclosed her plan. *“Momma, let me borrow your gun and your car cause mine won’t make it far.”*

“Hell no! I ain’t gonna be responsible for you going to jail. I know if you find him you gonna kill him.”

“You got that right! I’m gonna blow his mother fucking brains out! This will be the last time he thinks about taking my kids!”

“Well now you KNOW I ain’t gonna give you my gun or car!”

Right at that moment, Marie wanted to do something; but, she didn’t know where to start or what Danny had in mind. She had to wait. About twelve hours later, she again called Danny’s parents to see if they had heard from him. Danny answered the phone. Marie told him the same thing she had told his mother the day before – that she was gonna kill him when she saw him. She tried to get anyone to let her borrow the car; but, nobody would – Momma had already told them not to let her have anything. Marie later learned her Momma told everybody *“don’t let that fool have a car or gun cause she gonna kill that boy.”* This left Marie in a state of limbo – she had to wait.

Her lawyer called her later in the day to inform her that Danny’s lawyer had called him. His excuse for abducting the boys was that he wanted to see them for a couple of weeks before being stationed overseas in Germany. He would be bringing the boys home in two weeks. Not having any other option, Marie had to agree. Two days later when his mom called asking for the boys’ social security number put Marie on high alert.

“Hi, Danny needs the boys’ social security numbers.”

“What does he need that for?”

“For medical reason in case they get sick.”

“No. He doesn’t need that. All he needs to do is take him to the base and they can be seen there.” Said Marie and hung up.

“What was that all about?” Marie’s mom asked.

“Danny’s momma. She think I’m dumb as hell. His ass is going to Germany and he needs the boys’ social security numbers to get passports. I know this motherfucker is trying to get my kids out of the country! I can’t believe she is trying to help him!” Marie thought she was close to her mother-in-law (Ruth); but, obviously she took her son’s side even knowing he was wrong. Knowing she would also go so far as to lie to Marie to assist him in taking her kids out of the country devastated Marie. She loved her boys; but, she didn’t think she would ever sink to the level of betrayal she was feeling from Ruth.

Two weeks later, Danny’s mother Ruth called to inform Marie they would be dropping the boys off. She was not surprised. Marie knew Danny was scared to show his face...one thing he knew from being married to her was that she did not make idle threats. Marie had no doubt in her mind that she would kill Danny and she also knew that he knew she would do it. When they dropped the kids off there was no prolonged conversation. The in-laws stopped long enough to unload the children and their things. It was a very tense moment. After a year of divorce, they almost remarried – for the sake of the children who wanted their parents together (especially Everett who remembered them being together) – until one day she remembered why she divorced him and thought, *“hell to the no he ain’t changed.”* She also realized that marriage for the children’s sake was

not good for them either. Everett always knew when they were fighting and he would try to hug her as if to protect her from the argument.

Irrigation System: Just Be My Boyfriend

Marie's second relationship turned marriage lasted a total of ten years. She and Turner met during the pre-war preparations and training for Operation Desert Shield when he tried a ridiculous "pick up" line on her. She laughed so hard at his audacity that she relented and engaged him in conversation. The rest was history. As Marie worked for her college degree and her commission as an officer in the Georgia Army National Guard, he provided support both financially and emotionally. They were really happy and never argued for approximately ten years. After living together for so long, they finally decided to make it a permanent relationship – they got married. The idyllic or honeymoon phase lasted for about a year and a half before Marie suspected he was fooling around.

Turner began going to bars when he did not drink, he began hanging out at sports bars when he hated sports, and he did not come home after work. He worked nights and slept during the day. Once she began suspecting him of infidelity, Marie made a few surprise visits home during the day when he should have been sleeping – he was not there; but, when she returned home at the appointed time, he would pretend to that he had just gotten out of bed. Marie kept her counsel and did not tell him what she had discovered. After a few weeks of this, she finally came home early to have it out with him and confide her suspicions. When he began laughing, she thought she might be wrong; however, she later realized that he never denied it. When she asked a male friend what he thought about the conversation, the revelation was a confirmation for Marie. He

said to her, *“The reason he laughed was because you hit the nail on the head and he didn’t have a response for you. Keep your eyes open cause your instincts are right on. He is doing exactly what you think he is doing.”* A few months after her discovery, they had an argument that virtually ended the relationship and the marriage. The argument was trivial; but the message it sent was loud and clear when he said to her, *“You think I care about how you feel? Well, I don’t care nothing about how you feel.”* Marie immediately calmed down. It was as if the veil had been lifted. Her calm response to him, *“It’s time for you to leave”* was a true shock to him; but, he moved out. They remained married another year and a half before the divorce was finalized. During the separation and before the divorce, Marie was out with a friend. What began as a friend lending an ear ended the friendship and gave her a daughter nine months later.

Spring Frost: No More Bullshit

Three years later she married husband number three. By the third marriage to Chris (from her high school years), Marie’s “bullshit meter” had been set on very low. Twice she had suffered through infidelity and had had enough. She was not looking for Mr. Right or Mr. Wrong – she simply was not interested. Her sisters attempted to play matchmaker and told her that her high school sweetheart wanted her to call him – they had told him the same thing. When they finally did get a chance to talk, it was as if they had never parted (some twenty plus years). Their big mistake (which they later found out) was thinking they could just pick up where they left off. They rushed into the relationship with blinders on. Since the courtship went so smooth, they rushed into marriage because they were so familiar with whom they had been rather than whom they had become. Needless to say, Marie discovered early on in the marriage that it was not going to work

because her husband still saw her as the teenager he remembered rather than the woman he married.

Conversations began to start with: “*Do you still?*” Marie was a good Southern wife; therefore, while she gritted her teeth, she maintained the calm façade of interest. The final straw, however, was a one-sided argument about his adult daughter who came to live with them when her mother put her out but who also refused to clean behind herself. When Marie told him that she was not going to put up with filth, he was happy to have his daughter stay – Marie decided it was time for her to leave. She hadn’t been gone one month before rumors that he was clubbing reached her.

Disappointed but resolute, Marie accepted the news without comment or concern. Chris appeared out of the blue one day with divorce papers for her to sign. Marie began to sign them; but quickly realized the papers need to be notarized.

“*How ya doin’?*” Chris asked as he handed the packet of papers to Marie

She began reading through the provisions. “*I don’t have a problem signing these; but, they need to be notarized. I can get them done at work for free; so, I will get them done and you can pick them up any time after Monday.*”

“*Okay, I will pick them up from you later.*” That was it...no conversation, no recriminations, no nothing. It was over and Marie felt relief. Ten months later, she still had not received her divorce papers.

When her girlfriend asked her about it, she could only respond, “*Girl, I don’t even know if I’m married or not.*”

“*What? You mean he didn’t file the papers yet?*”

“*I don’t know. All I know is that I never got a copy.*”

Several weeks later while visiting her Momma, Marie stopped at a gas station before departing for home. Darnell was with her and she asked him to pay for the gas while she pumped. When he returned, Darnell looked at Marie funny like before saying, *“Your husband inside the sore.”*

“Really?”

“Yea, he up in the cashier’s face.”

Marie’s first thought was to just leave; but, thought better of it. She had to see for herself; so she walked over to the store. Seeing Chris leaning on the counter in the cashier’s face gave her final closure. She did not feel hurt or heartache...just finality. She tapped on the window and crooked her finger for Chris to come out side. When he did, she asked, *“What are you doing? Courting?”*

“No.” When he failed to elaborate further, Marie lost interest in questioning what he was doing.

“Where are my divorce papers?”

“Still on the backseat of my car.”

“Well, file them.”

Several months later, Marie’s mom called to let her know Chris had dropped some papers off for her that seemed important. Marie told her, *“It’s okay...that’s probably my divorce papers. Did he say anything when he dropped them off?”*

“No...he just said to give them to you.”

“Thanks Ma. I’ll get them next time I am in town.”

Interlude

Marie realized that being married was not something she did well. Although she was not a male basher or hater, she was not interested in seeking Mr. Right. Lack of communication and infidelity were not the major issues in her unions. She cared about these men; but, she always felt that she never really loved them. She felt that she had never experienced the soulful love that lasted through old age (the kind most people longed for); she experienced only the superficial kind that later fizzled and died for any small reason or excuse. Marie thought that her husbands eventually came to the same conclusion that she did – love didn't live within their union.

Through all of these marriages one thing has remained constant. Marie, who was for the most part a single-parent (even with her husband), loved and remained close to her children and continued to be the role model she hoped they can be proud of. Although they experienced her strength, her sons did not see or seem to know she had a softer side. They knew women had a softer side just not their mom. From their choices in girlfriends and life partners, Marie could see that they had chosen to gravitate toward women who were nothing like her but who were compatible with her strong personality. The saying “men will marry women like their mother” is not true in this case. She would often, throughout their childhood and now into their adulthood, talk to them about relationships and what they should be doing as men in the relationship. They sometimes needed to understand the female side of an issue and Marie acted as their sounding board but not the stand on the soapbox preachy kind. Because she was usually totally honest with her opinions when asked, she would only give advice when they ask for it because they knew she would be totally honest and they did not always want to hear it.

For some this would be off putting, especially for many Southern families because most Black Southerners are sensitive to the feelings of others and adhere to sensibilities; but Marie always felt that being totally honest with her children let them know where they stood at all times and left them with a clear understanding of where she stood and what she expected from them. Although she never felt she got this from her family, she felt the least she could do was to be a better parent than what she experienced at home. As a watcher and listener, she picked up things from other families that helped her in difficult times with her own children - she did not have a real sense of what was required because in her family she did not encounter many of the issues her children faced such as drugs, thugs, and peer pressure. From her family, Marie learned that healthy relationships did not exist or last long if they did. She had difficulty forming relationships of any kind except with her children (even that was hard sometimes because she was ill equipped with what to say or do in some circumstances). Her friendships were few and far between and she seldom dwelled on the fact that people did not call or visit and she seldom called or visited them. To not see friends simply put them out of her mind.

Through Black feminist thought and womanism the resiliency and empowerment can be seen throughout what Marie is going through at this season of her life. When Danny exerted his control over her life and attempted to kidnap her children, she became the aggressor instead of the victim. The fact that she was willing to kill him was maybe crazy, but it got her the result she wanted – her children. She used the fact that he took her and her threats serious to her advantage. One can also see the counter story of how she is feeling (she is scared but angry that he would dare to take her children) and her

particular view of relationships – she is not a shrew or a cheat who is with a different man every night. She is not the seductress or siren who lures men into her net. She struggles with her feelings and reconciling them with what she wants to happen and what she wants for her children to see and understand.

NOVELLA 7

CASH CROP: EDUCATION

Prelude

Education was stressed to Marie (by her grandmother) from an early age. She made sure she knew that she expected her to learn as much as she could and to graduate and hopefully go on to college. Her family rarely questioned what teachers deemed as right and important. The teacher was always right and Marie and her siblings were expected to pay attention, do as they were told, do all their homework, and stay out of trouble. Questioning what was taught and why Black history was a part of the curriculum never occurred to anyone – including Marie.

Tobacco: Education is Key but I Got the Dumbest Teacher

Marie's first experiences with school were negative ones. Leading up to going to school, she sat outside in the back yard with mama. Mama showed her how to make her letters in the dirt. The peach switch mama kept handy was used often and with deadly precision if she did not make the letters correctly. Marie did not think she would like school because everybody else was running around the yard playing as she was beat for doing it wrong. By the end of the summer before she was to start school, she could write all her letter perfectly on paper. She had graduated from the dirt to paper. Then, she had to go with mama to the school to sign up. As mama sat there and did the paperwork,

Marie looked around the office. Right before they got ready to leave, the lady called mama back 'cause she had something wrong on the papers. Where she had written Marie's name it was wrong. The lady told her that the birth certificate had one name and mama had written something else. Marie looked at mama and realized that her own mama did not even know her real name. Mama explained that the midwife must have put what she wanted on the paper instead of what she wanted to name her. At age six, Marie was smart enough to wonder why in six years her mama had not looked at her birth certificate and had been calling her the wrong name for all that time. Marie Sincerely Lucky whattin' even her name but everybody still called her that.

It was the first day of school and Marie realized really quickly that nobody in the class was familiar to her. They looked alien to anything she was familiar with – they were all white and she had not associated with too many of those. As she sat there distressed and about to cry, two familiar faces walked in – Bobo (Sammy) and Rooster (Henry), her cousins. Both boys knew her a lot better than she knew them. Things got better and she liked school so much that she “soaked up the knowledge” like a sponge. Her next negative experience came as she was reading out loud in class and the teacher corrected her on the word “right.” When she explained, “*dat's what I said rat deah,*” the teacher again corrected her – “*no, not rat deah – right there.*” After going back and forth a few times, Marie gave up and said it like the teacher wanted her to. Marie thought teachers were supposed to be smart; but, she sure got a dumb one – she couldn't understand plain English. From then on Marie knew teachers were kind of dumb; but, she said the words as the teacher wanted her to do. After this experience, she talked less and less in class for

fear of saying something wrong. Many of her teachers would call her shy; but, it was more fear than shyness that kept her silent.

Corn: Growing Up Is Hard to Do

Marie's unofficial Southern education began at an early age (at age three usually but as soon as you were born it sometimes seemed). Her mother began instructing her in what to do or say and what not to do or say in public by giving her "the look" that said more than her mouth ever could. She knew by her mother's reaction what was acceptable and what was not. The formal home training began, for her, at age five. She learned how to cook, began working the fields, and babysat younger children. At first, she was so excited to be growing up and being allowed to go to the fields with the grownups. The older she got, the more she really understood the hard dead-end life they had. Every day was hard; but, they rarely complained. Her experiences at home helped her to grow and navigate through the curriculum of the formal educational system.

Marie's mother only went to school to complete paperwork and pick them up when necessary. She was reluctant to take off from working the fields otherwise. In her seventh grade year, Marie's elementary school was having its yearly awards ceremony. All the papers went home and her mom said she was not going – she had to work. Marie did not expect to get anything; so, she really did not care one way or the other. Imagine her surprise when her name was called for the first of many awards for that day and seeing her mom waving to her from the audience as she stood to go get it. Each time they called her name, her mom went crazy in the audience (sometimes embarrassingly so); and each time she went crazy, Marie's chest stuck out a little more.

After the ceremony, Marie's teacher Miss Pearl, her social studies teacher – the meanest teacher in the entire school – came over to introduce herself to her mom. Apparently Miss Pearl knew Marie was receiving a lot of awards (uncommon for Black students) and called her mom to tell her she should attend the ceremony. Nobody even hinted at what was up and Black children were seldom receiving awards except for perfect attendance for a few which was a dramatic feat because not many attained this in a farming community. Marie saw Miss Pearl in a new light after that. She always felt she hated every student in the building – Black and white – and all the students were all terrified of her. Miss Pearl told Marie's mom that she was a great student, with a great mind, and that she enjoyed teaching her.

Such praise from someone like her changed Marie's outlook for her educational future. She would often remember that praise when life beat her down and she wanted to leave as soon as she got 18. Marie became an avid reader. Books about other parts of the world interested her; but, her favorite were mystery books and crossword puzzle books. She would sit for hours and read. Books inspired her to dream of traveling the world and the different types of jobs she could have. When Marie did finally leave home, she joined the army. Moving from place to place from year to year was a hardship on many military families; but, Marie loved it.

Meeting new people, going to different places, packing, and unpacking was not something she dreaded – she thoroughly enjoyed the “wanderlust” life. When her eldest son turned six, she knew she had to settle down in one place for him to go to school – and it had to be the best school. After shopping around for the best school, she moved into that neighborhood. She is of the South and the South is within her no matter where in the

world she ventured to; but her travels and experiences outside the South have enabled her to get beyond the silence and trappings of the South to some degree.

Interlude

When Marie entered the public education system, she was as prepared as her Momma could make her. She had a thirst for knowledge and thrived as a student. What happens to the children who do not get much preparation from home or preschool? Studies show that they start out behind their peers and some but now many catch up eventually. One teacher early in her educational career made the child feel as if her way of speaking was wrong. Marie was smart enough to know that the teacher was the dumb one but also smart enough to pick up on the fact that she needed to talk the way the woman wanted her to. Another teacher gave Marie the dream of moving beyond her circumstances with just a few words of encouragement.

The tenets of Critical Race Theory are evident in the first experience Marie had and are clearly illustrated in how her teacher automatically devalued her culture and person by demanding that she change the way she talked. Rather than having feelings of inadequacy, Marie thought the teacher dumb because she felt she was smart (which is in and of itself astounding after the abuse she faced at home – she had a resiliency and determination about her). The education system in place at the time was based on the colonialist model and oppressive to Black culture and dialect therefore inherently racialized. Reading the counter story from the child's point of view lets the reader know the teacher, who probably thought she was doing wonderful work teaching this little Black girl proper English, was in fact erasing some of her culture.

In the second novella, the fact that someone, albeit a white teacher, felt that she was smart and could do anything was internalized and became the first spark of the dream. What if a Black teacher had told her the same thing? Would she had responded the same or differently? I still see this prevailing attitude around the South that “white is right” when dealing with some Blacks who are still stuck in this time warp. Others sometimes take the exact opposite stance that “a white person cannot tell me anything” whether it is for their good or not. The fact that the person delivering the message is white automatically makes it invalid or not worthy of thought. There are still others who travel in between these two extremes. I consider myself one of these who will listen but make my own choices and/or decisions. I pick and choose what is valid and important for me much as we did the weeding on the farm – we had to first recognize what was a weed then pick the weeds from the actual plants. When we pulled the plant instead of the weed, this meant the harvest would be less than originally planned.

A person's character and their garden both reflect the amount of weeding that was done during the growing season.

- Author Unknown

NOVELLA 8

SEASONS OF MY MILITARY CAREER

Prelude

Marie left home to join the military hoping to never return to Georgia. Frightened as she was, she was desperate to get away from Chris, her family, and farm life. Having no definite plans or finances to leave for college, she took the only lifeline offered to her – the United States Army. Marie spent three years on active duty in the US Army. After a

brief break in service, she joined the DC Army National Guard where she stayed for a couple of years and was promoted to Sergeant (E5) after being selected as Soldier of the Quarter (for her unit) and Soldier of the Year for the DC Army National Guard after appearing before both boards. Soldiers competing for the honor had to appear before a board of senior non-commissioned officers NCOs who ask them questions about different things about the military, drill them on facing moves, and evaluate and select the best from the rest. A year or so later, an at-risk pregnancy forced her to leave the DC Army National Guard and return to Georgia where divorce and love for the military forced her to join the Georgia Army National Guard.

