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Unto The Third & Fourth Generation of African-Americans: Kaleb Norris's Stories of Generational Poverty And Inequality In The South

Derrick Marcel Tennial

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UNTO THE THIRD & FOURTH GENERATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS:

KALEB NORRIS'S STORIES OF GENERATIONAL POVERTY

AND INEQUALITY IN THE SOUTH

by

DERRICK MARCEL TENNIAL

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This is an inquiry that explores the cross-generational lived affects of educational, political, and public policies on my paternal family from 1899 to the present in Northern Mississippi and West Tennessee. It is an exploration of my family's history and my lived experience as the first person in the family to obtain an undergraduate degree, a graduate degree, and a doctorate, who has attempted to use education in a substantive way to break the cycle of generational poverty.

Members of six generations of my family are the main characters in the stories collected. Using oral history, I document their experiences. From the memories of living family members that knew them, I reconstructed the stories of deceased family members. Oral history not only allowed me to capture their stories but to also understand them as individuals in light of their lived experiences. Examining the affects of various educational, political, and public policies on their lives, I was able to construct new meaning. I convey this new meaning using the voice of our family patriarch- my great-grandfather- to dispel the myth that all families in generational poverty are headed by single-females.

African-Americans are a marginalized people rendered voiceless through educational, political, and public policies levied against them by the dominant culture. *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation of African-Americans* is a declaration of reclamation, not only for the voice of my family, but also for all African-Americans. This generational narrative reveals how various educational, political, and public policies have affected and continue to affect six generations of my family. This counter-story presents a fresh perspective illuminates past and present inequalities in our society. The dominant culture must acknowledge and affirm that African-Americans are a voice in this world, and we *demand* to be heard!

INDEX WORDS: Oral History, Critical Race Theory, Culture of Poverty, Generational Poverty, Intergenerational Poverty, Marginalization, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Culturally Relevant Teaching, African-American Culture, Social Consciousness Theory, Culture of Power, Theory of Cultural Ecology, Status Quo.

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AND INEQUALITY IN THE SOUTH

by

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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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2008

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DEDICATION

*“Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying:
Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I
ordained you a prophet to the nations.”
Jeremiah 1:5*

This is a manifestation of what you have destined for me before the foundation of the world was laid. Father, I thank you for entrusting me with various gifts, talents, and callings that I use and will use to speak the “nations.” Thank you for promoting me to the next level. Even with this, it does not yet appear what I shall! I cannot wait to experience how you are going to use this doctorate for your glory!

*“..And greater works than these you will do because I go to my father”
John 14:12*

Completing this doctorate, I find it ironic that I am the same age you were when you redeemed all mankind through your death on the cross. Prior to leaving, you told your disciples that they would have more opportunities to do the work that you began. Now I feel the same way – it’s just the beginning. Thank you for allowing me to die in many areas of my life in order to be resurrected in consciousness.

*“And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another comforter, that he may forever – the Spirit of Truth whom the world cannot receive...He will teach you all things...He will guide you into all truth.”
John 14:16, 26, & John 16:13*

Somewhere along the way, you whispered into my spirit that “Giving up is not an option.” There have been so many times that I wanted to give up on life, but you have been there guiding me, protecting me, and teaching me as you said you would. Even though this doctorate affirms that I have a degree of knowledge, I have recently concluded that the more I think I know, the more I realize that the more I do not know! I will forever need your guidance and instruction.

This work is also dedicated to:

Beverly Ann Cole Tennial – my mother

Thank you for your lifelong wisdom, encouragement, guidance, and support.

When it comes to my goals and aspirations, you have never told me that “I can’t!”

I know I can soar even higher– you are the wind beneath my wings!

Johnny Lee Tennial – my father

Thank you for your lifelong wisdom, guidance, and support. When I was a little boy, I did not like to walk, so you would carry me around your neck, and I felt like I was ten feet tall. I have the confidence to be all that God has called me to be and go places I have never gone because of the view that I have of the world because I sit on your shoulders!

Darnell M. Tennial – my brother

You are the answer to a prayer. I wanted a little brother or sister so badly that I prayed and wished on rainbows, but the only stipulation was I did not want one after I turned ten. God waited until I was twelve! I love being your brother, and I hope I have been a good example to you. So much of what I have done in life has been for you.

The Storytellers

Norris Lindsey and Lurline Campbell Lindsey – my paternal great-grandparents

This is the story of your life and your generations! Big Daddy, thank you for the benefit of your life experience to help make this family what I hope you envisioned it to be. Big Mama, you were an ever-shining example of grace and humility. Thank you both for paving the way and laying the foundation.

Helen Lindsey - my paternal grandmother

Thank you for opening up and sharing your life experiences with me. You are a gift and I thank God for you! As the oldest female child of Norris and Lindsey, you are the family matriarch and through your life and this story, you have established your legacy in the earth. I pray that God will keep you around for many years to come, so that you may continue to impart wisdom and knowledge to the generations.

My paternal uncles and aunts – Linda Lindsey, the late Robert Earl Benton, Lurlean Perry, Nina Lindsey, and Rennie Lindsey

These are your stories! I hope I have made you proud! Thank you for all your love and support over the years. Know that your living has not been in vain. Someone will read this and profit from your experience! Earl, thanks for being our “Joseph” – our dreamer and our “Moses” – our deliver!

My paternal great-uncles and great aunts – Klyde Lee Kones, Nellie P. Wynn, the late Willie Frank Lindsey, Jeannette Sanders, Chester Lindsey, Dorothy R. Sullivan, Carolyn J. Lindsey, and the late Fronnie M. Hale

Thank you for being perils of wisdom and for always loving me and supporting me throughout out my life. Impart into your children and grandchildren your stories so that our family may become stronger and wiser!

My paternal cousins – especially Tobie Benton-Harris, Tyrece Lindsey, Kenneth Randle, Kendria Lindsey, Mardquies Lindsey, and Nicole Lindsey

We represent the generation that is hammering away at the curse of generational poverty. Each one of us has a chapter to write in our family's history. Let us write it well and be the examples God has called us to be!

My other relatives that make up the Lindsey Family

Thank you for your love and support. Remember that perception is everything. How are you perceiving? How are you teaching your children to perceive?

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McQuilla Cole – my maternal grandmother

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grateful that I had you for as long as I did. I am still and always will be
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Hey, Granddaddy, I know you are looking! Watch me knock this
doctorate out the park! I love you and miss you both!

Connie Mae Cole Faulkner Atkinson – my maternal great-grandmother

Thanks, Granny, for keeping me all school when I was little and always
letting everyone know how proud you are of your first-born great-
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My maternal uncles and aunts

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taking me to the library at Memphis State University. While you studied,
I colored, but nevertheless the seed took root and look at the tree it has
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this. **Wayne E. Cole** and **David L. Cole**, thank you for being good uncles
and wonderful role models. **Anthony T. Cole, Sr.**, I miss you, man!
Thank you for allowing me to usher you into the eternal presence of God!
Save me a seat! I’ll be there after while. I’ve got some more work to do
first!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE COUNTER STORY

Through the darkness of night and the heat of day

A ship sailed with haste from the African bay

This ship carried cargo more precious than gold

-Carried human beings who were mean to be sold

Robbed of their culture

To their history blind

Knowledge is essential to a strong black mind

Beaten historically and culturally immersed

This feed our own hungry

And quench our own thirst

Now we realize what need most

We possess inside

-The feeling of spirit

And we call it – Black Pride!

A Different World

© 1988

Over 400 years ago, a lucrative enterprise began; millions of African men, woman, and children were kidnapped from their native land and transported to the

Americas. As they made this involuntary journey, they were stripped of their culture, their languages, their religions, their heritage, and their names. When they stepped off the ship, they were sold like cattle and given a new identity – slave! Then they were clothed in a new garment called poverty – poverty of mind, spirit, knowledge, and resources.

Over 400 years later, many African-Americans are still clothed in poverty, which has left them with deep emotional, psychological, and economic scars. Poverty has rendered African-Americans seemingly voiceless, void of power or purpose, and with a host of perpetual community problems, which include unemployment, lack of education and skills, low or no income, poor housing, high criminal activities, and deterioration of the family structure, thus preventing African-Americans from being able to “...play the roles, participate in relationships, and follow the customary behavior which is expected of them by virtue of their membership of society” (Iceland, 2003, p. 11). However, the time has come for African-Americans to discard the garment of poverty and to stand stark naked before American society armed with the stories that will allow them to reclaim their voice. My family, which has been immersed in poverty for six consecutive generations, has interceded for the African-American race. Through this inquiry, I share their stories of struggle, survival, hope, and hopelessness in American society in which educational, political, and public policies enacted by the dominant culture have played a significant role in the perpetuation of generational poverty.