When the First Sergeant moved her position and tried to demote her to Specialist (E4) instead of promoting her to Staff Sergeant (SSG), Marie went to Officer Candidate School to get her commission as an officer. She completed her training (18 months), was forced into logistics as her branch of service, and was assigned to the A Forward Support Company of the 48th Brigade. Marie excelled in all that she does and progressed up through the officer ranks fairly quickly – she was promoted faster than a lot of white male counterparts and definitely quicker than many Black officers. She mingled with many of the highest ranking officers in the state. She liked them and they liked her leadership and forthrightness. When the “good ole boys network raised its ugly head,” she knew it was time to go to the house and she retired when she got her twenty-year letter.

New Beginnings – Spring

Marie joined the military on February 5, 1982 a mere three months before her graduation from high school. Her big breakup with Chris happened in the beginning of December and here it was January a month later. After her emotional upheaval and

breakup with Chris, she felt that she would be stuck on the farm forever. For so long she had looked forward to the day when she could leave. Her constant thought was: *I can't wait til I'm eighteen and get the hell outta here.* Now that she was nearing graduation and without options, she laid on the trampoline staring into the sky. *God help me to get out of this place. I can't wait to get out of here. I am tired of these assholes.* She silently prayed.

A few days later, while sitting with everyone in the living room (momma's bedroom), Marie answered the telephone. It was a recruiter trying to sell her on joining the military. She was totally not interested or paying attention. Terrell was already in the Marines and she knew the military was not for her – he got religious when he left. Anything that could make Terrell get religion was not for her because he never went to church – she didn't know if he believed in God before he left. During the conversation, she sat up and paid attention when he mentioned college benefits. This recruiter explained to her that the test she had taken at school a few months back had qualified her for benefits plus a kicker (bonus) for scoring in the top ten percent in the entire state. He further explained that the more years she signed up for the more money for college she would get. Marie made an appointment for her momma to take her and talk to the recruiter.

Marie talked to Teresa her best friend a little later that night and explained what the recruiter has said. Teresa also wanted to leave but had not made specific plans either. Marie suggested that Teresa come with her to the recruiter's office and she agreed. The recruiter was a nice Black sergeant who explained everything to Marie and her momma in detail. He had already been introduced to Teresa and asked if she were interested in

joining. She said that she had been thinking about it. He then explained that Marie and Teresa could join on what he called the “buddy system” in which they would leave and stay together through their military commitment. Both girls were ecstatic that they could join together and be together (it meant it would not be so bad having your best friend along). Since Marie was only seventeen she could not join without parental consent; but Teresa was already eighteen and could sign her own papers. Marie’s momma asked her what she wanted to do because it was her decision. She told her she wanted to join, they all signed the initial contract, and made the appointments for both girls to get their initial physicals, choose their military occupational specialty (MOS), and dates to begin basic training.

They were scheduled to leave on Wednesday, February 3, 1982 for the military in-processing (MEPPS) station in Jacksonville, Florida. Teresa called Marie on Tuesday night as she was packing.

“You ready for tomorrow?” Teresa asked.

“Yep, packed and ready! You ready?”

“No, I don’t think I’m gonna go. I changed my mind. You think I’ll get in trouble if I don’t show up?”

“No, you know he said if we don’t go and do the next contract we won’t be in. Why you changing yo’ mind? Whatcha wanna stay here fo’?”

“I just think I need to stay here a little while longer to help out around here. We can always wait an’ go later. Right”

“Uh huh.”

“Whatcha think? Whatcha gonna do?”

“Well, I’m still going. Ain’t nuttin’ around here and ain’t no use stayin’ aroun’ here any longer. Besides I get money to go to college.”

“Okay. Call me when you get back.”

“Okay. I’ll holla at cha’ later.”

Early the next morning, Marie’s mom dropped her at the recruiting office to catch the van taking all the new recruits to Jacksonville. Marie, terrified because she had not been farther than Savannah before (and that had only been twice), was determined to do whatever she needed to do to get into the military and out of the state. She kept thinking she had been betrayed by Teresa. She knew Teresa’s family had finally convinced her to stay because they had been nagging her to change her mind since the first visit to the recruiting office. She also knew Teresa had probably changed her mind days ago and waited ‘til the last minute thinking she was gonna also change hers; but, Teresa had underestimated her drive and determination to leave – nothing and nobody was gonna stop her. She was tired of working like a dog in the heat for little or no pay. Marie was getting the hell away from Chris who had begun seeing somebody else and she was not staying around to watch that either. Everybody felt the need to tell her everything he was doing (even though she neither asked nor encouraged them to report on him). Well she would show them all – to hell with them all!

Going through the initial processing – physical through different doctors and stations, sitting with somebody in front of a computer screen looking for an MOS, signing contracts, and swearing in – was a two day event. Marie was sworn in early on the morning of February 5, 1982. Choosing a career was the longest part for her. The recruiter had already warned her that the MOS people’s job was to work the computer to

find what she wanted and that if she was not offered a job she liked to just come back without one and he would send her back later. The first job the computer operator (she didn't know his rank) offered her was "dietary supplement something something something specialist." When Marie asked him what that meant, he told her it meant she would be a cook. Marie looked him straight in the eyes and said, "*If I wanted to be a cook, I could stay home! I want something in administration or office work.*" He clicked a few more keys and told her he had something else in the food services. She declined those and left the room to call her recruiter from the pay phone as he had instructed her to do.

When she told him what had happened, he told her to tell the people that she would come back later because they did not have what she wanted. While she was on the phone with him the clerk came out of the office and told her to come back in and that he had found what she wanted. He had found Administrative Specialist and her Basic Combat Training (basic training) would be at Fort Jackson, SC and her Advanced Individual Training (AIT) or MOS training would also be at Fort Jackson, SC. Marie had her choice of when she was to start. She chose to begin Basic Training in August instead of June (two days after graduation) because she wanted to spend time doing absolutely what she wanted for a few months.

Two weeks after graduation had her wishing she had left right after graduation. She was bored with nothing to do. Friday, of this same week, her cousin Solomon called from the bus station in Statesboro for somebody to pick him up. Marie rode to the station with Elvira's husband to get him and they talked all the way back home. He was on the way home in Gainesville, Florida; he had just completed AIT; and stopped by to see

everybody before going home. He had planned on staying the weekend and going on home on Monday. All the kids their age – Gina, Henry, Marie, etc. – spent the weekend partying and living it up. The night before Solomon was to leave they were all sitting around outside catching up and chatting. Marie had been very vocal about being bored and wishing she had decided to leave earlier. She asked Solomon endless questions about the Army and he answered them all.

As Denise and Marie were helping him pack, Solomon asked Marie if she wanted to leave. When she said she did, he made her an offer she was not going to refuse – he would buy her ticket to go home with him but she needed twenty-five more dollars because he had enough to get it except for that much. He then went to call Elvira’s husband to drive him to the bus station the next morning. Marie grabbed the old suitcase she saved her papers in, dumped it out, and began packing.

“You got twenty-five dollars? Where you get money from?” Denise asked.

“No, but I’ll get it. I’m gettin’ the hell outta here!” Marie said; but in reality she didn’t have a clue who she could get the money from. Not too many people had twenty-five dollars to just give her. Early the next morning, she got up to call Elvira’s husband before he came to take Solomon to the bus station to ask him for the money. Elvira and her husband were like second parents to Marie. When things got really bad, she would often stay with them a few days until Momma got over whatever had pissed her off. She knew she could ask either one of them but she chose the husband because Elvira would ask her a million questions before she gave her the money while her husband would just give it to her. Sure enough, he said she could borrow the money and pay him back whenever she could. He told her he would bring the money when he picked Solomon up.

When he arrived and she added her beat up bag to Solomon's, he looked at Marie and asked, *"What chu' doing?"*

"That's why I needed the money. I'm paying for the rest of my ticket. Solomon is paying for the rest and I'm leaving with him."

"Ya Momma know ya leaving?"

"Well, no. I didn't tell her. Besides, I'm grown and she can't stop me. I'm gonna pay ya back!"

"Okay. I ain't worried about ya paying me back. Give it to me when ya can."

"Okay. I will"

Marie and Solomon traveled and chatted all through the trip – he pointed out places to her as they rode through towns along the way. The few times they had to stop over at a station were fun too. For Marie, it was a new adventure and she had the time of her life just seeing so many places that looked just like home. They spent the whole day and night traveling (they stopped at every town between Statesboro and Gainesville). They arrived at the station at about ten the next day. Marie couldn't wait to see her Aunt Bette. Solomon had not told her Marie was coming and it was going to be a big surprise...or so they thought. They were the ones surprised.

When Solomon called, Aunt Bette told Solomon to get home the best way he could and she was not coming to get him before she hung up. Since Marie and Solomon didn't have much money, they couldn't get further than the station. Solomon used his last bit of change to call her back. Aunt Bette began screaming at him as soon as she answered the phone. When Solomon did get a chance to say something, he quickly said, *"I need you to come pick me up. I got Marie with me and she can't walk that far."* After

cussing him some more she hung up the phone again. By this time Marie was regretting coming. She didn't know her aunt cussed and she didn't think she would actually let her child walk home (wrong again).

Marie finally asked, *"Well is she coming to get us or do we need to start walking?"*

"I don't know; but, I ain't walking. That's why I tole her you came. She might make me walk; but, she ain't gonna make you walk."

Two hours later they had not been picked up.

"You sure we don't need to start walking?"

"No, she'll come."

"I can't believe she would make you walk!"

"She done done it before."

"I don't care how mad Momma is at me she will at least pick me up."

"That's the difference between yo Momma and mine!"

About thirty minutes after this conversation, her Aunt pulled up in her car.

Solomon gave Marie a look as if to say, *"told ya."*

The ride was in total silence after the first hellos. Marie's Aunt did not grill her until they reached the house. At first Marie thought she was so mad that she wasn't gonna say anything. Her Aunt had other ideas. She called Marie into the kitchen and asked,

"Why yo Momma didn't call and tell me you was comin'?"

"She didn't know I was comin'."

"You mean she don't know you here?"

"Yes ma'am. I didn't tell her and she don't know where I'm at."

“I know you grown now; but, ya need to call yo Momma and tell her where you at.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“In the meantime, we all work around here. Sometimes we hire out to pick different crops. You don’t have to go all the time; but, I expect you to go some of the time. The boys like to go out, so you can go out with them as long as you can get up for work and church. Since Bobby is gone, you can use his room.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Marie worked hard the first week. She did more and made more money than she would have in a month back home. Her back, arms, and legs ached like she had never done a day’s work in her life. They didn’t pick too much tobacco – her aunt picked peas, beans, tomatoes, cut okra, etc. The farmers around the area loved booking her Aunt and Cousins because they had a reputation of working quickly and diligently – when they hit a field they were all business until it was done. This was how her Aunt was able to do two fields in a day sometimes – they were booked every day except for storm days when it rained. Saturday came around so fast that Marie had not realized she had been there that long.

She and her Cousins partied Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night; but, she went to church on Sunday, and up for work on Monday as directed. They took her all over the place. While they met their friends and girlfriends (who rolled their eyes at Marie until they learned she was family), they did not leave her alone when they went out. Marie was having a blast. Tuesday afternoon she was watching TV in the den when her Aunt came in and asked, *“You talked to ya Momma yet?”*

“No ma’am not yet.”

“Come in here and call her right now!”

When Marie called, her Momma’s first question was, *“Where you at?”*

“At Aunt Bette’s house.”

“When you went dea?”

“Last week when Solomon left.”

“Oh yeah. How long ya planning on being gone?”

“Til two weeks before time for me to leave.”

“When was ya gonna tell me ya was gone?”

“I whattin’. Aunt Bette made me call ya. You didn’t even miss me did ya?”

“No, I thought you was down at Elvira’s like usual.”

“Well, not this time. You wanna talk to Aunt Bette?”

“Yea.”

Marie went back to watching TV and spent the remainder of the summer in Gainesville. She saved her money (what she didn’t spend partying with) to throw herself a going away party before leaving home for good. Aunt Bette drove her to the bus station at the end of summer and waved goodbye. When Momma picked her up on the other end, she explained that they had moved while she was gone. Marie didn’t care where they lived. She was concentrating on her party and packing to leave forever.

Plowing Ahead: Tank Hill at Fort Jackson, South Carolina

By the time Marie had arrived at the in-processing station at Fort Jackson, SC, she was ready to begin her new career. The sorting process was simple: she had to have another physical, a lot of shots, and swear in for the third time before signing the contract

that really inducted her into the military ranks. At the end of this process recruits went into one of two direction: Hollywood where they lived in air-conditioned buildings or Tank Hill where they lived in old World War II barracks with fans to cool them off and little to no heat in the cold months. As luck would have it, Marie was directed to the cattle truck line (although she had no idea at the time, it meant Tank Hill). The area was called Tank Hill because it was marked by a huge water tank that could be seen from miles around. The barracks in that area were not surrounded by grass but by red clay dirt and hills all around. The cattle cars used to transport them from place to place looked like cattle trucks with seats in them. The drill sergeants stood around not saying much as the sergeants at in-processing directed them to get their things, load the trucks, and get on. They still didn't say anything to them as they chatted on the way to their destinations. When the trucks stopped, they spoke for the first time:

“You candy asses have been dragging your asses around all day holding us up while you take your sweet-ass time getting loaded! Well, this is how we work around here – move with a purpose and move when I tell ya! You got two minutes to get all your shit and get it inside and we gone do this until you get it right. MOVE!”

Terrified, everybody tried to grab their bags and ran into the building – not caring if they tripped over anybody else or not. When the last person got inside, Marie heard, *“I said two minutes you rocks not ten! Bring EVERYTHING back out and let's try it again! Move it! Move it!”* Marie had two bags of military stuff issued to her and one bag from home. Other girls had tons of luggage as if they were on vacation. They would do this routine for about an hour until they didn't care if they made it in the two minutes before

the drill sergeants took pity on them and let them stay inside. What they later learned was that had they worked as a team, they would have made the time with no problem.

After torturing them with the bags, the drill sergeant finally let them choose a bunk and unpack their military gear. After an hour, he came in for the first official lockdown (of their personal luggage). He performed the ceremony as if it was an age-old ritual. Each new soldier had to march to the luggage room after removing any personal items they would need over the next few months. They stood at attention while he asked them questions and told them in no uncertain terms that the room was off limits to all of them until the end of their training and anyone caught entering the room would face punishment for breaking a direct order. Marie didn't know what that meant; but, it didn't sound good.

The first week of basic training was spent learning how to make the beds, how to clean everything, how to do physical training (PT), how to do grass drills, how to eat (an entire platoon) in ten minutes, the different ranks and how to address them. By the end of the second week which was the first time they were allowed to call home, Marie was ready to quit. Some of the girls had been talking and told everybody that if they just said they wanted to go home, they would let them with no problems because they were still trainees. A couple of the girls had already left. Marie had reached just such a point – she was tired of this shit already. As she stood in the long line (it looked to be a mile long) waiting to use the only pay phone available to them, Marie thought about going home: going back into the fields, nothing else left to do, and no college. By the time she arrived to the front of the line, she had already shed a few tears; but, was okay when she made her call. She told her mom that she was okay, had started an allotment from her check

coming straight to her (all except \$50.00 she kept for herself went home – a total of \$400) and that she was going to call again when she had a chance. She was resolved – *these fuckers were not gonna take her college education away from her she was gonna be okay.*

The first day Marie arrived at BCT she couldn't do one push up. By week three, she was able to do five. Since they ran every where they went, she was in pretty good running shape. The only people who didn't have to run every where were the smokers. They sat down after every meal to "light up" and sometimes they were allowed to "light up" on breaks from training while everybody else had to run or do punishment for some infraction. It didn't take Marie long to learn that smokers had a break from their daily hell. The next time the drill sergeants took them shopping, she bought her a carton of cigarettes and began "lighting up" when the breaks were called (she would later become a two-pack-a-day smoker and have this addiction for another fifteen years before she one day quit cold-turkey). She was a survivor and BCT – Basic Combat Training – taught her to survive in a battle and in war.

Marie made it to graduation. While many of her friends loaded into cars, cabs, and buses headed home, to the airport, and to their next duty station; she waited outside the barracks for her ride to the other side of post for her Advanced Individual Training (AIT) to learn her job skills. She knew she wouldn't be sweating it out as she had on Tank Hill because all the AIT barracks had air-conditioning. She did have some freedom during this phase; but, since it was still considered training, she did not have total autonomy. They had buddies assigned (and no one was supposed to be seen without their buddy), curfews (times to return to the barracks), and bed checks (to ensure they were in their beds sans bedmate).

Marie enjoyed her classes even though they were grueling. She had learned how to type in high school on an electric typewriter; but, the military school taught them how to use manual typewriters. Marie had a difficult time using them without making too many mistakes – she had to redo a lot of her typing assignments. She tried never to fail a formatting test because she could only retest twice before being kicked out of school. She had to retest once and was so scared of messing up that she did not repeat the experience. If all went well during the week, they were allowed the weekend to party if they did not have duty. Marie always left and returned with her assigned buddy – Private Robinson; but, they rarely spent time out together. They were friends but each had a boyfriend and did not enjoy double-dating; so, they planned carefully how to not miss curfew and to enjoy dating without being shackled to each other. One Saturday night, this came back to haunt them and they discontinued that practice.

Robinson had seen a new guy that she spotted and really liked. The problem was the boy she had been seeing; so, she broke up with him and made a date with the new guy. Marie and Robinson parted ways at the post club. Marie went to the movies while Robinson chose to stay at the club with her new guy. After the movie, Marie went back to the club to meet up with Robinson; but, she was not there. Her date walked her back to the barracks where a group of the girls sharing the room with her and Robinson met her at the door.

“Lucky, where you been?”

“Yall seen Robinson?”

“Yeah, she came back a little while ago. Something is wrong with her and we don’t know what! She talkin’ crazy like she high! Since she didn’t come back with you, we were scared to take her to the infirmary in case you got in trouble! Hurry up!”

“Whatcha mean like she high? Yall know Robinson don’t do drugs!”

“Well, she acting high outta her mind now!”

Terrified, Marie ran upstairs with the others. Sure enough Robinson was out of it. As they worked to revive her, she woke up crying, and then fell limply onto the bed like she had passed out. She couldn’t tell Marie what had happened to her, how she got back to the barracks, or anything that made sense. *“Okay, we can’t let her sleep and we can’t take her to the infirmary! Let’s get her in the shower! Turn on the cold water! Green, you go get some coffee!”*

Marie and her other roommates alternated between cold shower, walking Robinson around the room, and pouring coffee down her throat from about midnight to six the next morning. Robinson finally fell into a natural peaceful sleep without the ranting and crying. By this time, they were each exhausted and soaked from head to toe. Each took turns changing and watching Robinson for any signs of medical trouble. When she slept peacefully for about three hours, they all went to their beds hoping the worst was over.