The African-American, Poverty, & Education

According to the United States Census Bureau, the official poverty rate in 2005 was 12.6% of the population (www.census.gov). In one of the wealthiest countries in the world, more than 37 million people live in impoverished conditions. Of those 37 million people, African-Americans have the highest poverty rate of any minority. The official poverty rate for African-Americans in 2005 was an overwhelming 24.9%, which is more than double that of the national poverty rate (www.census.gov). The number is even more staggering when it comes to African-American children. Half of all African-American children live in poverty. As a result, African-American children are more likely to be dependent on welfare, become teenage parents, live in single-female headed households, live in substandard housing, and become entangled in the criminal justice system - more so African-American males (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 2). This is a perpetual problem without a viable solution. Why are so many African-Americans living in poverty?

This problem began in 1619 when the first Africans arrived in the Americas as slaves. For more than 250 years, Africans from Western, Central, and Southern Africa were captured and transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas where they were forced into slavery, and thus into poverty. The institution of slavery stripped Africans of their experiences, history, language, and African cultural practices; they were forced to adopt the culture (language, religion, and “civilized” practices) of the dominant culture. More than 140 years after its demise, slavery still has a profound effect on the descendents of slaves. Its impact remains prevalent in the foundation of core African-American values.

Serving as a shining example of the impact of a carefully crafted educational, political, and public policy, the institution of slavery is the foundation of policies enacted by America's dominant culture that exclude African-Americans from mainstream society and perpetuate the cycle of emotional, psychological, and economic bondage. In American society, African-Americans have been viewed as socially, culturally, and economically inferior to the dominant culture. The end result has been a carefully constructed, complex relationship in which African-Americans have sought to break free from all forms of poverty, but have been hindered by various educational, political, and public policies.

This carefully constructed, complex relationship has been reinforced in American schools. In 1837, when the idea of universal education for elementary-aged children was introduced to American society by Massachusetts Secretary of State Horace Mann, it was heralded as "the great equalizer." The fundamental purpose of the common school was (1) to stop the threat of cultural pluralism with the immigration of people from various European nations and (2) to teach strong nationalism. Education was supposed to make "Americans" of the children and bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, the privileged and the underprivileged, the advantaged and disadvantaged, and the dominant culture, African-Americans, and other minorities. However, the dominant culture excluded African slaves from the conceptualization of education. In addition to being *omitted* from the conceptualization of education, African slaves were not even fully included in the original American concepts of citizenship and personage. The Naturalization Law of 1790 denied citizenship to any persons other than white immigrants. After 1787, each African slave was counted as three-fifths of a person to

determine taxation and member appropriation for the House of Representatives. Even with the exclusion of African slaves from education and only partial inclusion in citizenship and personage, some African slaves pursued education relentlessly. Many African slaves became literate through sympathetic slave owners and their family members, abolitionists, Christian missionaries, and mulatto slave children (who resembled their white slave masters/fathers). Some slaves even taught themselves to read and write.

The educational pursuits of African slaves made many members of the dominant culture uneasy. Some dominant culture members feared that education would have liberating consequences for African slaves. The dominant culture understood that many African slaves instinctively knew that education was the key to social, economic, and psychological change. In order to keep African slaves subservient, dependent, and impoverished, laws were passed outlawing read and writing in southern states. If knowledge of a slave's ability to read and write was made public, the punishment was severe including death. "... [T]he history of education for African-Americans is not a story of liberation and prosperity but one of struggle and disappointment... education, as we know it, was never intended to have liberatory consequences for African-Americans" (Lynn, 2006, p. 116).

The lack of liberality in education for African-Americans is enacted in American schools in relationship to "how society at large and the schools treat minorities (the system) and how minority groups respond to those treatments and to schooling" (Ogbu, 1999, p. 156). For education to become the "great equalizer" and liberate the African-American, education must seek to (1) heal the wounds of the past, (2) address the issues

of poverty and education in the African-American community, and (3) produce more culturally relevant pedagogy designed to increase the number of high achieving and socially productive African-American students.