About nine the next morning, they were all wakened by Robinson shouting for them to get up. Really pissed that she woke them at first, they all got up to check her. Other than sporting a black eye that she did not have a few hours before and her hair standing on top of her head, she seemed fine; so, the entire room of girls just looked at her: *“What? Why are you all looking at me like that?”*

“What happened to you last night?” Marie asked.

“Whatcha mean? What happened to me?” Robinson demanded.

“What did you do last night and how did you get back to the barracks?”

“I went to the club. You know you left me there. Me and Scott danced – I really like him! The last thing I remember was putting my drink on the table and dancing. Then we came back to the table, I finished my drink, and that’s all I remember. I don’t remember coming back to the barracks. You didn’t bring me back?”

“Somebody said Scott brought her back; but, I don’t know cause I didn’t see who brought her back. They thought she was drunk so they called us to come get her from the CQ (charge of quarters) desk,” said Green.

“Well, I ain’t liking him! How he gonna leave you at the barracks like you was?”

“I don’t think he did anything to me! I think it may have been Wilson. He was watching me in the club and he is mad cause I broke up with him.”

“Another thing! Didn’t yo Momma ever tell you not to leave a drink and come back to finish it. Is Scott too cheap to buy you a fresh drink?”

“Well, since we were near the table, I thought it would be okay to finish it. I didn’t see anybody hanging around our table.”

“It don’t take long to drop something in a glass. Besides, you was probably looking at Scott too much to even notice somebody walking by. Wilson had all his crew in the club last night and any one of them could have spiked yo drink. Don’t ever do that shit again – buy a fresh drink! You had us scared shitless! You was crying, blabbering and we couldn’t understand what the hell you was talking about, and then you would pass out cold. We put you in the cold shower and you fought us, then cried, we walked

you around and gave you coffee until you fell asleep. Oh...sorry about ya hair. Now you have the nerve to get up like you just had a peaceful night's sleep while we been up all night. To top that off, you got a black eye you didn't have when we put you in the bed three hours ago. Since you okay, leave us the hell alone so we can get some sleep!"

"You kidding right? I didn't really act like that did I?"

"Yeah, you did. Enjoy yo day and let us sleep!"

Robinson did leave them to sleep. When they located her later that day, she had tried to fix her hair as best she could and was sporting sun glasses to cover the black eye. From that time on, when they were supposed to be together, they were. Marie learned new meaning for "I got your back" and she made sure she had her buddy's back for the remainder of their training period. Right before their training was to come to an end, Marie received her orders for her next duty station – she was going to HHD 10th Brigade in Darmstadt, Germany and she was ready.

A week before graduation the announcement that Project Exodus was about to begin. Project Exodus would empty the barracks before the Christmas holiday which meant they would be leaving early and all new assignments would begin after the New Year. This meant Marie had her orders amended to report to Germany in January instead of in December right before Christmas – everybody was getting two weeks leave to go home. Christmas never meant much to Marie; so, she was not excited about going home for it. She wanted to go overseas instead; but, had to make plans for Momma to pick her up – she should have enough money since she was getting all of Marie's paychecks still.

At the appointed time, Momma showed up with her boyfriend Bernard, to pick her up. Marie tried to be happy about returning home to see everybody; but, she wasn't.

All she wanted to do was to keep traveling and moving. They made the trip home in a relatively short period of time because Bernard was a truck driver and he drove really fast. Momma questioned her about the Army and how things went. Marie was happy to tell of her experiences – she had a good time in the military and she liked it. Momma told her that Teresa had called asking when she was coming home.

“Why she wanna know when I’m coming home? If she had come with me, she would know when I was coming home!” Marie had not forgiven Teresa for not coming with her and had no intentions of talking to her.

“Well, she asked me to tell you to call her.”

“Well, I ain’t got nothin’ to talk to her about and I ain’t calling her!”

“Suit yaself. I’m just telling ya.”

Marie spent her two weeks camped on the couch until time for her to leave. She did not call Teresa or anybody else while she was there. She did see her Daddy; but, she did not spend much time with anybody. She was anxiously waiting for the day that she would be flying out to go to Germany.

New Crop: Bitches, Homeys, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends – Germany

Marie flew into Frankfurt, Germany. She was to report to the 21st Replacement Unit to get her next assignment. She would later learn that even though she had a direct assignment, she had to officially be assigned by the Replacement Unit. Arrangements were made for someone to pick her up and transport her to her new duty station.

Everything was unfamiliar to her; so, she didn’t do much exploring – she only went where she was directed until her ride showed up to get her. Sergeant Miles picked her up. He would later be assigned as her trainer or mentor to get her integrated into the unit. He

told her that she had been assigned to the S-1 (administrative office) of the Brigade and was to report to Staff Sergeant (SSG) Pickering the following morning. When they arrived at the *kaserne* or the barracks (which looked like a long block building with three floors and a basement), Marie thought that they took a wrong turn. This did not look like the place she had just left or Fort Jackson.

SGT Miles took her into the CQ to sign into the unit; to supply to get issued a room, a key, and bedding; before helping Marie bring her bags in. When she opened the door, the room was divided into four sections. Using wall lockers, desks, and beds; somebody had totally segregated the room into two large sections and two small sections with barely enough room to move around in without bumping into something. There were names on the lockers and the two large areas looked well decorated and lived in. SGT Miles told Marie that her roommates were on leave: one had gone on her honeymoon after getting married and the other was in the states on leave. He told her to pick a section of the room that was not being used and move in. He told her he would come back to get her to take her to the Mess Hall (cafeteria) for dinner in a few minutes.

Marie began unpacking until he came by for her. The Mess Hall was in a building located near the gate which was a short walk. Since she did not have a meal card, he showed her how to sign for her meal instead of paying for it, explained what she was to do the following morning, gave her a tour of the *kaserne* after dinner, and showed her where everything was in the building before showing her how to get back to her room. Although she shook her head and nodded in the right places, Marie didn't remember half of what he was saying to her. She did remember which floor had what but not much beyond that – the basement is where the supply room and the arms rooms were, the first

floor is where the offices were: S1 (administration), S2 (security), S3 (training), S4 (logistics), and Brigade Headquarters (Command Sergeant Major and the Colonel). The company and the soldiers were all on the third floor. There were no elevators; so, she had to walk up and down the stairs. She knew where the *latrine* or bathroom was. When she entered it, she was shocked to see a tub in the middle of the floor surrounded by a bay of about six showerheads. Wanting to take a nice long soak, she was trying to figure a way to do that in private when another soldier walked in. Seeing Marie looking at the tub, she let her know that nobody ever used it because they did not have privacy. Everybody took showers because they were already used to taking showers without privacy.

That night and for two months straight, Marie wrote her letters home. She was homesick and lonely; so, she wrote about everything she did at night and mailed her letters every morning. Her Momma was still getting all of her check except the \$50.00 – she didn't need much and she was happy. Marie reported to the S1 Section as directed the next morning. She was instructed to report to Gateway to Germany (a course she would attend for approximately two weeks while she waited on her security clearance to come through and that taught her rudimentary basic skills to navigate the German economy). She had been assigned as the Brigade Publications NCO (she was the librarian for the Brigade). She did not work directly for SSG Pickering in the S1 Section (Administrative Section). She worked for Major Munn (the Brigade Adjutant or S-1 as he was addressed). She would later learn that this skinny, nerdy looking officer had the biggest Black music collection she had ever seen, knew more about Black music than she ever did, and did not have a lick of rhythm but loved to dance. She was to work in a classified vault which had limited access with SGT Miles as her immediate supervisor. She shared office space with

the Signal platoon. Both of them (she and them) handled sensitive documents and had Top Secret clearances. Only personnel on the authorization list could enter the vault with them. Every day she went down to the first floor, dialed in the combination, unlocked the vault, and entered until some chore, assignment, hunger, or quitting time demanded she leave. Her roommates finally returned one at a time while she was out.

Marie had been falling into a rhythm – PT, shower, breakfast, work, lunch, work, dinner, shower, write home, and bed. She never went anywhere and did not talk to anyone except SGT Miles and Private Taylor who lived down the hall and who had arrived a few days before her. Everybody stayed to themselves and they were not very friendly. About three weeks after she had arrived, she entered the room to realize someone had returned from leave. The roommate that had been married had returned. Marie spoke to her and she just looked at her and closed her curtain to her area. Feeling slighted but pissed, Marie continued to her area and decided that the less she saw of her the better. She had learned that both her roommates worked shifts at the signal site and were seldom in the room – not a problem not speaking or seeing her. She thought the other one was gonna probably be just as bad. They had over their share of the room; but, Marie was not making any waves because they outranked her.

Sure enough, the other one returned about a week later and was sitting talking to the rude one when Marie came in. She looked at them both and kept walking to her area. They did not disturb her; but, they did begin whispering – she knew them bitches was talking about her. This continued for a few days. Then Marie came into the room during lunch to find the latest returnee alone without the first bitch. She passed by her and went to her area. Then, to her total surprise the bitch actually spoke to her.

"I hear you from Georgia."

"Yeah." Marie answered suspiciously.

"What part?"

"Nevils, outside of Statesboro."

"Me too. I'm Thomas and I'm from Milledgeville. You ever heard of it?"

"No."

"I ain't never heard of Nevils but don't yall have a college or something in Statesboro?"

"Yeah, Georgia Southern College."

"Well, since you my home girl, we can be friends. You been getting out?"

"No." Marie did not have a clue how to handle the 'friendly' bitch that wouldn't speak to her before now.

"Well, I'm gonna show you around. You need to get out and enjoy Germany. It's a cool place to do stuff. I have extended my assignment a couple of times. It's always something to do here."

Not knowing how to take the change in attitude, Marie said, *"Okay."*

"If you need anything you ask me. Okay?"

"Okay."

"And don't worry about Brinson she is a real bitch but she won't bother you now that you my home girl. Promise you will ask me if you need something."

"Okay...I will."

The next day when she returned to the room, the dimensions of her living area had changed. They had divided the room equally and given her more space. Thomas was true

to her word. She began taking Taylor (from Alabama) and Marie to different places when she was in the barracks. If she was on shift, she often pointed them to different things they might enjoy doing. Pretty soon Marie was out just about every night. She and Taylor were inseparable. Thomas continued to be her friend but she was seeing one of the guys on the other side of the kaserne (he was infantry and spent most of the year in the field). When he was in garrison, Thomas almost never stayed in the room. Imagine Marie's surprise when Thomas actually brought her boyfriend to meet her. At first she was flattered that Thomas thought her homey enough to introduce her to her man until reality set in: *"You know I think I should introduce you to my home boy Will. I think you two will hit it off. How about we go on a double date this weekend?"*

Not having any attachments or plans, Marie said okay. When her date showed up, he was hunky gorgeous. Knowing she was not bad looking herself, Marie thought: *Why not?* The four of them had a good time that night and Will was indeed a gentleman. When he kissed her goodnight, Marie was on cloud nine. He called her the next day to ask if she would go out with him again and she agreed. This time he showed up with a dozen roses and it was just the two of them without the buffer of their homeys. They wound up back in Marie's room after the date. As they sat talking Will tried to kiss her which she returned until he tried to push her on the bed for something more intimate. Marie pushed him up and moved to the chair. Will asked her to come back to the bed so that they could talk – only talk.

Realizing that he was sincere in that he would not push her beyond where she wanted to go, Marie sat back down beside him and the craziest thing come from his mouth: *You know, I think we look good together. I believe if you let me we would be good*

in bed too. I'm not going to keep pushing for that cause I know you are not ready. Why don't we get married?"

"Get married! You don't even know me!"

"We can get to know each other. If we get married, we can get an extra \$400.00 a month for BAQ (Basic Allowance for Quarters – funds paid to soldiers for purposes of paying their rent or mortgage)."

"You crazy! Four hundred dollars is not worth being married to somebody you don't know."

"We can always see other people if we decide too. You know open marriage. We would be married to get the BAQ but see other people."

Marie looked at Will (who she had started liking) and told him in no uncertain terms: *"You are crazy as hell if you think I would marry anybody for money. Take your ass home and don't call me again!"*

"Let me know if you change your mind. I'll be waiting for your call. You know how to reach me."

That was the last time Marie saw or talked to Will and never regretted the decision. When she told Thomas about the conversation, Thomas pretended to be shocked; but, Marie suspected Thomas knew the score and had set her up. That Friday Thomas' brother, who was also stationed in Germany, came to visit. Thomas had made plans for everyone to enjoy that Saturday at the park, dinner out, and clubbing later in the night. Her attempts to pair Marie and her brother did not go unnoticed by Marie who was adept at dodging or Taylor who thought the shit was funny. After the outing, Marie began

to spend less time with Thomas and more time with Taylor – she had the feeling Thomas, although her home girl, was not her girl friend.

Taylor and Marie partied every night that they could and traveled to different places on the weekends. Marie had not been homesick in so long that she had not written in months. Time had passed by without her noticing. About four months after she had been in the unit, she was summoned into the First Sergeant's office. He is the one responsible for the welfare of personnel in the unit. When he summoned a soldier, it usually meant one of two things – either you were receiving an award or you were in serious trouble. Marie had not done anything to get awards for so she figured she had done something wrong. As she entered the office, she was directed to knock on the door and report in to the First Sergeant. After knocking on the door and directed to enter. Marie marched up to the desk, stood at attention, said: *“First Sergeant, Private Lucky reporting as ordered,”* and popped to *At Ease* when directed. The First Sergeant then began to berate her for failure to call home and worrying her Mother:

“Private Lucky, I have here a Red Cross message to inquire if you are dead or alive. It seems you have not contacted home in a while and your Mother is worried that you have been killed and the military failed to notify her of your death. When was the last time you had contact with your family Private?!”

“About three months ago First Sergeant!”

“I am giving you a direct order to go right now to the CQ desk and call home! Do you hear me Private?!”

“Yes, First Sergeant!”

“If you ever come back in by office for something as simple as this I will have you on extra duty for two months! You should communicate home at least once a month! Do you understand me?!”

“Yes, First Sergeant!”

“Dismissed!”

Smarting from the ass chewing she had just taken, Marie went to the CQ desk to call home (it was the only official phone they were to use to call the states but she could have called from the vault). *“Hello. Hey Ma. Why did you have to send a Red Cross message. I told you to do that if you needed to get in touch with me about something happening at home.”*

“Well I hadn’t heard from you in a while when I was gettin’ letters almost every day. I thought they had killed you an’ was not tellin’ me.”

“I am okay. I’m working and hanging out with my friends. They would stop my pay if I am dead. Oh...while I have you on the phone. I need to change my allotment so you won’t be getting as much money as you been gettin’. I will keep sending you some just not as much.”

“Okay baby. It’s your money. I’m grateful for anything ya can sin me.”

“Okay. I will talk to ya later.” For the remainder of her eighteen month assignment in Germany, Marie enjoyed herself tremendously. She met Danny, they married, and left Germany for Fort Hood, TX when she was seven months pregnant. When their child was six months old, Marie left the military (something she loved) to take care of the baby and return to college thinking Danny would stay in. As soon as she got out, Danny left too. He had tricked Marie into getting out and then he decided to get

out instead of reenlisting as they had discussed. Although she was livid, Marie kept it to herself and went along with his deception.

Stormy Weather – Moving Back Home

Danny and Marie moved to Maryland with his parents. Marie had no intentions of staying beyond a few months (time to get a job and get back into school). Danny had other plans – he was comfortable living off his parents. At first Marie kept up a good front of happiness but that did not last too long because Danny had started hanging out with his cousin Rudy and coming home drunk most nights. While his mother disapproved, she felt Marie should allow her son his time with family because he was not fooling around just hanging with his favorite cousin.

Marie looked at things differently – he was hanging out instead of trying to move them out into their own place. Things came to a head one day as Marie issued Danny an ultimatum (to either get her a place or she was getting her and the baby a place without him). He turned and punched her in the face – something he had never done. His father had a history of beating his mother when he was young. He had put a stop to that when he became a teenager. Knowing this Marie was shocked when he hit her. Stunned Marie gained her senses fast enough to dodge the second blow and come with her own to his jaw. They tore the room up fighting before Danny's mother could get them apart. Danny left the house with Marie screaming she was calling the police on his ass. The police arrived moments later, took her statement, asked her to come to the station for pictures, and asked her to call him if he returned – his ass was going to jail if she had anything to do with it. Nobody was gonna beat on her and walk the streets to talk about it. She was not her mother.

Marie took the pictures at police headquarters, went to the emergency room where she was told her nose was broken, and returned to Danny's parents house with her baby. She had made an appointment for later (Friday – and this was Monday) in the week with a nose specialist to see about her nose. He could not do anything until the swelling went down to see if she needed surgery. The next day she drove around looking for an apartment before she signed a lease for one she liked and could afford. When she informed Ruth, her mother-in-law, of her intentions to move out, Ruth asked: *“Have you heard from Danny? Do you know where he is?”*

“No, I haven't heard from him. You can look for him; but, I won't. I am taking my baby and we are moving by the end of the week. I thank yall for letting us stay here; but, your child should be staying with you not his wife and child.”

Pop walked in by the time Marie was making her last statement. *“No, if anybody is gonna be on the street it will be him. You and the baby are welcome to stay here as long as you want to.”*

“Thank you Pop; but, I have a place just big enough for the two of us and I can afford the rent on my salary.” Marie had joined the DC Army National Guard and was working there temporary full-time during the week. Although the position's title said temporary, it was a permanent type job that was reallocated every six months; so, she had pretty steady employment for as long as she needed it. That coupled with her monthly drill (monthly National Guard duty) check was enough for her and the baby to live comfortably.

“Okay, but you don't have to move.”

“Thank you but my mind is made up.”

The next day when she came home, Ruth had just hung up the phone in the kitchen and said, *“I found Danny. He has been staying with Rudy and his mom my niece.”*

“Okay. I’m glad you found him. I will be moving this Friday.”

When she came in on Thursday, Danny was sitting at the table with a watch with a diamond in it as a way of apologizing for hitting her. He even cried as he apologized and begged her forgiveness. Marie told him that she was moving out the next day and that she had an appointment with a nose specialist because her nose was broken. Danny pleaded to go with her to the doctor. She said yes that he could come along.