The time has come for African-Americans to reevaluate history and understand how educational, political, and public policies have affected their participation in the educational process and the perpetuation of intergenerational and generational poverty. I have explored my family's history of silent frustration in an attempt to illuminate educational, political, and public policies that have kept African-Americans inextricably yoked to poverty - emotionally, psychologically, and economically.

The Question: Why?

Why has my family (and other African-Americans) been unable to break the curse of generational poverty? I assert that it is because of educational, political, and public policies enacted by the dominant culture that have suppressed African-American socioeconomic mobility. I have explored educational, political, and public policies that have perpetuated the cycle of poverty in my family. I have also sought to understand whether or not my family's perception of education has changed from generation to generation.

The Questions: What and How?

In order to understand the affects of various educational, political, and public policies on my family, I sought answers to these questions: (1) What were the dominant educational, political, and public policies and ideologies during each generation? (2) How did educational, political, and public policies affect each generation? (3) How did educational, political, and public policies affect each generation's view of and experience

with education and poverty? (4) How have educational, political, and public policies perpetuated generational poverty? (5) Finally, in what ways have the dominant culture benefited from the plight of African Americans in poverty?

These questions are essential to understand how educational, political, and public policies have contributed to the perpetuation of generational poverty in my family, as well as in other African-American families, to seek possible solutions to break the generation curse of poverty; to empower present and future generations through knowledge of the past and present; and to force education to have liberating consequences for all African-Americans.

A Closer Look: The Lineal Juxtaposition of Poverty & Education

I long for her...

I thirst after her...

She has given me comfort and companionship when no one else would

Through her, I am experiencing success beyond my wildest dreams

Through her, I have been able to establish a career, earn money, buy a home, & travel

She touches the recesses of my soul and makes love to my mind

I have loved her since I was three years old

Her name you ask? Education...

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Education has played a major role in my life since my first day of pre-school to this very moment. It has always been there. It has always made me feel safe. With an

education, I was taught to believe there were no limits and no boundaries as to what I could do or who I could become. As a result, the more I learned, the more I wanted to know. My quest for education has taken me from school to school and place to place: Happy Nutritional Children, Dunbar Elementary, South Park Elementary, Alcy Elementary, Sherwood Junior High School, Memphis Central High School, the University of Tennessee, the University of Memphis, Rhodes College, Freed-Hardeman University, and Georgia Southern University. I knew that I could not be successful in life without an education and would be doomed to a life of poverty.

Poverty is no stranger to me; I have relatives who live in poverty day in and day out. In fact, my parents come from impoverished beginnings. More so than my mother's family, I have seen the affects of poverty on my father's family, which can be traced back to my paternal great-great grandparents. Born to former slaves during the Reconstruction Era after the Civil War, they were raised in Mississippi. Their parents suffered racial and socioeconomic discrimination. Without an education or access to resources, their parents did the only thing they knew how to do, which was return to plantation living through the sharecropping system. "After the abolition of slavery..., blacks in the South often worked as sharecroppers, mainly because they were barred by law or custom from almost all other full-time jobs" (Iceland, 2003, p. 81). They worked from dawn to dusk, and at the end of a fiscal year or harvest season were *more* indebted to the white landowner. Like their parents, my great-great-grandparents were illiterate. Their inability to read and write (lack of formal education) kept them indebted to landowners. Poverty was no longer just a by-product of slavery. It was a social pariah passed down to their nine children, including their second oldest child, my great-grandmother.

Affectionately called “Big Mama,” my great-grandmother was one of the most generous and loving people I have ever met in this life. She had no formal education, but I remember many times seeing her marking through crossword puzzles. She did not know how to read or write; however, she recognized letters, so would complete the crossword puzzles through letter recognition. She and her husband, my great-grandfather, affectionately called “Big Daddy,” lived in poverty until the day they died. They worked as sharecroppers and raised a family. Unlike Big Mama, Big Daddy was surprisingly literate. No one knows exactly how he acquired his education. According to my father, he kept his education a secret for more than fifty years.

The first child born to the union of my great-grandparents was my grandmother. My grandmother has very little formal education. In 1997, I was shocked to learn that she knows the alphabet and how to print her own name with verbal prompting. A remarkable woman, she raised six children as a single-parent while working as a sharecropper and in a flower nursery. Her arms, hands, legs, and feet are now riddled with arthritis as a result of the strenuous, back-breaking work.

Unfortunately, through her, the legacy of generational poverty has been passed on to subsequent generations. Out of my grandmother’s six children, only one earned her G.E.D. – General Education Diploma. My aunt (fourth born) received her diploma shortly after the birth of her only child. She attended a local business college and obtained an entry level position with a prominent Memphis corporation and remained there until her job was eliminated due to corporate downsizing. Although she did not pursue any additional education, the educational skills she did acquire led to other career opportunities.

After completing the tenth grade, my father (third born) quit school to work to support himself and his family. After a short courtship, my mother became pregnant with me. Two months after I was born, my parents married. My father is a *highly* intelligent man from whom I inherited my assertiveness and articulate speech. My father is a natural born leader. In his early fifties, he has begun to realize his own potential. He is a 34-year veteran of a construction firm where he puts his love of math to use on a daily basis. However, due to his lack of education, his company does not pay my father what he is worth; they only provide minimum healthcare and no retirement benefits.

Quitting high school, my father followed in the footsteps of his older sister and brother who both dropped out of school to help support the family. His sister (first born), a mother of two and grandmother, is an excellent cook, who worked for a local Southern restaurant for many years before obtaining a supervisory position in the food services division of a local company. Only six months shy of completing her high school education, she quit school to support the family. His now deceased brother (second born) was the “Joseph” of the family. He was a dreamer, who successfully convinced my grandmother and other family members to leave sharecropping and substandard living conditions in Mississippi and move to Memphis. His dreams took him and his family to Los Angeles, California, and Denver, Colorado. However, broken dreams upon his return to Memphis led to personal despair, alcoholism, and drug abuse. Prior to his death in December 2006, he confided in my father and I that alcoholism and drug abuse led to his untimely demise.

Following in the footsteps of their older siblings, my father’s two younger siblings did not receive their high school diplomas. My aunt (fifth born) became a

mother at age 16 and did not return to school full-time after the birth of her first child. Now in her early forties, she is the mother of nine children (ranging in age from 25 to 4) and a grandmother of six. She lived on public assistance until welfare reforms of the 1990s forced her to obtain employment. My uncle completed the twelfth grade, but failed senior English which prevented him from graduating. He went to work for the same local eatery for which my aunt and his sister worked. He remained there for 20 years as a waiter, cook, and dishwasher until he was forced out by new management. He has a common-law wife and three children – one who suffers from juvenile diabetes. All of my uncles and aunts have at some point have returned to the family homestead including my father, who now resides there with his mother, two youngest sisters, and his youngest sister’s nine children and grandchildren. Poverty is a ravishing cancer, not only in my immediate paternal family, but also in my extended family as well.

In many ways, my extended paternal family mirrors my immediate paternal family. There are many single-female households. Their children are following in the footsteps of their parents by dropping out of school, having a number of children, and working unskilled jobs. Like their parents and grandparents, some rely on public assistance to support their families. One thing that amazes me most is that there is no shortage of gifts and talents in my family. I have relatives that could have lucrative careers in hair care, the automotive industry, computer technology, broadcast journalism, fashion, etc. I have repeatedly asked myself the question, “Why is poverty running rampant among us?” I believe that my family believes in acquiring education; however educational, political, and public policies have hindered their ability to experience the long-term benefits of education.

If my family has been hindered by educational, political, and public policies enacted by the dominant culture, then surely the students that I have taught for the last ten years have been affected as well. For 10 years, I have taught secondary English in public school systems in Memphis, Tennessee, and metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. All of the schools in which I have taught were Title I schools, which means that poverty was a reality in the lives of these students. For a school to be classified as a Title I school simply means that more than 40% of the student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch; the school receives additional federal funding to ensure that these children will have a “fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education, and reach at least proficiency on the state’s academic achievement standards and state academic assessments. Funds are used to support additional academic services, materials, and personnel” (www.aacps.org).