After her x-rays, the specialist came into the room to tell her the good news: she would not need surgery and he could set her nose without any problem by taking a flat stick and popping it back into place. The aftercare was simple too: not to blow her nose really hard, don’t hit the nose (be careful not to lay on it or anything to push it out of place), and wear a splint of sorts on her nose for a few days. Danny sat in the corner as the doctor put the wooden splint into her nose and popped it into place. Marie heard the bone pop. The pain was minimal; but the look on Danny’s face was priceless. He was in tears and Marie realized that witnessing the doctor fixing her nose was more punishment than jail or anything else could have done for him. She rubbed it in – she wanted him to suffer for hitting her so when the doctor stepped out to get the splint she said, *“Yeah, look at what you did!”*

After leaving the doctor’s office, they sat and talked for hours. All the pent up anger Marie had came to the forefront and she blasted him for his deception about the military and his comfort in living with his parents. The drinking and hanging out was the

last and most difficult to deal with – his feelings of inadequacy in providing for them made him drink more than was healthy. His constant arguments with his father who also thought he could use some guidance drove him from the house more often than not. Marie’s solution to all of this was simple – get your own place. He then went with Marie to see her new place. After looking it over, he said that it was too small for a family – Marie was moving alone and told him this. He asked her to give up the small place and he promised to find something bigger for all of them. Marie agreed to give him the chance he was asking for. He didn’t let her down. Two weeks later they moved into a two bedroom, two bathroom apartment with a den for a little more than she would have been paying for the small one bedroom she was going to rent. All was well and Danny never raised his hand to her again.

Winter: Homecoming

Danny eventually had to return to the military because he had difficulty adjusting to civilian life. The plan was for him to return (his assignment was Fort Stewart, Georgia – a place Marie had no wish to move to because she had vowed never to return to Georgia) and Marie and the baby would stay put until he was assigned to a post that he and she liked. If he went without them, his assignment would be eighteen months instead of three years as unaccompanied and married. They were hesitant but resigned to their decision until Marie became ill one day at work. The diagnosis was pregnancy with the risk of miscarriage – she was high-risk for being able to carry the pregnancy to term. The doctor recommended that she completely stop working (even though her job was an office job) and stop school and do complete bed rest. Talk about karma, divine intervention, fate, or whatever people want to call it deciding what you are forced to

readjust to. Marie learned to “never say never” because she was forced to return to a place she vowed never to return to – Georgia.

Moving back was difficult and took a toll on their relationship. Since they were living on one income, they could not afford to rent an apartment while they waited for housing on base; so, they moved in with Momma. Since Marie had stopped all of the allotment she had once sent when she got married, Momma disliked Danny for causing her to lose some income. Marie was not aware of Momma feelings until they moved in. Nothing was said directly; but, Marie soon picked up on her feelings by snide remarks she would make about Danny in seemingly innocent conversations. Things soon became tense and came to a head when she locked them out of the house one night.

Marie and Danny went out with her sister and her husband to dinner and the drive in movie. Since it was a family affair, they also took the baby. When they returned home at about eleven, the lights were out and the doors were all locked. Knowing Momma was home but not coming to the door pissed Marie off. They wound up sleeping in the car for the night until she deigned to let them in the next morning with, *“I go to bed early. If yall gonna go out, you need to get in before I go to bed!”*

Marie looked at Danny who seemed about to explode and gave him the look that meant *to be cool we will talk later*. When they got to their room, he let it all out, *“What the hell was that? She goes to bed way after we do! Why won’t she give us a key if she wants to go to bed early or better yet get her ass up and let us in?”*

“Look, this is her house and we need to get the hell out of here. I didn’t have to be in by eleven when I was a teenager and I’ll be damned if I come in that time when I am out with my husband! I will drive you to post tomorrow and go looking for a place. We

already know we don't want to stay here in Nevils or in Statesboro. Most of the places around post are ghetto and dangerous places I am not gonna stay in by myself with you being deployed to Honduras so much back and forth. I'm gonna look in Savannah to see what I can find."

"Alright, we need to hurry the hell up and get outta here. This motherfucker is crazy!"

They did find a place in Savannah within a few days and moved soon after. Marie had the baby and six months later, when the movers came to move them to their apartment on post, she let them take everything except her and the children's clothes. She went in the opposite direction. They divorced, she moved into Section 8 housing complex, and began working at the local sewing factory. While there, her coworker who was also in the Georgia Army National Guard as a part-time recruiter asked if she was interested in rejoining the Guard. Marie saw this as an opportunity to get back to the military while she took care of her kids; plus, the extra money would help her pay the rent because as soon as she started working, her rent went to the normal amount, the welfare check she had been forced to get (\$200.00 a month - \$199.00 of which covered the bills) had stopped, and the food stamps decreased (although she was getting \$75.00 at first that amount eventually went to \$25.00 per month – the paperwork required to get even that never changed and Marie finally figured it wasn't worth it and stopped sending the packets in).

Marie's first drill was surreal. She sat around in civilian clothes because she did not have uniforms (this lasted for about five months). She was not used to just sitting at drill and having NCOs telling her to go to the motor pool out of sight instead of hanging

out in the halls or office. She went to the motor pool, found a truck to sit in, and went to sleep until someone came to get them for lunch formation. She returned after lunch and repeated the process until time for the dismissal formation. When she finally returned home on Sunday evening, she was so tired from sleeping all weekend. The pay – four days wages for two days work – was not something she was gonna give up if all they wanted her to do was stay out of sight instead of putting her in her job. What Marie saw as soon as she got to the unit was that all the clerks were pretty white females. She was supposed to report to the unit as an administrative clerk (her MOS).

Although there was an E-5 slot and Marie was an E-5, she was not placed in the slot. She was slotted as in an E-4 5-ton truck driver slot and sent to the motor pool. Marie remained in this limbo for about five months until the unit was slated for Desert Shield (they were notified that they had to get their rosters updated, people in the right slot or training if needed, and begin the process just in case they were called). Marie was called into see the First Sergeant and was told she had to go to truck driving school. When Marie told him that she had the 64C (truck driver) qualification from DC Army National Guard, he told her the designation had changed to 88M and that she had to actually attend the school. Marie knew this was a lie; but, wanted the active duty pay she would get if she went. She was an NCO and would not have to live in the barracks with lower enlisted soldiers (she would also get BAQ).

Her orders for school had her reporting to Fort Jackson, SC within driving distance of home. When she arrived, she found that her orders had her reporting to the wrong school; she was supposed to be at Fort Lee, VA. The unit had her drive back to Savannah for replacement orders while they procured an airline ticket and permission for

her to report late to Fort Lee. She finally made it to training; thrived on the fast-track program; but gave up her chance to attend her graduation and be honor grad because she chose to return to her unit to deploy instead of deploying with the active duty straight from Fort Lee.

Loam: The Soft and Wet

Marie's unit deployed to Desert Shield soon after she returned. They were trained up at Fort Stewart where they honed their combat/survival skills, were checked medically, and where they were instructed on the customs and traditions of the area they were being deployed to. They were a heavy supply unit which meant they ordered and supplied three major classes of supplies to all other units as well as minor items in the other classes of supply (there are ten classes of supplies in the Army). After being shuffled from one duty to another upon arriving in country, they were finally sent forty miles behind the front line because their commander had pissed off everybody who he met (he bragged about this ability with regularity).

The unit sent an advanced party of soldiers to set up the base they would occupy. Marie's new beau Turner was in that group; but, she knew he would be okay. Marie and the remainder of the unit followed two weeks later upon receiving word that the base camp was ready. It took them longer than normal because the unit did not have its equipment (the boat had not arrived yet) and there was no place to purchase tents and materials needed. What they found when they arrived at the base camp was a well stocked store of materials.

Over half of the advanced party was Vietnam War personnel. They regaled the young soldiers, Marie included, on how they saw the area they were assigned and

knowing they had to set up or else the unit would be stuck in “tent city” doing shit details for months they took teams and struck out across the desert to pilfer and bargain for what was needed. There were more than enough tents; but, water was limited to what we brought with us while showers and latrines did not exist. The dirt was so dry and hard that tent pegs for the tents could not be hammered into the ground. It took many tries and a lot of work to get one tent up. Then, the dust storms that moved entire sand dunes came to change the landscape, terrain, and landmarks in the desert. Added to this was the fact that they were close enough to hear the actual fighting a few miles across the desert which left many of the leaders afraid of the enlisted soldiers. They complained enough to the Commander that he finally confiscated all ammunition and put it under lock and key. Only personnel going out on missions were issued ammunition (30 rounds and no grenades).

Marie went on a few missions but finally told them all that she was not going on any more because another driver (female and her buddy) had been captured going in the wrong direction. Since she was the only female driver and the unit was only going to give her 30 bullets, Marie figured court martial, jail, and home all sounded better than capture, rape, and torture. Her refusal went all the way up to the First Sergeant and back down to the lead driver – they all were sure she would follow orders even when she assured them that she was not. Eventually, she received different orders that fateful night – the mission was changed to go to Kuwait and she was being replaced by a male driver. When her platoon sergeant brought her the change in assignments, Marie just could not let it rest. She had to let him know that she meant business: *“Well good cause I wasn’t going anyway. Yall woulda had to court martial me. I waddin going.”*

“You woulda went.”

“I promise you. I wouldn’t”

“Well don’t worry about it now. We don’t know do we?”

Marie let it die after that because she knew he had done something to help her not to make that choice. She found a new respect for him. He finally changed her from driver to working shift in the supply section. She was responsible for issuing and receiving Class VII supplies (she handled vehicles instead of the other items under this class). Her duty hours were usually early morning and late evening – the midday hours were so hot that everything shut down. The front line eventually moved further away from them. As it moved, the unit received more supplies. Soon after they line moved, a unit moved next door to them. The First Sergeant was a club owner in his everyday life and felt the need to bring entertainment to the desert in the form of a night spot called The Soft and Wet.

He first installed a pool (fabricated from 3000-gallon water bladder and conex containers). Next, he built an eatery. Lastly, he opened the Soft and Wet (a nightclub that catered to all ethnicities). The club was open seven nights a week, there were lines of vehicles and people for miles vying to get in. It was THE place to be. Since he was their next door neighbor and Marie’s unit assisted him when he first arrived, they all received VIP passes. Marie and her buddies would park and walk to the front of the line to get in, treated to the best seats in the house (tent), and given free (non-alcoholic) drinks. Life was GOOD! Marie was at the club most nights – even on country and western night. She would do this until the Red Cross sent a message notifying her of her paternal grandmother’s death. She returned for the funeral and did not return to the war zone with her unit as she had been directed to do. Her commander told her to come back to the unit

after her bereavement time; however, he did not tell her how to do that. She remained at Fort Stewart until the unit arrived. Upon their return, she would be forced to make other changes.

Growing in New Directions: An Officer and a Lady

When the unit returned, Marie was looking forward to making E-6 (she was qualified in two MOSs and there were slots in both that she could get promoted in). What she got one drill was the exact opposite notification – she was going to be administratively reduced because she was in an E-3 slot; a white female that had joined the unit right before Desert Shield had gotten promotion to E-5 during the mission was being promoted in the E-6 slot (which she was not qualified for) instead of Marie; and, there was a representative wanting to talk to soldiers about considering Officer Candidate School (OCS) in which everybody with college credit had to go to show support instead of an empty room. Marie made her feelings known to her platoon sergeant: *“This unit did not promote me to E-5 and I’ll be damned if they DEMOTE me from E-5! How in the hell can they get away with this? She just got here! Yall just sit around and let the ‘good ole boys’ do whatever they want to do around here when you know it’s wrong. This has to be against some regulation! And, why do I have to go to this stupid presentation anyway? I’m not interested in being an officer!”* Non-Commissioned Officers prided themselves on being that and when confused with or called an officer, they often said, *“Don’t cuss me. I work for a living.”* Marie was very proud to be an NCO and had that same attitude.

Although she did not want to attend the presentation, she did pay attention as respect to the presenter. She listened attentively, took the handouts, asked a few pertinent questions, and left with no intentions to go to OCS. Sunday had her changing her mind.

The plans to demote her were confirmed and final and would happen within a two month period. She went in to see the Training NCO, her friend Doug, to ask for assistance in completing the packet for OCS. Doug explained the process, the application, and the timeline. All paperwork had to be finalized by him before presented for signatures. She would come in the following week to sit down with him. All of this she did and was accepted into the program.

Officer Candidate School (OCS) was an eighteen month commitment to monthly torture – mental and physical. Marie was the only female in her class; so, she had to keep up with the guys. Every few months she wanted to quit; but, Turner would tell her that she would be okay when she got to drill, walk her to the car, and shut the door behind her. Sure enough, as soon as she hit the gates, she was ready to rock and roll through the weekend. Beginning Friday night, the class spent time setting up their lockers and rooms, meeting with the TAC (Teach-Advise-Counsel) Officers who were the school house cadre responsible for their training. They also spent a lot of time running back and forth doing grass drills (grueling and punishing exercises usually conducted on the grass at a fast pace and for long periods of time usually until muscle failure).

Saturday morning began with 4:30 am physical training (student conducted) followed by classes all day until about 6:00 pm. Any break from class was not spent relaxing – the candidates repeatedly checked the barracks and fixed anything that failed the inspections that took place while they were in class. If they had too many infractions, they were usually instructed to meet the TACs at a designated place and time for remediation training (grass drills, extra physical training, or some other diabolical event the TACs dreamed up). One time the TACs did not like the way they cleaned the showers

so they had them get their toothbrushes (that they used) and scrub the shower. Another time, the displays were not identical and were so far off that they had the Candidates move all of their things (beds, wall lockers, clothes, and equipment) outside onto the grass and set up everything as if they were in the barracks. When they finished (not getting it right after four or five times), they had to move everything back inside and set it up again. The Candidates then had to sleep outside because they could not clean properly. The remediation training doled out swiftly and with deadly precision, varied based on the infraction and was rarely repeated. There were also some good times and bonding within the group.

One rule that could never be broken, since Marie was the only female, was that the males could NEVER forget the female (Marie) in whatever planning they were doing. For the most part, they remembered to plan for her and her needs; but, on occasion they did forget to get her. One such occasion happened during their Christmas program six months before graduation and a year into the program (you would think they were accustomed to remembering the lone female by this time). Prior to the Christmas program that they had to perform for the TAC staff, the Candidates had a barracks inspection that they had to pass. The TACs inspected Marie's room first – she was the only female in a twelve bed room and had to ensure her bathroom and the entire room was clean and her personal area / display was an exact replica of the male set up or they all failed. When they left, Marie was left standing and waiting until time for them to change and report to the auditorium for the program. After about forty-five minutes she heard the announcement for all Officer Candidates to report to the auditorium in two minutes for the program.

When she stepped into the hall to see what was happening, all the males were in Class A (formal dress) uniform while she was still in the BDU (Battle Dress Uniform). They all had two minutes to get to report to the TAC staff. Marie looked to the Candidate First Sergeant and Commander and everybody knew what was about to happen – grass drill in Class A because they had forgotten her. Two of her buddies had a plan to keep them out of trouble.

“Okay here is the plan: Williams and I will help her change while the rest of you report and tell them we stayed back with her because she was in the bathroom. What do you think Lucky?”

“I ain’t lying or doing pushups for yall!” Marie said. One of the cardinal rules of OCS was: an Officer Candidate can neither lie, cheat, or steal nor tolerate those who do.

“It won’t be a lie! While you take each thing off, Williams will hand you BDUs back in your locker while I hand you your Class A uniform. Since you will be changing in the bathroom and because we are staying back to wait for you to come out of the bathroom, we won’t be lying. Get it?”

“Okay, but, I am not gonna lie. If they ask me, I’m telling yall forgot to tell me the inspection was over and to change!”

“You don’t have to lie. Just don’t say nothing!”

The three of them arrived at the auditorium about five minutes after the others and were immediately stopped by the TACs and questioned as to why they were late. This was an old trick of theirs: they had already asked the others where they were and why they were not with the class and their stories had better match up or they were going out to the grass in Class A uniform. Marie stood in the middle at the position of attention

hoping they did not ask her any questions while Williams relayed the story they had concocted to stay out of trouble. The TAC looked at them and directed them to take their places for the Christmas program – it went off without a hitch. The TACs even enjoyed Marie’s portrayal of the female TAC. They told her she sounded like she would make a great TAC (that did come a couple years later when they invited her to join the staff).

A few months later Marie graduated and was transferred to the A Company (Forward Support) of the Battalion. She spent her first year (Second Lieutenant) as the leader of the Transportation Platoon which had small, medium, and large vehicles. The largest vehicle she had was the HET (Heavy Equipment Transporters) or tank carriers. She would often have rodeos (or driving competitions) during drill weekends in order to ensure her personnel were trained and so that she could drive some of the neat vehicles she was responsible for. When she was promoted a year later, she was transferred to the POL (Petroleum, Oils, and Lubricants) Platoon where she worked with her future First Sergeant.

Marie worked hard and her reputation with the Battalion as a diligent, common-sense, dedicated leader was well known. She made quick decisions and got the job done. When her soldiers were working, she was working alongside them just as hard while still doing her duties as their leader and an officer. Many of her counterparts were often off sleeping or riding around doing nothing. Her soldiers were always rewarded for their hard work – she insured anyone desiring and requiring schools were sent, anything above the call of duty was rewarded with accommodations, and after every major mission she ensured her platoon had the biggest party (her expense and sans her presence). By her

second year as an officer, she had learned a few tricks to circumvent the system to take care of her soldiers without incurring the wrath of her Commander or Battalion.

During one summer camp the Commander had directed all platoon leaders to put in only one soldier for the Georgia Commendation Medal, one for the Army Commendation Medal, two for the Army Achievement Medal, and the top two or three for Certificates of Appreciation. Marie thought that her soldiers deserved better. They had pumped over 500,000 gallons of fuel without any major spill (active duty units could not meet this standard so this was a major milestone for a National Guard unit). Her guys even trained some of the active duty guys on safety issues and had to supply them with spill kits when they spilled fuel (major environmental issue) during a mission at Fort Stewart. Everyone praised her platoon; but, she was still restricted to only a few awards.

After talking to her Platoon Sergeant who also felt the entire platoon deserved recognition, Marie planned how to reward everyone. While all the other officers were at the Colonel's billets having drinks and a barbeque, Marie was at Battalion Headquarters using their computer system to type up her awards. With the assistance of the S1 Sergeant, she was able to get an award properly formatted and done for each soldier. She then separated them into separate piles: one pile meeting the restrictions set by the Commander and two other stacks. She then signed and turned in the first stack by the deadline. The next month she signed and turned in the next stack and the third month did the same with the last stack. At the end of four months, all of her soldiers had been rewarded and awarded commendations for their success at camp. At the end of formation during the last month, the Commander pulled her to the side.

“You know, I have never given out so many awards as I have in the last few months. I can’t believe Battalion approved them all. I see your platoon had a lot of them. Correct me if I’m wrong but it looks like everybody in your platoon has gotten an award over the last few months.”

Grinning widely, Marie responded: *“Well Sir, you are right. They deserved it and I wanted to make sure they got it. You just gave out the last one and yes everybody that was at camp got one.”*

“Well I’ll be. You go girl! That was smart!”

Of the three lieutenants, Marie had gotten the only award given to officers in the unit; but the Commander never presented awards to officers in formation in front of the troops. She got it in his office during one of their regular planning meetings. Marie was not upset – she knew she worked hard and deserved it but she also knew that she would not have been a success without her soldiers giving more than 100% to mission accomplishment. This kind of leadership style would be her trademark for the remainder of her military career.

She later joined the TAC staff. She eventually became the Senior TAC while she was First Lieutenant; but, was laterally transferred to Senior Instructor when she had two Captains working for her – she could not supervise officers of higher rank and in order to keep her on equal footing with them the Colonel moved her over instead of demoting her back to regular TAC status. Marie remained at the school until she made Captain. When she was promoted, she was warned that she had been at the schoolhouse too long and it was time for her to move to either a company command or to Battalion staff.

Marie did not expect to get a command because not any Black females had command positions that she knew of. Although she was dreading Battalion staff, she was resigned to it. One day as she was walking down the breezeway at the schoolhouse a Major stopped her. *“Captain Lucky. I see your name tag says ‘Lucky.’ Are you Captain Marie Lucky?”*

“Yes Sir.” Marie responded becoming suspicious because he knew her but she didn’t know him – she had never seen or heard of him before.

“I’m Major Joe Hortin. I have heard so much about you – nothing but good things. Your name was thrown in the hat for a new position. I am about to open a POL unit down in Brunswick. I hear you have logistics and POL experience and quartermaster qualified. You would be a perfect fit for what I need. What do you think about taking over as Commander?”

“I would love to sir!”

“I have to get back to this meeting I’m in right now. Do you have access to the .mil email?”

“Yes sir, I am working here and my office is down the breezeway.”

“Well, I need you to send me your military autobiography by the end of the day. I am going to send you the format and I need you to get it right back to me today.”

By the time Marie returned to her office, the e-mail was waiting for her. She sat down and completed the paper and returned it to Major Hortin. A few weeks later she, received orders transferring her to the company as Commander. The Colonel (her new boss) assured her during their first meeting as he was detailing her progression plan that she would command for three years, get promoted on the standard timeline, and he would

then bring her on the Battalion staff. To Marie this meant that she would probably not make the next promotion to Major unless she stayed beyond the ten years she needed to retire as an officer and to make her twenty years of service.

Marie would command for only two years before being promoted to Major and transferring to Battalion staff as the Logistics / Operations Officer. In this position, she oversaw all matters for logistics (medical, transportation, and classes of supply) and operations (all missions for the Battalion). She also served as liaison for the Guard with the state and its various emergency agencies in case of major catastrophe (terrorist, natural, or nuclear). This was the only job she ever really feared – the nuclear threat to the state was so great and potentially so deadly that she decided her time with military was coming to an end. She wanted to be with her kids if there ever was a catastrophe not going in to clear bodies from the kill zone. As soon as she got her twenty-year retirement letter, she put in her retirement packet and retired.

Interlude

Marie joined the military as an escape from the life she lived. She became an officer to fight the injustice of the time. She served her country admirably until she felt she could no longer be effective as a leader. She rose through the ranks with a quickness not often experienced by Black females, she made a difference where she could, and she was happy serving. When she smacked into the wall of the “good ole boy network” she opted out of the fight – she was tired. She had tried to assist as many soldiers in general and Blacks in particular as best she could; but, she felt the fight was overwhelming and daunting at times. Home and retirement were the havens she sought. Prior to her leaving, Marie was asked several times why all the Black officers were leaving. At the time she

had a ready response – they were tired of being mistreated and tired of the “good ole boy network” in action.

Viewed through the Critical Race Theory lens, the system in place in the Georgia Army National Guard is racialized and oppressive in both the enlisted and officer ranks. The military (the Georgia National Guard at least) knew there was a problem with retaining good Black officers who were transferring to the Reserves in droves. The Southern mentality of not recognizing issues of how Blacks were treated was in full force. Denying a racial issue and the racial tension was to a few Black officers paramount to denying slavery ever existed in the South. Some of the practices were so ingrained across the state that many white officers did not see the big fuss and really could not understand why Black officers were not going to stay. As a Black female officer who could and did navigate through the system, Marie did see the pitfalls (most she was able to avoid those from experience and watchfulness). She also heard the talk about Black officers who tried to do as the whites did but who later were “slapped in the face” because they needed to be “put in their place” for overstepping “their bounds.” Time and again she saw this happen and rarely did she partake in the outside of work mingling with the white officers. She saw this as the main reason she avoided the pitfalls – the only thing these people knew about her was her work not her personal life. The less they knew about her the better.

Would the Guard ever change in Georgia? Probably not totally but it was making headways in a positive direction. Do Black officers make a positive difference? Yes (at least for some of the enlisted soldiers who look for Black leaders to be somewhere in the mix); but, the ones who falter makes it difficult for those who do not.

NOVELLA 9

SEASONS OF MY CAREER IN EDUCATION

Prelude

Most educators go through seasons, I think, of their career. Many, as I did, begin with an enthusiastic zealotry. How long this lasts depends on the teacher. Marie began with this spirit; but, lost it along the way somewhere. After years of going through the motion, she regained her zest for teaching.

There are seasons in life and there are seasons of the soul – the springtime when faith is born; the summer when faith matures; the reaping and harvesting in the fall; and the dark time, the winter when you walk over frozen ground and you're sure nothing will ever grow again. . . Everyone has the wintertime of the soul. Song of Songs : devotional reading
(Seniors' Devotional Bible, New International Version)

Marie saw this return to passion for her vocation as a new season of growth and learning. She had been through and come out of the dark times with an enthusiasm not just for her work but for life in general.

Spring – Planting Season

Marie had just moved to Savannah from Statesboro. She was looking for an opportunity to get a job that paid the bills. After trying repeatedly to get a foot in the door and being told she was over qualified for each position (code for not hiring Blacks), she was tired of beating her head against a brick wall. Her unit had rotated back from Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm a few months ago. Although her job at the sewing factory was still waiting for her (that was the law), they really did not have any work for

her because they had been laying people off and the plant was on the verge of closing. Thinking it would be easy to get a job, Marie began looking for something else after quitting. She knew things had not changed much as far as Blacks getting office jobs in Statesboro; but, she had hoped that it was at least considering letting them come out of the fields. This was not the case; so, she moved on to the big city – Savannah.

The only job Marie could get quickly was driving the school bus. The money was not great; but the hours were ideal – she could be home when the kids got out of school and she could take classes during the day while they were in school. Terrence, the boyfriend she lived with, was assisting with the majority of the bills; so, money was not an issue as far as her salary was concerned. He allowed her the freedom to return to school without worrying about working two or three jobs to be able to do it. Marie used her military educational benefits to pay for school to ease the burden of personal finances. After a rough start, she quickly adjusted to being a student again. She began her studies with aspirations of becoming a teacher. Marie wanted nothing more than to make a difference in society; but, teaching was not something she had aspired to do nor was it a calling.

Marie went to Armstrong State College because it was right down the street. Determined to finish her college education, she visited the advisor assigned to her. When he asked her what she wanted to major in, Marie was a little uncertain. She had began as Undecided when she took classes at City Colleges of Chicago while stationed in Germany; but, later changed to Business Administration to match her MOS (administrative specialist). The Human Resources class let her know that this was not something she wanted to do on a daily basis. When she and her husband transferred to Ft.

Hood, Texas and she registered at Central Texas College, she changed her major to Business Management. She thoroughly enjoyed her classes especially the Business Law classes; but, the Management classes were not what she wanted to do either. When she explained this to the advisor, he let her know that Armstrong did not have business classes – she would have to attend Savannah State College on the other side of town if she wanted to remain in business; otherwise, she would lose a year of the credits previously earned. The only other alternative he gave Marie was to go into Business Education – taking the business classes at Savannah State and the education classes at Armstrong (dual degree). She asked if she could think about it and he did a schedule for her to take the basic classes she was missing whether she decided to stay or go to Savannah State. Later that day, Marie had a conversation with her friend Amanda who did not see a problem with her teaching; *“When we have people come into the section, don’t you teacher them? How many people have you trained in the past year?”*

“Yeah, I do. I have trained every new person we have had.”

“So you already teach. It’s the same thing.”

“No, it ain’t. I can see one of those kids saying the wrong thing and me going to jail. If I go to jail, you better bail me out.”

“You ain’t going to jail. You can handle them just like you do on the bus.”

Marie went on to change her major to Business Education and took classes on both campuses. She hated going to Savannah State...the lines were ridiculously long and slow moving. She always registered at Armstrong first (it took her 30 minutes or less) and then went to Savannah State for the day (it often took 8 – 9 hours).

On the first day of her first education class (emphasis area), her professor, Dr. Stokes, asked everyone who wanted to be a teacher to raise their hands. Marie was not quite sure yet; so, she was one of two people who did not raise their hands. This being an education major required course, she waited for him to continue hoping she wasn't about to be blasted by the teacher. His next statement floored her: *"Well, before you make up your minds to set foot in the classroom, be sure you know what you are in for. By the end of this class, I hope you will have decided if this is for you or not. Some of you will find this will be your last education class and that is okay. It is better to find out now that it's not for you rather than when you are standing in front of a room full of students for the first time."* Marie went on to complete the observations, assignments, and the class. In the end, she decided that she had something to offer. She studied hard to ensure she learned as much as she could to be the most knowledgeable teacher she could become in her field. If training was offered, she went. If there was an area she did not feel comfortable teaching, she researched and studied it. Preparation was the key for her and she was ready.

After observing how Black students behaved in class and their lack of participation during her practicum and teaching, Marie was of the mind that most of them did not care about education and were lazy when it came to preparation for class. She would often look at them with disgust at the way they were throwing away their opportunity to be successful. She had decided that when she started teaching, things would be different. She was going to ensure her students got the best teacher than what she was seeing on her visits to the classrooms.

Summer – Tending the Crops

Marie began her teaching career with the passion and enthusiasm of the truly idealistic. She looked forward to teaching youngsters to be productive citizens with the skills necessary to enter the workforce or college. Her first week of teaching soon put all of her ideals in proper perspective. The idealism quickly turned to realism. Her first awakening came while she was standing there in front of her class lecturing and asking questions. The students just stared at her with no apparent willingness to respond or participate. By the end of that week, she was questioning whether or not she had made the right choice in careers. When she talked to her mentor teacher, she explained how she was to proceed to get the children to respond positively in class. Her students were mostly native Gullah students with a rich history (one many of them were ashamed of). Many of them would not talk in class because they were embarrassed by their dialect. As country as she sounded, Marie could sympathize with their dilemma. She eventually learned how to engage her students in a way that allowed them to participate by playing up and exaggerating her countrified dialect. As the students began paying attention to the way she spoke (which was really different), they began asking where she was from and if she was from the country. Marie always responded with a “*yeah and proud of it!*” Pretty soon her students opened up enough to relate some of their heritage in class. This was her first experience with Black students who were different from her and was successful until she left.

Things were going pretty good until a few weeks later a student came in late. When Marie asked her for the pass and why she was late, the student, Marisa, began cursing and shouting at Marie. Totally shocked Marie began to reach out to her when she

exploded, *“Don’t touch me. Don’t put your fucking hands on me. I’m sick and tired of you mother fuckers always fucking with me asking me questions all the time. I’m tired of this bull shit!”* By this time Marie was beginning to get angry as this was playing out in front of a room full of students who looked on with open mouths. No longer was she as sympathetic; so, she responded, *“Sweetheart I didn’t touch you, but you’re gonna wish I had. Get out of my class and go to the office. I will have a monitor escort you and bring your write-up shortly.”* Marisa stomped off and went to the office. Before leaving campus to serve her suspension, she came by to see Marie to apologize for her behavior. When Marie asked what had happened for her to just explode, she told Marie of her trying morning. Her baby was sick again, she was totally on her own and had no one to sit with her at the hospital the night before, she had just found someone willing to sit with the baby while she tried to come to school, and she was tired and worn out. Marie who understood and had continuously tried to help her when those situations had come up over the first few weeks of school, reminded her that she was not the enemy and that was no excuse to be rude and nasty to anyone. Although they ended on a positive note, their relationship was never the same. Marisa eventually dropped out of school because she was missing too many days to take care of the baby. In South Carolina, any girl that gave birth was considered emancipated no matter the age. They could live on their own and parents had no choice in the matter. Marisa’s mother had put her out when she had the baby, the father was not around anymore, and there was no support for the young mother. After she left, Marie barely gave her another thought – life moved on.

For another two years, Marie worked at teaching her students and learned a lot from them in return. Everything was not peaches and cream by no stretch. She liked her

students and their dedication to making good grades; but, she hated the chauvinistic attitude of her principal. He was Black with the distinct belief that women should be seen and not heard. Most of his male staff did not share his beliefs but they did not openly argue with him. This really “stuck in Marie’s craw” but he was one old dog not looking to learn a new trick. As the faculty advisor for Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), Marie was responsible for ensuring her students became leaders in the school and community. Her first year as advisor was a learning experience – she focused on how the organization ran and teaching students their roles and responsibilities. The students decided they wanted to have a male and female school king and queen.

Marie tasked them to research and to develop a plan for the program and the presentation for the principal. The students worked hard and put together a very professional presentation. They even scheduled a meeting with the principal. One thing Marie had not counted on was his reaction to boys modeling on the stage. One of the students on the committee was his son, who was very enthusiastic about competing for the first ever school king. A few days before the scheduled meeting, Marie met the principal in the hall and he told her in no uncertain terms that no son of his would be modeling or prancing on a stage – that was for girls. To say she was flabbergasted at his sexism would be an understatement; nevertheless, she continued on to her meeting with her committee.

Upon telling them of the conversation she had just had in the hall, they asked if they should continue with the meeting with the principal. She advised against it because it seemed as if his mind was made up. The students begged Marie to check to see if he would still meet with them. When she did, he agreed with a smirk on his face. At the

appointed time, Marie accompanied her students to the meeting. They were prepared and had dressed the part (business attire). The principal listened and told the committee he appreciated their presentation and would consider having the program. As the students filed out, he asked Marie for a word at which time he began to berate her for her audacity to allow the students to present such a proposal. When he finished blasting her, he told her to leave his office and did not let her get a word in edgewise.

This man was well known for his bullying tactics but they only served to piss Marie off – she was far from intimidated and thought about reporting him to the district. She knew her first step was to go through her assigned vice principal - which she did. He told her that he would have a talk with him for his behavior and that if he did not apologize or at least own up to his bad behavior, then she could proceed further over his head. He never really apologized but he did own up to his misbehavior and sexist attitude; but, stuck by his decision. This did not endear Marie to her boss; but, he did not openly go after her; so, she left the first chance she got.

One day she got the call from the teacher who mentored her during her practicum informing her that there was an opening in her department. The school was less than two miles from where Marie lived rather than the one hour commute she was doing at the time. Although she loved her job and students, not traveling so far from her home and children was too enticing to pass up...besides she already liked the school because she had done her practicum there. She would remain at this school for another fourteen years. Her classes and the school were racially balanced for most of that time. Marie often felt superfluous to the educational process though (she saw herself as a facilitator to learning rather than a teacher – that's what was stressed) and was often unyielding in the way she

conducted her lessons. She taught to the average student and did little to enrich students at the advanced level although she would give the student below average as much support as possible without neglecting the class. Students just did not care; so, why should she? Once in a while she would have the student that upset her world temporarily. Two such students were Joey and Mary.

Joey was a Goth who walked into Marie's classroom...this was a time before such expressions were popular. Word had already gotten around to most teachers that he was a problem to deal with in class and the mother was compounding the problem by condoning his behavior whether he was right or wrong. Many Goths at the time were viewed as devil worshippers or witches. He was constantly harassed by both administration and teachers about the way he dressed; but, Marie had no way of knowing that. She just thought, "*Why the hell did they put this asshole in my class for me to deal with this shit like I don't have enough of these assholes in one period to deal with.*" With a really negative attitude, she asked the student for his class change form to add him to her role.

Joey looked just as pleased to be in her room as she was to have him in her room; but, gritting her teeth, Marie welcomed him in. Since she knew she was going to be staring at him, Marie made a conscious effort to not look at him weird. What Marie observed over the next few days was a hardworking but quiet student that did all of his work on time. This was a self-effacing white child that just looked weird. A few days after being reassigned to Marie's class, Joey entered the room wearing a studded dog collar with a thick chain hanging down. Marie quietly pulled him to the side and explained that he was out of dress code. She calmly explained that he could not wear it

because it posed a threat to him because someone could pull it to choke him. This began a conversation and they talked a few minutes more and he told her that no one ever told him why he could not wear it. . .only that he could not before giving him funny if not irritated looks. He had ignored them because he and his mom felt it violated his right to dress as he pleased.

Marie explained that it was a safety issue not a personal one and learned something in the process. He was one of the nicest persons and attentive students in the school. Because of his dress and oddities, he had been ostracized and labeled as someone who needed watching and disciplining if he did not follow the ‘rules’ as deemed appropriate. He and his mother fought the battle in spite of the opposition he faced from administration. This was a white child who openly lived what was comfortable to him much as many Black children are ostracized for the way they dress with the baggy pants and over-sized shirts in her classes today.

Mary was another of Marie’s students that upset her neat little world of not getting too close to care about the personal lives of her students. Mary never talked in class. She was so quiet that Marie sometimes forgot that she was there. Getting her to answer a question or speak in class was neigh impossible; but, she did her assignments without complaint. One day as Marie was standing outside the door while students entered the classroom; Mary stopped beside her and burst into tears. Marie, not equipped to handle these types of outbursts, panicked. When Mary would not explain what the problem was, Marie immediately took her to the vice principal at the end of the hall and went back to class. She felt safer waiting for someone to explain the situation to her. She was later directed to report to the vice principal’s office on her planning period.