As a novice teacher, I found it difficult to understand why my students were not achieving academically. I soon learned that many of their families were living in poverty. I clearly saw education as *their way* out of impoverished conditions. Ten years later, I still see education for what I have personally known it to be - an abolitionist, a liberator, an emancipator! I am currently an English instructor for the Gateway to College Academy at Georgia Perimeter College. “The Gateway to College program serves at-risk youth, 16 to 20 years old, who have dropped out of school. Students simultaneously accumulate high school and college credits, earning their high school diploma while progressing toward an associate degree or certificate” (www.gatewaytocollege.org). The program is a second chance opportunity for students who were not successful in traditional high school. The scholarship program pays for all tuition and books. With the

rising cost of education, to have the opportunity at a free college education is simply phenomenal. Our number one concern at the academy is how to get our students to see the long term benefits of obtaining a college education. As a researcher, I am concerned about how past and existing educational, political, and public policies are hindering my students from being successful. It is disheartening semester after semester to see many of my young students (and my young cousins) dropping out of school and following in the footsteps of their parents and other relatives. I hoped that my inquiry begins to answer these questions for my family as well as the African-American as a race of people.

Can You See Me Now? The Social Justice Lens of Critical Race Theory

The purpose of this study was to explore the affects of educational, political, and public policies enacted by the dominant culture that has perpetuated the cycle of cross-generational poverty in my family. Using the social justice lens of critical race theory as my theoretical framework and oral history as my methodology, I discovered and rediscovered and interpreted and reinterpreted the life experiences of six generations of my family.

Critical race theory, a theoretical framework, is the progeny of critical theory of society or critical inquiry developed by the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School is an informal reference used to identify a group of Marxists, who were adamantly opposed to capitalism. The Frankfurt School developed the critical theory of society to address the problems of European society. During 1920s and 1930s, Europe was a hotbed of political activity – working class revolutions were rampant, which led to World I and the defeat of Germany, followed by the rise of Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany. In an attempt to address these changes, the Frankfurt School chose the portions of Marxism they felt

would bring clarity to social conditions and incorporated other schools of thought including Weberian Theory, Freudian Theory, positivism, Aesthetic Modernisms, Culture Theory, and others. Nazism posed a threat to the Jewish membership of the Frankfurt School. They were forced to relocate to the United States, where their work continued. The work of one member stood out in particular. Herbert Marcuse gained notoriety for his work in social theory. The emotional and sexual liberation advocated in his work provided a platform for the student movements of the 1960s that called for psychological, cultural, and political reform. Academic scholars were impressed by critical theory's concern with "the social construction of experience..." (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 435). Critical race theory is based upon this primary principle.

Critical race theory examines the historical and contemporary relationship between the dominant culture and subcultures or minorities. There are six tenets of critical race theory:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law...Critical race theorists...adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.

6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Matsuda, 1993, p. 6).

In layman's terms, critical race theory believes that racism is normal in American society, (2) the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and affirmative action legislation have proven more beneficial for the dominant culture than for minorities, and (3) the concept of "race" is a social construct which has nothing to do with intellectual, physiological, or genetic inferiorities, as once believed. It is related to education in that it can be used to "understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, controversies over curriculum and history, and IQ and achievement testing" (Delgado and Stefanic, 2001, p. 3).

As a researcher, critical race theory (1) allowed me to look beyond individual circumstance to the root of the problem, (2) raised awareness in an effort to effect change, (3) identified hidden meaning behind established power structure and traditions and its adverse effects, and (4) allowed me to become "prophetic" by understanding the past and making predictions about the future based upon the given circumstances. Critical race theory also forces "critical qualitative researchers to operate in self-revelatory mode, to acknowledge the double (or multiple) consciousness in which she or he is operating (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 423).

One of the more important aspects of critical race theory is the incorporation of storytelling. These narratives focus on racial injustice and occupy a very unique space in that they give voice to those in "liminal spaces in an inherently unjust society" (Lynn, 2006, p. 116). They are also important in that they seek to counteract the stories of the

dominant culture, which are reproduced in every aspect of American society. Most of what we see in mass media reflects the dominant culture's standards of acceptance and excellence that seem to "remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups and provide a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural" (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005, p. 11). Storytelling gives marginalized groups, such as African-Americans, a voice through which they can achieve self-acceptance by trusting their own feelings and acknowledging their perception(s) of reality. "What are the issues that marginalized or disadvantaged people speak of with excitement, anger, fear, or hope" (Ayers, 2006, p. 88)? Storytelling also produces counter stories that challenge or even counteract the narratives of the dominant culture. The stories of my family have produced counter stories or added to the existing narratives of race and culture in the African-American community. My family's narratives will hopefully be used as a "tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

A Method to the Madness: Oral History Methodology

In order to adequately interpret the lived experiences of my family, I used oral history methodology. Oral history focuses on the individual and the meaning of their lived experiences. Oral history:

1. Allows the reader to experience the person's life vicariously
2. Allows for further testing of any hypotheses
3. Highlights behaviors and attitudes that may be analyzed across social or ethnic group.