Dreading the meeting, Marie dutifully reported to the office. After reiterating the importance of student privacy and her duties as a teacher to maintain confidentiality, the vice principal began telling Marie of the situation:

“First of all, let me explain that Mary is living in neglect. She is responsible for taking care of her younger brother. Both children live with an alcoholic mother who is usually passed out on the couch by the time they get home from school. Mary sometimes goes days without eating to ensure her younger brother has food. There is an older sister who lives on her own; but, is too self-absorbed to care about taking care of them.”

“So did you have to call DFAS?”

“I did not call for the outburst this morning. DFAS already has an open case on the children; but, they deem it better for them to remain with the mother than to enter foster care.”

“Wow. That sucks...knowing these kids are neglected but saying it’s better than the system. This explains why Mary looks dingy sometimes.”

“That brings me to the reason for this morning’s breakdown. Mary has not been able to do the laundry for the past couple of week because the mom has been drinking up all the money. Her sister came over yesterday and because she wanted to go out and did not have any clean panties, she took Mary’s last clean pair of panties. This apparently pushed her over the edge – not having at least a clean pair of panties to wear with her dirty clothes.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes...apparently she just could not take have dirty clothes on AND dirty panties; so, I took her shopping to get her some new ones. As soon as this conversation is over, I

am placing a call to DFAS to do a drop-in to check on them today. Do you have any questions?"

"No. This is so crazy."

"You never know what your students are going through at home and you never know what it is that will cause them to reach their breaking point."

"Yeah, I see that."

Marie left the office that day with a new found respect for Mary. Mary was a chubby white girl who looked like she never missed a meal; but, apparently she was missing them on a regular basis. Marie never spoke to Mary about what happened. She began to pay closer attention to her students and tried to become a little more open with them. Over the years, Marie would become close to some of her students; but, she always kept some distance between their personal lives and the classroom.

Year fourteen was the hardest year for Marie. She was burning out and sick and tired of being sick and tired. She had always felt that when she could not force herself to go to work, it would be time for her to look for something else to do. Well now was that time...she hated going to work. The new principal was one of the worst she had ever worked for. She was facetious and duplicitous in that she would say one thing to the teacher while plotting how to write them up for the infraction. Marie had these experiences on a daily basis as a child and now that she was an adult quickly approaching midlife, she was not going to take it anymore.

Her new boss once told a teacher that she liked the outfit she had on that morning; but, then she called her to her office an hour later and gave her a counseling statement on the inappropriateness of her professional dress to go into her permanent record. When

Marie first heard she was to be the new principal, she was excited because she had worked for her at church. She was a church elder who was in charge of the children's ministry. Marie worked for her as a volunteer and enjoyed the experience. So when the devil showed up at school masquerading as the woman from church, Marie was shocked and unprepared. She hated this person without any guilt of being unchristian. She stopped going to church and volunteering for fear of actually seeing her there. Her salvation came from a friend, the executive secretary for the demon, who was leaving for a smaller new school opening up. Marie was afraid to leave her job until her friend reminded her, *"Opportunity does not come around too often. You keep talking about wanting to leave; so, now is your chance. You better take it."* It took Marie a few seconds to realize how stupid she was being. She was trying to find somewhere else to go anyway. Why not just take the chance? She did and got the job. After asking for and being granted the transfer, she danced out of the principal's office on cloud nine.

Marie arrived to school early to set up for the first day. The past week had been a whirlwind of activity. She had been hired to the new school about two weeks ago (two weeks before school was to start). Although it was to be a small learning community, it was going to be a lot of work...there were only eight teachers to man an entire school. The district expected them to set a new standard in education by being the pilot program in one of the worst urban schools in the district. The new school had the same functions and responsibilities as a large school. They had to accomplish this with a few books, no resources, and little planning. Marie had been teaching in the district for about fourteen years and knew her content; but, as a business teacher, it would be difficult to do her job

without computers or any books for any of her classes. She, however, was excited to face the challenge.

Fall – Harvesting . . . Worst Practices

As Marie looks back at her teaching practices, she realizes that there is a pattern to the type of student that comes through the door. Every four years the personality, dynamics, values, or whatever description one tacked onto the new flock of students visibly changed from one cycle to the next. The new cycle often created a chaos that teachers had to sort through and deal with. She also realizes that she may have been one of those teachers that did more harm than good for her students (Black and white). There were times when she was really strict and not very understanding of their plight. Going the extra mile to ensure they were successful was not something she had time for or was willing to do at the time – she only did what was required of her. Some of this attitude, she thinks, could be from the fact that she got out without any help; so, was not very sympathetic with those stuck – it just never occurred to her to think about it. To her way of thinking this “blind reality” was very similar to what she felt happened with white privilege and its “color blind society.”

Many of her parents when they came to conferences were not cooperative – they were often combative or said the “right things” to get through the meeting. Many automatically felt she should be giving their children a break whether they deserved it or not. Their attitudes often caused Marie to be even more stubborn than she really felt like being. For a profession that called for professionalism, she delivered that without a problem; but, flexibility needed to be a teacher was not something she was willing to be. Although many of her students and parents called her “*bitch*,” she felt as long as her

students learned something in her class, she was okay with it. Her reasoning behind how she conducted her classes and her inflexibility in procedures was her belief that high school students should not be babied but prepared for adulthood they were about to enter. Marie lost sight of the fact that they were still children albeit almost adult.

The caring was not something she delved into and was missing in her teaching. She later learned that this was how many of her co-workers saw her also . . . inflexible and rigid in how she did things. What astounded her was the fact that the ones who said this behind her back were the main ones looking for her to join them when time came for a project or committee endeavor to be done. The very traits they scoffed at were an asset when they wanted something done. Although this characterization hurt, it was not something she dwelled on for fear of succumbing to it.

Winter – Dark Times . . . Self-reflection

Being Black and teaching in a majority Black school is not as easily done as people think. Marie's day of awakening to her inadequacy came the first day class in an urban classroom and it had nothing to do with resources. As she stood before her first class...there was not one white or Asian face in the group. Her entire class was Black students. In her entire teaching career she had never had other than an assorted mix with a few Black students scattered in. After getting over this initial shock, she thought "*Oh Lord. What have I got myself into?*" Marie knew she had to readjust how she presented her lessons – not water down but to make it more relevant to her students to meet their needs. No longer could she just lecture and demonstrate; but, she also needed to recognize and educate her students using best practices that were more successful for them (no more "middle of the road" teaching strategies expected of her in the

predominately white or mixed classes). To Marie, this was a very freeing but terrifying adventure – change can be scary.

Relationships were important in the education of her Black students. The “village” (parents, students, teachers, community) is crucial in many instances for the success of it students. For Marie, who had difficulty forming relationships, relationships did not become as important as they did in her Black classroom...as she soon found out in a conversation with one of her students. During a lecture, one of her students began talking to other classmates and the other children laughed. The discussion was about something totally off topic. As Marie addressed the student, he said “*Come on Ms. you know how we do.*” Marie responded, “*No, I don’t. I’m from the country. Explain it to me - seriously!*” The student after looking at her to see if she was serious, explained what they were saying in a way that made sense to her without any hesitation and so that she could better understand his world.

This conversation opened Marie’s eyes to two things: one – she had a better understanding of this particular student and two – she really did not understand their definition of living Black in an urban environment. Her upbringing was totally different from theirs; but, they could probably survive in an urban environment better than she could: they knew which agencies to go to for aid she didn’t; they knew how to ride the bus to get around town she didn’t; they knew where shelters were if needed she didn’t; they knew where and how to get free food if needed she didn’t; the list went on. She also realized that her students knew more than most teachers gave them credit for knowing and had dreams and aspirations that few asked them about or cared about. Her reflection did not stop there...she also realized that her ignorance could do more harm than good to

her students. Her students also had an awakening when they realized that a Black teacher did not mean immediate understanding of them and their environment. As the year progressed, this student became one of Marie's best students and was always telling her, "*You know we cool.*" She knows this is good in his language.

Marie made an effort to get to know the students who passed through her door and who she passed in the halls on a daily basis. She worked hard at becoming more available emotionally – something she had never been willing to do before. Many students responded and, although she felt uncomfortable in many instances, came to her for guidance and advice.

Interlude

Marie finally realized after years of teaching to the average student that she had lost touch with getting to know her students. She felt ill-equipped to deal with personal issues involving her students. After moving to a smaller learning environment and experiencing the importance of knowing her students beyond the classroom, Marie realized that she needed to look at her issues and how they affected the classroom environment. This self-analysis forced her to really look at herself and ask the hard questions: was what she doing causing more harm than good? Was she really making a difference in the lives of her students? Did she care? These questions go to the heart of what I consider to be curriculum studies – questioning what we as educators do on a daily basis.

As she looked back and reminisced about her teaching encounters, Marie honestly believed her attitude had probably harmed many of her students (Black and white) and her Black students would, some of them, remember more of the bad than the good she

tried to do because she was unbending and cold at times (more often than not). She realized that she did care but was unable to convey that apparently to many students and peers. If she who really cared but had high standards could cause so much harm, what about the many teachers (of all nationalities and ethnicities) who did not care beyond getting a paycheck? When the school was abruptly closed and her job came to an end, Marie is angry and ready to leave. She gets her wishes when she receives a transfer over the summer.

NOVELLA 10

GOING TO MARKET – TEACHER AS STUDENT

Prelude

The world of academia, by all presuppositions, is designed to educate the masses on important topics, ideas, and issues. Many colleges decry their belief in diversity and giving voice to the oppressed. The reality for Black students can be the exact opposite of what the ideas are – they do not always practice what they preach. The conservatives masquerading as rebels continue to perpetuate the same system of oppression that has been in place in society for centuries because our forward thinking academics are in essence continuing to perpetrate that which they disparage – oppression, silencing and marginalization of the other (people of color, women, etc.).

The doctoral program at Georgia Southern was daunting for Marie. She had never had to have fifteen to twenty books for a class before and that took some getting used to. She enjoyed most of the classes she took...they made her view life a little more analytically and objectively. It was hard to watch the news or watch television without looking at the scenes to see the oppression and marginalization in imagery and media.

Each class was a new eye-opening experience for her with such topics as: critical race theory in education, blood economies, drugs, autobiography, etc. Marie dived into these classes with enthusiasm of the newly devoted.

She had chosen Georgia Southern University as the fit for her doctoral studies because she wanted the small classes conducted in the face-to-face meetings with professors. She did not want to do the Cambridge program (over the summer with follow-up during the year), Nova (periodic consortiums or meetings), or Capella (online everything). She had talked to peers from all these popular programs and was not impressed or satisfied that they would work for her. She wanted to earn her degree after learning something plus Georgia Southern offered degrees that would allow her to remain in the classroom rather than being pushed into leadership – which she had no desire to do.

Once Marie got over the notion that she was going to be tested over information from a textbook and that the professors wanted her to be more well-read in the different areas and on different topics, it became easier to navigate through the program. Her very first professor (who described himself as damn Yankee transplanted in the South), opened her mind to the possibility of making inroads into righting some of the wrongs of society by becoming an activist for education of all children. She struggled, however, with a way to accomplish this – being a Black female and all.

Deadly Weed: Why Don't You Just Quit?

The world of Doctoral Studies was totally alien to Marie. Her first experiences with getting an advisor should have been a clue as to how her time spent in the program was going to be...difficult. She was assigned a professor as advisor. When she contacted him about her schedule and what classes she should take, he informed her that he was not

her advisor and gave the contact information of who was. Marie contacted this new professor several times with not one response. Eventually, Marie got a response...she was not her advisor and Marie should call the secretary to see who was. Well, Marie called the secretary and was informed that the first guy was indeed her advisor. It seemed she was not wanted by either one of them; but, as long as she could register for classes because a sympathetic department head who authorized her to take classes, she felt it was okay not to have one. This mindset would come back to haunt her later. These same two professors would almost lead to her downfall.

Marie was accustomed to getting feedback on several assignments and then getting a final semester grade...the one paper due as a grade was daunting and frightening especially if one was unsure as to what the professor wants as a final product. Every class was on a different subject which she found fascinating until she took the fateful philosophy class. Rarely did she understand any of the books her professor had them read or what her professor was talking about during class meetings. She would often read and reread her text in hopes of clarity which never came. When she wrote her one paper, she felt she had finally gotten it right until she got the grade...C! How did she get a C? What was wrong with her paper? Was she that far off the mark? Upon contacting her professor to get her paper back, she was asked why she didn't put in a return envelop when she brought her paper by her house. When Marie explained that she had been working late every night during the week papers were due and had to bring the paper by her house in order for it not to be late...ergo was not able to get to the post office or get the postage on the return envelope; her professor offered to send it back to her. When Marie got the document back, the handwritten notes were so indecipherable

that she could not read them – the feedback was worthless. Marie’s next class with a different professor let her quickly know that she did not learn anything worth knowing about philosophy in that class...they had not studied any of the prominent philosophers of education and those obscure philosophers that they did study mattered only to a minor degree to anyone other than that one professor and others in her particular area of study.

One of the darkest days in Marie’s life came a year later when another professor (who was also the advisor originally assigned to her and who never advised her on anything while trying to pawn her off on another professor) refused to look at her one paper that was her grade. He ended class a week before class was supposed end and would not receive any more papers...after he has sent an e-mail reminding students to get their papers to him. *Marie did not read the e-mail incorrectly...he was not accepting it. She had an F in the class.* She reread the message and sent another asking what were her options. His response was . . . retake the class. Her option (which she found out later during the process to be readmitted into the graduate program and after it was too late) was to appeal the grade through an appeals process: contact the professor and after getting the formal denial, appeal through the board presiding over such matters. Instead, she was now required to appeal being kicked out of graduate school all together.

Well this was only the beginning of a tough road...Marie’s average had fallen below the required 3.5 GPA (an F and C will do that to your GPA) and had been there in this status for more than a year. She was one of those students who had fallen through the cracks and gone unnoticed for over a year until circumstances brought her to the forefront and everyone’s attention. She was placed on academic probation and excluded from all classes until she completed the process of receiving a waiver. The process was not

short...she had to sit out a semester of school to get through the process and wait for the board's decision. This process required three recommendations from her professors, an application, and favorable board action. The worst part was that during the process to remain in school, this same professor was on the board to determine if she would be readmitted to the doctoral program...talk about getting royally shafted!

Marie called the one person she felt who could help her – the dean. Once she explained the situation to the dean...she was asked, “*Why don't you just quit?*” To say she was outraged would be putting it mildly...she was really pissed! How could someone, you should be able to turn to for advice or guidance, just tell a student to quit! Marie's son was over at the house during this conversation. He pleaded with her to finish – he said “*Mom, don't quit. You have worked too hard...I can't wait 'til you finish and I would be proud to call you Dr. Mom.*” She then called one professor who she felt would give her sound advice. This professor, after hearing the story, told Marie she must not quit...she had to fight to finish, she was a great writer, and curriculum studies would benefit from her completing the program. She also asked if she had an advisor and offered her services if needed. Marie felt she had been given herself back...she had never been a quitter; but, before that conversation, she really felt like quitting. Now, she was gonna' fight for her right to finish what she started. This was gonna' mean additional time (at least a year or more) taking classes (at least seven with A's) to raise her GPA to an acceptable level and retaking the class she failed.

This situation lead Marie to believe that the reason why many Black students do not complete graduate programs could be the same as she experiences...lack of caring for Black students as people while espousing adherence to diversity issues and expanding the

field to make room for the voice of others. When forward thinking colleges of education have white deans, advisors, and professors who blatantly let students of color know they do not care about them as people, the likelihood that more Black or other minorities are going to enter and complete the program diminishes. The issue may not have been racial to the perpetrators; but, it sure seemed like it to Marie. She also remembered in several of her classes when asked who did not have an advisor, it was often the students of color who did not have one – most of her classmates who were white had advisors before the end of the first year while students of color in their second or third year were still searching – silently knowing why but not voicing their feelings or issues thus sowing the seeds of silence.

Farmer v. Agriculturalist: Meet the Experts

Having professors who have the visions of open-mindedness, Marie was able to move beyond the classroom in curriculum studies. She traveled with and without her peers to conferences. She met some of the most prolific writers on education issues. Marie was in awe as she ventured from conference to conference and shook hands with authors she had studied and written about. What she found was that they were normal people with ideas and convictions they were willing to put into print for all to see much as her professors were. She sometimes felt overwhelmed when they discussed issues and topics and could recall authors to support and argue their viewpoints on myriad events. Marie was wishing for the day when she could remember who wrote what without having to look it up. She did a lot of reading; but, she had a hard time recalling what book or author she read. This was a skill she truly envied.

Marie even sat on a few discussion panels with her professors. She talked about her research as a student. Although she did not consider why it was important to discuss her research, she did the panels and talked about it. Her awakening to the importance came to her after a meeting with her dissertation committee when a committee member warned her, *“You need to defend more strongly why you are doing this type of research. If we were not your committee, you would probably not be allowed to do it this way.”* She was to appear in an upcoming conference and now she had new meaning attached to why her methodology was important and why she needed to talk about it – she was already advocating for change in curriculum studies and had not even been fully aware of it.

Interlude

Marginalization and oppression can take on many forms. For Marie, this was apparent in the inherent lack of concern or caring by the same academy that espoused diversity, social justice, and giving voice to the oppressed. To say they have a system riddled with hypocrites would be an understatement. The fact that the system is racially unbalanced and there is systematic disregard for students of color totally negates the image they want to present to the world of leading the charge for change – they haven’t changed much because they are stuck in their rut of privilege and oppression. Marie is now aware that she is an active advocate for change and it happened when she was not looking.

in sowing the seeds of silence

in sowing the seeds of silence

what do you think shall i reap?

not death, not really that scary

i do not think that way
a tree meditates
leaves still and flowers of wisdom bloom
roots grow and penetrate
gathering the humus of contentment
accumulating what we all look for
happiness.

- Ric S. Bastasa

Silence in one way of keeping the marginalized oppressed. The fact that academia is heavily racialized does not occur to the unracialized (dominant group) only the oppressed. The feelings of isolation for Marie was almost overwhelming in that she did not have a clear idea of who she needed to talk to or how to go about starting the conversation. Who do you look to for social justice when the advocates for social justice are the ones oppressing you? Marie was now aware that she had to follow the advice of one of her professors – push to give voice to the oppressed. Because to remain silent on issues she knew were wrong would further perpetuate instead of resisting and breaking the oppression she and others experienced.

CHAPTER FIVE

REAPING IS HARDER THAN SOWING: REFLECTIONS ON INQUIRY

Harvesting a crop is always harder than sowing it. Timing, weather, diligence, and luck all play a role in whether the harvest is good or bad. If weeds are not removed in a timely manner, they can choke or kill thriving plants; if weather conditions are not favorable to plant growth or crop tending, the harvest may be small or non-existent; and if the farmer is not diligent in his duties, he/she may not know it is time to reap the harvest. Farming, as well as education, is an often thankless career that requires dedication and passion. Although there is a “method to the madness,” there is not a standard one rule fits all methodology. Each year, each crop, each student requires something different to thrive. I believe education should not be static or just teaching students to take a standardized test...we should be teaching children to be critical thinkers not to memorize and cheat their way through school and life. “When people can think critically, they can change things” (Foster, 1997, p. 52). Teaching should, but does not always, require introspection and critical thinking of its teachers. Several issues took shape in the stories but the overarching issue was: the inter-sectionality of race, gender, and sexual oppression. Although my first instinct was to write autobiographically, I decided that fiction served as a better methodology to present my study.

Ploughing New Ground: Using Fiction in Research

Using fiction as a methodology is not easily done. “The interweaving of fact and fiction requires writing skill and experience” (Bell, 1992, xiii) to create creative but logical stories. “Efforts to preserve white ideology include silencing the voices and stories of African Americans despite evidence of their authenticity” (St. Jean, Y. and

Feagin, J. R., 1998, p.14). By using the main character, Marie, I was able to present my auto/biography of family, friends, and acquaintances in the fictionalized form needed to give “meaning...only story can bring to redeem otherwise futile, flattened, or brutalized lives” (Ranier, 1997, p. 32). When one views the early years of her life through the critical lens, one sees Marie experiences as the oppressive hierarchies that are abusive in nature. Her role in the family was well defined and limiting. She was relegated to “woman’s work” in helping to take care of the younger children, cooking, and cleaning. The lines between what women and men were expected to do were well defined. There was no complaining. Although not directly addressed with any specific novella, the way the women interacted would be indicative of the BFT tenet – they talked to each other and the children (normally through lesson to teach them something) and the children witnessed their daily struggle and ways of dealing with life. Their voice can be clearly seen as being effectively silenced by how they responded to different situations such as the mother beating the child for being raped instead of dealing with the male rapist; and, the child being further silenced by not having any adult to confide the abuse to.

The canon gatekeepers or those pure traditional theorists have, for too long, suppressed the voice of the other by continuing to deny their work as being valid research. “Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate . . . is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested” (Morrison, 1988). Viewing my work critically shows CRT tenets in my fiction: the narratives (my particular narrative in fictional form) provide for a composite history of this particular Black girl who resisted the racism and sexism of her race and place to overcome oppression in society as a whole, her community, and her family. It is in everyone’s (schools, society,

teachers, parents, etc.) best interest to not only properly educate all students no matter their background story; but, to also understand how our preconceived notions, ideas, and background can either aid or hinder our success. When viewed as a collection, the novellas show a person determined to survive an abusive culture and life without many of the resources available today. How to deal with a child with “baggage” is no longer just a theoretical thing to be argued or talked about. The teacher in the classroom is living the experience on a daily basis. No longer can we just stay out of the lives of our students. We must open our minds to the possibilities that their experiences and our experiences spill over into the classrooms on a daily basis. Curriculum theory must be willing to open the door for this less-used discourse and dialogue of the value of teachers’ lived-experiences even when fiction is used as the vehicle to deliver the message.

The freedom to speak the unspeakable (Morrison, 1998) through fiction is freeing in that it allows me to further resist oppression found in academia and return to my “Blackness” rather than denying my heritage and fleeing to mainstream methodological methods (Morrison, 1988). Just as dominant society has defined for so long what it means to be Black (mostly negative and untrue stereotypes) and denied us [Blacks] to join the discourse (Townes, 2006) it also purports to define what it is to be allowed in the canon as valid research. I contend that my life, my story, and the stories of close relations and friends are all valid and have a place in academic study especially in the study of Black teachers and students from the South – I am a part of all of that so, I think, my/our experience should give credence to validity by providing the connectivity of experiences and providing a direct link between the idea of resisting oppression with the lived

experience of resisting oppression as Marie has done on several occasions. It seems she spent a great deal of her life fighting one or another form of oppression.

If I am to be an advocate for social justice and a party to a true academic arena that seeks to give voice to the oppressed and marginalized, I should not have to completely shed my culture and heritage (storytelling) and put on the cloak of dominance to be accepted – I, and others, should have the work speak for itself by being able to utilize my cultural strengths within the confines of proper research. I should not be forced to “whitewash” my study for it to be accepted. My stories tell the counter stories and counter narratives to the dominant version of what it is to be a Black girl raised in the South. How else can my culture continue to make progress toward center if not by breaking through the barriers in place to maintain the illusion of superiority and exclusivity?

Our colleges and universities must also practice what they preach in that they need to do more than pay lip service to diversity and cultural education. Under the guise of increasing awareness of other cultures, many academic halls are still shrouded in the conservative cloak of oppression. Many of the academics who charge young students to push against the oppression and marginalization of the other are many times themselves unable to break through the bureaucracy and oppression of the tenure process (publish or perish) or the “canon” fodder of gate keeping the research products of the marginalized. They are themselves locked into an oppressive academic system that continues to deny the advancement of the “others” seeking higher degrees. The academics that guard the canons of academic research, when challenged with new methodological practices such as fiction, which gives voice to the oppressed and silenced, will sometimes push back

with such viciousness and finality that the silencing of new ideas can often be swift and deadly until such time as it garners enough support to sustain the onslaught. Because fiction is often viewed in what is deemed as legitimate research as non-academic, many researchers shy away from using it in order to be accepted as legitimate researchers.

I dare to use fiction because it allows me total freedom to explore the lives of the oppressed and to tell the counter-story in a way that I feel will be a credit to my family, my peers (of all races), and my culture. Those closest to me and about whom I write are protected more so with this methodology than an autobiography, case study, or any other method could provide. “Cultures, whether silenced or monologicistic, whether repressed or repressing, seek meaning in the language and images available to them” (Morrison, 1998). Since storytelling is part of my heritage and I have lost so much of it that through acculturation into this dominate society, I am through this process trying to develop more of this part of my heritage to reclaim some of what makes me Black. “Silences are ... broken, lost things have been found” (Morrison, 1998) and my story (and the stories of many women in this world) is told. Fiction gives more life to the facts and makes my characters come to life a little more so that the “unspeakable things unspoken” (Morrison, 1998) can be uttered or spoken. I have taken many instances and events of childhood, talks, and commiserations and made them into a comprehensive tale that closely parallels our lives in the South. Our stories are not limited by geography or time – many of them have been lived in years past and all across the world.

Pulling the Weeds by the Roots: Breaking the Silence

“There is no more compelling societal problem in need of redress than [B]lack women’s experience of male violence” (West, 1999, p. 1) especially violence by Black

males. Rather than accepting suffering and violence in the resilient manner of our ancestors, many women of color are today breaking through the barriers that have held them in oppression for decades and centuries. “By speaking out, formerly victimized individuals not only reclaim their humanity, they simultaneously empower themselves by giving new meaning to their own particular experience” (Collins, 1998, p. 48). They are being empowered to break through the bonds that have held them silent for too long. The “long tradition of silence about . . . violence against women is now increasingly being broken by a range of sources including self-help books, mass media talk shows, and academic studies” (West, 1999, pp. 1-2). When a high-profile pastor from Atlanta was victimized publically by her husband and the event was televised, it opened many eyes to the plight of all Black females. Although the victim was a theologian, she was not immune to the violence.

For years some Black communities and Black churches have played a role in keeping oppression alive through their teachings of divine suffering and their chauvinistic notions (all notions associated with the colonialist oppression present in society) of a woman’s place: mother, wife, sister, follower, or other. “Women, who are at the center of [B]lack families, play significant roles as wives and as mothers in the socialization of younger generations” (St. Jean, Y., & Feagin, J. R., 1998, p. 18). One positive stereotype (and there are not many) is that Black mothers as nurturers. When society tarnishes this image, it devalues and hurts the entire community. Rather than challenging this in society, the community focus on the Black man can sometimes be so intense that it can reduce women and their issues to invisibility and marginalization.

There is no easy way to “tip toe” into change. Silence must be broken and changes within the community must take place. The instinct to protect the race and community at all cost must be checked. We (community members) must be willing to sometimes “air the dirty laundry” and to look into the mirror and truthfully face the image that stares back at us. If it is tarnished, then we need to clean it up – not cover the mirror in hopes that it will go away.

Strange Fruits: Critically Thinking Teachers

One of the major accountability criticisms is the fact that teachers do not teach students to work collaboratively or to think critically. It is difficult to teach someone something you yourself are not very familiar with. Teachers (the majority of which are female) are not encouraged to be critical thinkers (a byproduct of the dominant male society). The curriculum is often spelled out and scripted to ensure the standards, which are closely aligned with the standardized tests, are covered. There is little time or room for deviation or critical thought – it is certainly not encouraged. When students fail to measure up to the bar on the tests, the new decree becomes *“Okay continue to follow your script; but, you need to utilize technology and outside resources to ensure students are getting more out of the lessons. Look at some of the resources we have available in this package deal. No need to re-create the wheel. Just familiarize yourself with the product(s) (or we will send a trainer from the company at a nominal cost to ensure your people are trained) for use in your classroom.”* Thus, the commodification of education and standardized testing – the packages include the curriculum, the resources, and the tests all bundled up from one major company. But, that is another story for another time because I am not presently addressing the commodification of education at this time.

Many see teachers as not critical thinkers; but, the rhetoric in many workshops that I have attended demand that teacher teach student to work collaboratively and to become critical thinkers because this is what industry is looking for in its workforce. Teachers are touted as the professionals to ensure the needs of industry are met within the classroom. This push to meet industry expectations is supposed to also prepare students to be ready for academia. Education, however, is not only racist but it is also sexist in that the teachers (the majority of which are women) are not afforded the respect of other professions. We find through legal discourse or critical legal studies that many of the laws dealing with education are inherently enacted to benefit the oppressors more so than the oppressed. If the dominant society's interest do not converge with the needs of the oppressed, there will be little to no change in their plight.

As a critical social theory, BFT is one way of to seek justice and equality in the fight to end sexist oppression and to empower all teachers (of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities) to assert their expertise through critical analysis of their personal experiences and to put action to theory. This means educators must keep pushing to speak for themselves from a personal standpoint; and, within the confines of their environment (past personal history and situational dealings with students) to set an agenda for change. The power to effect change should not be dictated down by business and industry but should be from the bottom up. Education should not just be a commodity with just a bottom line – students are not all alike. Each and everyone is different; and, education must meet their needs. In a time when accountability is paramount to having a job, I contend, many teachers should become better critical thinkers to be able to better create critical thinkers who can think through a question on a standardized test.

As Marie entered her mid-career (about year thirteen or fourteen), she was able, through the doctoral program at Georgia Southern University (GSU), to analyze how her past was affecting her teaching and dealings with students. It did not occur to her that she might have been contributing to the issues inherent in education until forced to through a program of study. Many of my fellow teachers do not opt to go to a progressive and forward program that challenges them to think like GSU; they choose instead to do online universities with ways of doing things that often will not force them to become critical thinkers – just critical doers. I have listened to their descriptions of what their program entails and cringed at times at how impersonal and difficult traversing their studies seemed.

My standard response is usually to tell them that I chose GSU so that I could understand and learn something before I was done with my studies instead of going through an entire program and not get anything out of it but a raise. Because I was raised to believe that knowledge opened doors to opportunities, I wanted to KNOW something more when I was done – I had met and had conversations with too many advanced degreed people who did not know much about education and I did not want to be one of those. As forward thinking as GSU and other academic institutions are, they can also be oppressive in dealing with students and teachers in public education.

Teachers in the classroom and theorist at the collegiate level sometimes share a mutual mistrust or misunderstanding of each other. Classroom teachers will many times view theorists as people with ideas in the clouds and who do not have a clue as to what happens in a public school classroom. In many of these instances they would be right – not many theorist teach in the public high, middle, or elementary schools. “Critical

theorists espouse praxis, a complex integration of political action with intellectual inquiry, but tend to be heavy on the latter and light on the former. Where are the voices of classroom teachers struggling with these questions (Ayers, 1992, p. 260)?” In the trenches, where reality (which is more action than inquiry) is taking place. “Academics rarely see them and rarely hear them – they are silent shadows in our consciousness” (Ayers, 1992, p. 261). This condescending attitude of superiority of knowledge and experiences silences the voices of teachers and goes against the rhetoric of openness of the field to alternative ways of giving voice to the other.

Planting for a Harvest: Southern Black Women, Family, and Religion

In some African tribes, the women were the rulers as in the Amazon nations; so, being strong leaders are our heritage. One misperception of being a Black woman in the South is that they should be able to weather any storm and being able to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. What does this rhetoric mean? It simply means Black women in her family were not pampered. They are strong leaders many times in single-parent household. Many have a hard life with circumstances constantly against them. There seems to be an invisible wall that they identify with but have been unable to get over or around. There are three strikes against them – being Black, being female, and living in the South.

Historically, Black women have been the strong backbone of the family unit – a holdover from slave culture. Separating families was a way to control the slave population. This often left Black women responsible for the household without a husband. Black women were not put on a pedestal or coddled like Southern delicate hothouse flowers (as many Southern white women were considered). These women

worked alongside the men in the family and girls were expected to do their fair share of the chores. There was field work for everyone (men, women, and children), “women’s work,” and “men’s work.” The women worked the fields, cooked, cleaned, and did all things involved in maintaining the household. The men of the family worked the fields, worked with the livestock and made repairs around the house. Women worked longer into the day than the men because when the day was done, the men relaxed while waiting for their supper, the boys often played in the yard while the girls had house work to contend with.

Being Southern, for me, is not just an identity with place; it also means a way of interacting and behaving. Southerners can immediately discern if someone is not of the South just by looking at them and how they act or just by how the conversation progresses. Before any meaningful conversation takes place, Southerners must observe the graces – greeting (mornin’, afternoon, hey how ya doin’?), ask how they (or family if you are on familiar and friendly terms) are doing, and then participate in idle chat. Once the proper social graces are observed, meaningful conversation can take place. To rush straight into a conversation without observing these graces is considered northern, rude, and disrespectful. These types of “life lessons” were taught long before children begin school especially for Blacks who must be able to navigate through both societies (Black and white) for survival. Life lessons are critical for survival in all cultures; but, for Blacks in certain geographies it can be the difference between life and death in many situations in the South. This reality cannot be overlooked or trivialized. Blacks in the South had to be aware of where they are at all times as far as geography and situational. Being in the

wrong place and in the wrong circumstances have resulted in many young Blacks either suffering through situations over which they have no control, the penal system, or death.

Living in a society that puts everyone on a racial or class system is often co-opted by the oppressed without notice. Not knowing anything different than what one is taught can often blind them to the reality of other options. How does one break the chains of oppression? The answer is thought to be education and experience; but, what if the education and experiences are inherently oppressive? What then? Religion maybe?

Marie's South is considered the "Bible Belt" of the nation – highly virtuous with moral values based on strict Biblical teachings. There are hundreds of thousands of churches in the South and Southerners are famous for their strict adherence to the Holy book (hence the nickname "Bible Belt") and hospitality to others. From reading the novellas dealing with the religious aspects of my character, one realizes that religion was not fixed or static – they worshiped when they felt like it and the adults who did appear religious were not living their religion daily. They committed atrocities that left my main character confused and angry. Her mother, who was not particularly religious, allowed her the choice of choosing to worship or not.

Parents have a great impact on children whether they know it or not. In the novellas, Marie felt confused and uncertain of her mother's love in many instances. She was not close to her; but, was close to both her grandmothers. The behaviors practiced in her family really confused her in ways that children cannot often understand. Children often watch and listen to the adults around them. They learn more from that than what their parents try to teach them. These untaught lessons can form longer lasting effects than the life lessons parents intend to teach.

Love of family (especially our children) is central to many relationships. This does not mean that one likes every one of their family members because “you can’t choose your relatives” (favorite Southern saying) – it simply means that when it comes down to it “blood is thicker than water” and family sticks together in most situations just because they are related. Family members can cross lines that no other would dare. They can do things no outsider would dare consider. I posit Black mothers love their children as all other races of women can and do. They love and protect them as most mothers are apt to do; but, they must also give the tough love (and realistic directions about racism and society) their offspring need to survive in the bitterly cold world that does not always like them because of the color of their skin.

Marie realizes her family traditions, her relationships with the men and women in her life, and the church to better understand how these affected her makeup and educational experiences. In her quest for self understanding, Marie learns that the seeds planted early in her life had sprouted and grown to create the woman she became. Some of those seeds had taken root long before she was old enough to know better; others did not stick with her; and still others stayed for a little while but were later discarded. The older she got, the more she really understood the hard dead-end life she had lived. Her experiences at home helped her to grow and navigate through the curriculum of the formal educational system. There was nothing in the public school system that was harsher than what she lived at home on a daily basis. Through the relationships and family experiences, Marie became a truly educated Black woman of the South with some trappings of tradition, religion, and progressive rather than regressive thinking. Her story

is one of courage, determination, and survival – one that can be heard across many ethnic, cultural, and geographies (womanism at its best).

Marie survived physical abuse as a young child, sexual molestation as a young woman, and her loss of faith to become a cracked, but whole soul. She silently carried her scars from her past and went about surviving from day to day. The weeds sprang up from cycle to cycle. She plucked what she could and continued to press forward. Self-pity and depression were often pushed to the background of her life...she did not have the time to indulge in either self-indulgent pastime. Much of what she learned as a child created the adult she later became (positive and negative) – the work ethic, the pride in doing a job well, relying on herself rather than others, distrust of what people told her (actions speak louder than words), and knowing that education, although inherently racist, could be accomplished through hard work and determination.

Race, culture, class, and sex all play a role in defining who we are as people. “I had lots of experiences which I now value, because they taught me something about myself, forced me to re-examine some of the values I learned in my family” (Foster, 1997, p. 13) and throughout my life experiences. Teachers have a history and a life that often plays a larger role in the classroom than one may think. I like to think that I am impartial and unbiased at all times; but, I know that is not true. The most that I can hope for is to be as fair as humanly possible. My awareness of my multi-consciousness and self-reflection allows me to first recognize my biases; thereby, I can attempt to neutralize those as much as possible. The more aware I am the more I will be able to work on meeting the needs of all of my students.

By using the tenet of BFT and womanism, I am better able to recognize, understand, and give voice to the oppression of my life. I see how our life experiences are not ours alone – many women suffer the same or similar atrocities – and how these experiences need to be expressed in order for change within my small community and society to occur. Although I am by nature a private person, if my story will help at least one woman to break the bonds that hold her and deter her from moving forward through life (or make the journey a little easier), it would be worth sharing them with the world.

Picking the Crops: Self-Analysis and Teaching

Garnering as much of the positive values, character traits, and experiences from the past have enabled me to be more sympathetic rather than angry with the plight of others. Two of my most difficult and most personally fulfilling years of teaching were the last couple of years. I had very few resources the first year which lead to me covering the standards by varied and creative teaching methods – something I had not done since my first years of teaching when I tried new ways and strategies with my students' needs in mind. The enthusiasm I had my first two years as a teacher had dissipated over the years. My drive to know each student by pulling their permanent records and codifying demographic information about each group was non-existent. This practice was resisted by the counselors and I did not push to know personal information about my students. I got to the point that I figured most students were the nearly the same – white students often resented Black teachers, Black students resented white teachers, both groups would more often than not do what the Black teacher told them, both groups respected the opinion of the white teacher more. These color-coded opinions are probably not accurate – they were my thought process of the time.

I was teaching in color for many years until I was hired for the new school and had enrollments of ninety-eight to one hundred percent Black classes – now I had to shift my focus (because they were all Black) to what they needed to be successful. “A lot of people think that just because you are the same skin color as someone else you will automatically be able to relate to them, but what they overlook ...[is] different experiences” (Foster, 1997, p. 21). This was made clear to me as I stood that first day before a class of urban Black students for the first time.

I had no idea of the challenges to my teaching style until that very moment – it was truly a rude awakening to my inadequacies. I knew my content and had my way of teaching it without worrying about specific needs of any ethnicity, socio-economic status, or race of student. I had gotten so far away from what was important for them (students) to be successful – I was standards driven. This was supposed to be my focus right? How had I gotten there? I really do not have a definite answer for that question. My only response is that somehow over the years I became desensitized and removed from my students to the point that I probably did more harm than good. That does not mean I was a bad teacher – I know that I taught them what curriculum I needed to cover; but, I now wonder what other lessons I unknowingly taught them.

Revisiting my ghosts of the past has helped me to, I hope, be a better teacher. It has allowed me to look at the past with a critical eye on the experiences that have shaped me. Education was to be my key to success and to break the chains of my childhood. Education had and continues to have many faces for me – how to survive at home; how to survive at school; how to maintain my façade of success in roles as daughter, as Black,

as woman, as mother, as teacher; how to work hard for what I wanted; and how to be self-sufficient.

When “hell is a place called home,” (Davis, Jones, Walters, Bridges, & Hilton, 2006, Track 13) school can be either a haven or double hell – it depends on what is going on in the school. When schools were desegregated, Black students lost some of the community continuity, Black pride, self-esteem, and cultural unity taught in school. Instead of being praised for being intelligent leaders, many were placed in special education classes and white teacher did not expect them to be intelligent enough to compete with white students and let them know this in no uncertain terms. They were relegated to be second class citizen and many and have fulfilled this role without fail (Foster, 1997). Standing in the front of a room full of Black students shook me to my core and I was terrified for the first time in my teaching career (more than the first day I ever taught – which was pretty scary).

I was so acculturated to the colonialist mindset of education that I mentally grouped students by color. My racist attitude was a part of me that I now see and can recognize as a fault that needs checking and addressing. A little of this attitude is shown in how Marie deals with her two white students who did not fit her pre-judgments (prejudices). She thought about her preconceived notions for a short time; but, she did not dwell on them for a long period of time – she watched them, she understood them better, but she did not fully understand herself. I had to really analyze, rethink, and make some changes to be successful with this group of Black students – it was in their best interest and mine for me to do this successfully. Many students (male and female) are opting out of the educational system because of their experiences in them and their dissatisfaction

with what they receive from teachers and the system in general. Many parents are allowing them to because their experiences are not much better.

Fertile or Unfertile Soil? Students and Education

The United States has a very high dropout rate especially the Black students. In many communities, these students do not see education as a means to escape or progression – they see it as a waste of time and a hassle not worth fighting. Over the years, we have allowed our priorities and focus to turn to other things to the point that education is not as highly valued as it was forty or fifty years ago. “Too many Black students have learned to play the game, to play on a teacher’s sympathy in order to get away with doing nothing. Teachers have to demand from Black urban students the same as they would...from privileged white students” (Foster, 1997, p. 47). If they cannot play on the sympathy of the teacher, many students will then become disruptive and achieve the same result. They do not value education for the sake of breaking any bonds of oppression. Our children are running away from rather than running to education.

“Black adults are partly to blame for the plight of Black children...Our children got to the Promised Land and we stayed on our side of the wall...we didn’t help them learn how to live in that situation...We just let them walk into the lion’s jaw without supporting them” (Foster, 1997, p. 10).

I agree with Foster in that some parents do not properly equip their children to succeed in oppressive school environments; but, I also posit, many parents, if they were aware of this failing, would do more to ensure their children are prepared. Parents have been so indoctrinated with reports and statistics that makes them feel society is really doing what is best for their children when it comes to education. Many have allowed white society to

take over the education of their children without any oversight or resistance. Other bad systemic offenses have been allowed to fester and grow within the community – things that are kept quiet and allowed to continue such as neglect and abuse. This is not systemic of the Black community alone – it is a societal problem for all races, classes, religions, and genders. Raising children has become now become a national problem instead of a family issue. Politicians seem to think schools and parents are not doing it right and have made strides to mandate and legislate how to teach and raise children.

Mothers, fathers, and sometimes families continue to force their children to become adults at a young age. In many instances the parents abdicate authority to these children and force them to take on adult responsibilities such as working to pay bills instead of focusing on education and/or raising younger siblings instead of being children. Then, these same parents throw their hands in the air and say, *“I just don’t know what to do with him or her. He or she just won’t listen to me.”* As a child responsible for raising my younger siblings to a great degree, I can say from experience, it is difficult to return to that subservient child role when you have been the one making decisions and have been in charge. I recognized the different hierarchies in place in my life and how oppressive they were. My main goal in life was to escape my family, my life, and my oppression as soon as I turned eighteen. What I failed to realize was that there were societal oppressions I still had to contend with – at the age of eighteen, I did not even know it was called oppression. I thought it was chauvinistic and wrong.

The roles become confusing and for children, like me, who are leaders of sorts, becoming a follower (even to parents) is not a role we accept without question. If abuse is also involved, then the respect for authority of any adults may be continually questioned

and challenged. Many children of abuse act out in class – they may not have any other outlet available to them and everything festers to the point of bad behavior in class. If you look into their eyes, you may see sadness. I often see a kindred hurt soul in some of my students. The very people responsible for my protection were the very predators I needed to be protected from. To me, they were liars of the worst kind; so, trusting anyone is very difficult. My grandmother used to tell us, *“If you lie, you will cheat. If you cheat, you will steal.”* I always took this (unforgiveable sin) to mean that something as small as a lie can lead to bigger things that land you to jail or worse. I often watched the liars in my family spin one lie after another, cheat on each other with regularity, and, although I did not witness any theft, I think many of the perpetrators were capable of it. My dislike or hatred of lying was unyielding (I didn’t care why they lied) and caused me to sever many familial ties and relationships.

The Harvest: Lessons Learned

I have learned a lot about myself. I learned to be less judgmental and insensitive and more empathetic with the plight of others. Whereas before I never voiced but often thought, *“Who cares about your problems? We all have issues and I really don’t care about yours!”* I now really take the time to listen and to offer help to students and parents in need. It may not make a big difference; but, I hope this introspection and critical thoughts will help me to be a better well-rounded teacher/educator. *“Too many [B]lack teachers...are forgetting about our roots, about how we are connected”* (Foster, 1997, p. 52). We sometimes see ourselves as separate and, in some cases, above the child from the housing project or abusive home life. This student may someday be the next door neighbor, the person providing you a service, the person marrying into the family or the

person robbing your house. If we don't take an interest and active role in educating our future no one else will especially in a society that spends more on prisons than education.

By the time our Black children have begun school, they have already been taught lessons that can often determine whether or not they are successful in the classroom. Many parents fail to realize how what they say affects their children. The hurtful and sometimes denigrating remarks can often scar children into becoming self-fulfilling for their children. When children (and adults) are constantly denigrated with their shortcomings, they often ask, *“What's the point? You are gonna still label me as such and such and it won't make a difference.”* I am often confronted with how I perceive students who come through the door.

We (teachers) are often so consumed with being fashion police or dress code enforcers that it can sometimes encroach on what we were hired to do – teach. Students sometimes come to school with preconceived notions of what to expect – teachers who care about them and are competent to teach them what they need to know. This is not always the case. Teachers often expect students to arrive with some “home training,” some enthusiasm for education, and to be ready to learn. What we (teachers) often get is not that – one to two percent of our students are often jaded and hostile to a system that has treated them badly. The majority who are ready for class never really makes up for the minority who are not and who can be disruptions. How do we deal with this dynamic? There is no static map or plan to follow. Neither Black nor white teachers have the magic formula to teach Black students.

No matter what the ethnicity, an ineffective teacher is just that and is of no use to anyone; but, for a Black student, I posit, there is the double letdown when that teacher

happens to be Black. This further perpetuates the notion of worthlessness and low expectations for the teacher as well as the student. “Black kids need teachers who can understand and appreciate something about [B]lack communities” (Foster, 1997, p. 61). This does not mean knowing; just empathy and understanding of differences. I firmly believe that children (and students) live up to your expectations of them; therefore, when students do not feel a teacher is requiring or expecting much from them, that is what the teacher is going to get. If students are to learn anything from teachers, they must first be receptive to the information imparted to them. Many of them quickly learn which teachers have what they are not looking for. Just as teachers often have preconceived notions about students who walk in, students too have preconceived notions about the teachers who stand before them in class. “We [teachers] should be asking ourselves, ‘*Why do we teach the materials we teach?*’ and ‘*Should we be teaching it?*’” (Reynolds, 2003, p. 3).

When the Bible says “Behold, a sower went forth to sow” Matthew 13:3 (King James, Bold Text Edition) I’d like to think it also applies to what teachers are tasked to do. We are to plant the seeds of knowledge and education, water this with love and caring, and then watch it grow up into the lives of our students so that they can be productive people and citizens. Sowing those small bits overtly through classroom lessons and covertly through our interactions with students is the easy part. Reaping the harvest is the hardest because it is often difficult to tell if the seeds fall on fertile or fallow ground, whether the seeds took deep roots or not; and whether or not the seeds were choked out by weeds or not. No matter the case or circumstances of the seeds, we must

continue to sow good seed in good soil and hope for a bountiful harvest at the end of the growing season.

In doing this body of work, I have a new found appreciation for the job I am called to do. The stories were not difficult – they are a part of my and others close to me stories. Bringing them back to the theory and making the connections through theoretical lens was the most difficult part of the process. Finally realizing that I am walking the less traveled road by doing fiction was daunting and frightening; but, I think the message is important enough for me to take the challenge and put the work forth. One of the challenges of doing this fiction was finding research on the methodology itself. It was disheartening to find that my methodology was considered more literary than academic. During my program of study, I often struggled with writing in the formal academic format. Some days I sat for hours trying to fit what I wanted to say into the proper format with the proper wording; but, I always tried to infuse my narratives into the assignments. Several of my professors would tell me to remove myself from the work and to make it impersonal – this was like pulling teeth for me (very hurtful and difficult to do). It never sounded right to me. The chance to write in a style that I feel more comfortable with has given me the opportunity to *REALLY* write something that I hope gives the reader insight into the issues I tried to address. I did not let the fact that it is not widely accepted deter me because it fits my personality and does allow me the freedom to be me.

EPILOGUE

Marie survived her two years in her urban high school and loved the experience; however, she was set adrift when the district closed the school without warning, reduced the administrative staff (reduction in force was in essence just plain firing), and suddenly transferred her in the middle of the summer. She received a letter from the human resources department instructing her to call her new school to talk to the principal. Elation and shock warred with each other at the letter; but, she was happy for the opportunity for a fresh start because she was bitter at the treatment the faculty and staff suffered at the hands of the district superintendant and board of education.

Once her school closed, she had wanted to leave and made no bones about it – she told everyone that she was not staying and that as soon as she could find a position she would be transferring. She had requested the now closed school for two reasons: to get away from the demon she had come to work for and for the challenge of teaching law classes in a small learning community. She had done research on the small learning community her first year at Georgia Southern and was interested in actually working in one – the theories and studies pointed to them being one way to successfully educate children. This was her chance to see for herself.

She was not disappointed with the school or the environment; but, when push came to shove, she was pissed at the lack of parental outrage at the closing of the place. Those small few who voiced their opinions and concerns did not stir up the outrage of other parents across the district when their program or school was threatened. There was barely a ripple of complaint let alone outrage. After pouring her heart and soul into the place (usually for ten to twelve hours a day), Marie felt betrayal and disappointment

because she had to bear witness to what the district had always done to this Black urban school – whatever it pleased. For years, she had heard teachers and administrators talk about how the parents just allowed any decision of the district go unchallenged or barely challenged. She could not have conceived the depths of this truth had she not born witness to it – she was appalled, pissed, and ready to leave them to their folly.

The school she transferred to was, not at first glance, the grand palace she was accustomed to; but, it had atmosphere and character. Her first impression of the place was not good – the building looked old and her classroom was small, dark, and not very conducive to teaching like she was accustomed to – she thought she was in the dungeon of the castle. After meeting a few people, she had a change of heart. For her, people make the place and she quickly found her niche. The student body was not urban but middle- to upper-middle class with a majority white faculty. Witnessing how new teachers were often treated, Marie knew she would face the old *“let’s get the new teacher to do it or let’s give it to the new teacher”* mentality. She was not, however, as prepared for the students as she felt she was. On the first day of class, one of her Black students stood up and said after looking at her strangely, *“You know you are the first Black teacher I have had since I have been at this school.”*

“You kidding right? What grade are you in?”

“No ma’am. I am in the eleventh grade.”

“Wow. That is strange; but, I saw a lot of Black teachers in the faculty meeting. Maybe things will change.” Her friend had already told her that her nephew had graduated from the school and did not have a teacher of color in four years. She had been

in a school similar in student demographics to this prior to being in the small learning environment; but, she soon realized that all schools and student bodies are different.

Four of her six classes were loaded with special education students of all types of accommodations. The lead teacher she spoke with most often about issues tried to divert her with such platitudes as: *“Oh, Ms. Lucky you are so good with our students. Oh, Ms. Lucky you are so understanding with our students and their situations. Thank so much for your help.”* Marie understood very well and wanted to smack the shit out of her simpering ass every time she uttered them. They wanted to stack as many of their children as possible into one room (some with paraprofessional assistance and some without), were going to check on them as little as possible, and it was her problem now.

She had faced this issue before and the special education department also thought she was good with their students (and she was). The only problem she had was their belief that she would sit by and just let them get away with bullshit – not identifying their students, not providing the paperwork, and not responding to her concerns when an issue arose. It took her three years to teach the other special education department to follow the law...she wondered how long it would take to educate this one. Another concern that she saw and could not get past was what was written on some of the accommodations: one child had enough modifications to ensure she was not included in a regular class setting (but there she sat) another (who she felt should just get his ass beat instead of accommodations) had the modification to not disrespect him or he would go off. Marie thought that was the flimsiest excuse to identify a child as special education she had ever heard. Her first encounter with him was interesting.

Marie had six special education students in the class (four of whom should never be together in a class because of their behavior). One of the four masters of disruptions stood up in class the second day of class and asked Marie, *“You ain’t never seen no thugs like us ain’t it?”*

After chuckling because she had been in a school where she got along just fine with real thugs and killers, Marie responded, *“Sweetheart, I’m the queen of thugs and you don’t scare me. Now get back in your seat and get back to work.”* As she tried to continue teaching, her attitude modification was not following along. When Marie asked him to participate he said, *“I ain’t doing nothing and you can’t make me.”*

Marie, not to be outdone in smartass remarks, responded, *“You are right. It’s your choice and your grade”* as she continued with the lesson. A few minutes later, she looked over and he had begun to participate in the lesson as she lectured. Later, when the class was assigned projects, he was one of the first to complete all of his work. He and Marie agreed on one thing – she could not make him do anything; but, he learned something else – she was not going to waste time arguing the obvious or entertaining his attitude as she was sure others had probably done. The battle to control this four was sometimes trying to her nerves; but, Marie kept her smile and attitude on the positive side no matter what came her way.

A few weeks later, she was offered another opportunity to make a difference in the lives of her students. At the beginning of her day, she received a call from the vice principal over her department on a matter of a student. Near the end of the conversation, she said, *“I don’t know if you know or if anybody has mentioned to you - you being new and all - that we have a step team here at the school. I wanted to ask you if you would*

sponsor this team. I'm gonna tell you up front that there is no stipend so you won't get paid for it and these are not the best students in the school. In fact, they are many of them, discipline problems and some have academic problems and could probably not get into any other club or organization in the school because of grades or discipline. I do have to tell you though; that, if we don't get a sponsor, we have to shut them down for the year and I haven't been able to find anybody yet."

With such a glowing recommendation, Marie had to think only for a few seconds before responding, *"I would really like to do but I need to finish writing my dissertation if I want to graduate by December. What all is entailed in doing it."*

"I will see if I can get somebody to help you so that you can finish your school; but, I need somebody to be responsible for it. I really don't know everything about the team but I can send one of the captains down to talk to you. Like I said there is no money and these are not the best students but they need somebody to take over or else they won't have a season this year – we will have to close them down."

"Okay, I'll do it."

"Great. I will send the captain down to talk to you. Thanks."

Marie did talk to the captain, who was a Black female senior, and was happy with her decision. She answered all of her questions very articulately; however, in the midst of one question of her plans for the team, she switched her speech pattern (she code switched for a second into her normal speech pattern). Studying this phenomenon, Marie was awestruck to see it happen. The switch was so swift that she would not have noticed had she not known what it was.

Her children thought she was crazy to take on something else when she was trying to finish school and because she did not know anything about step teams. Many of her co-workers told her she was crazy to work without being paid, was succored into something because she was new, and did not know the first thing about step teams. What everyone failed to realize was Marie did not begin teaching for money (she made more in the military – almost twice as much), she was told up front there was no money and she would have some of the undesired students from the student body, she did not know anything about step teams but she did enjoy step shows, and best of all was the fact that she understood some of what these girls needed – she could have easily been one of them had it not been for the choices she made to change her situation early in life. She felt now was her chance to really make a difference in education...

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