Oral history places value and meaning upon a person's life and can be used to help understand the attitudes and beliefs of a certain era and subscribes to the following criteria:

1. The individual should be viewed as a member of a culture; the life history describe[s] and interpret[s] the actor's account of his or her development in the common-sense world.
2. The method should capture the significant role that others play in transmitting socially defines stocks of knowledge.
3. The taken-for-granted assumptions of the specific cultural world under study should be described and analyzed. These assumptions are revealed in rules and codes for conduct as well as in myths and rituals.
4. [Oral history] should focus on the experience of an individual over time to capture the "processual development of the person."
5. The cultural world under study should be continuously related to the individual's unfolding life story (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 121-122).

Using critical race theory and oral history methodology allowed me to construct meaning of my family's cross-generational experiences living in poverty and the extent to which educational, political, and public polices of the dominant culture that affected their lives. I hope my research empowers my family to rethink their position as it relates to the benefits of education in spite of educational, political, and pubic policies designed to impede their progress. I hope this self-reconceptualization of education will lead to self-realization and self-actualization for my family as well as for others in the African-

American race, who will no longer be silenced by marginalization, but who will arise and speak to the issue(s) at hand and offer solutions that will greatly benefit themselves, their families, the African-American community, and the entire global society.

The Storytellers

For this inquiry, I selected immediate family members according to their generation. There are no members of the first generation of my family still living. Therefore, I reconstructed their stories from the oral history of living relatives from subsequent generations. For the remaining generations, I used oral history methodology to record their stories. I chose individuals whom I felt could best recreate their lived experiences as well as offer their honest perspective on their experiences and the experiences of others. I tried to avoid relatives whom I thought would simply tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. I was after the unadulterated truth! The only way that the marginalized can regain their voice is through coming to terms with the truth – no matter how hideous, dreadful, painful, and unattractive. I recorded the oral history of the following family members:

“Halen” has six children, 20 grandchildren, and 11 great-grandchildren. She lives with three of her adult children, nine-grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. She has little formal education; she had to quit school to help her parents sharecrop. After working for many years as a sharecropper, she now lives on social security. Although she has no formal education, she can write her name with verbal prompting.

“Kay” has two adult sons and three grandchildren. She dropped out of high school in her senior year to help support her mother and her younger siblings. She is a food services manager at a local company.

“Redskin” is married with two children. He is currently separated from his wife of 32 years and has two adult sons. He dropped out of high school in the tenth grade and has worked for the same construction company for 34 years. He lives at the family homestead with his mother, two sisters, several nieces, nephews, great-nieces, and great-nephews.

“Sheryl” is a divorcee, who has a son and one grandson. She has a high school diploma and worked for a local corporation before falling victim to corporate downsizing in the mid-1990s. She is the owner of the family homestead and resides there with her mother, brother, sister, nieces, nephews, great-nieces, and great nephews.

“Pearl” has nine children and five grandchildren. She dropped out of high school at age 16 after having her first child. She has lived on public assistance most of her adult life. She lives at the family homestead with her mother, sister, brother, nine-children, and four grandchildren.

“Lennie” has three children. He finished high school, but failed to make up a semester of English in summer school. He worked at the same eatery with his older sister Kay for

more than 20 years before being terminated as a result of new owners and management. He lives with his common-law wife and three children.

“Ty” is Kay’s oldest son. He is engaged to the mother of his daughter. He is a high school dropout. However, he is a commercial truck driver. He lives with her fiancée and daughter.

“Lamont” is Sheryl’s only son. He is married with a son. He graduated from high school. After working several years as a manager for a nationally-known automotive repair shop, he quit his job to go to college. He and his wife have a son and own their own home.

“Shuntay” is Pearl’s first-born daughter. She is a high school drop-out and a mother of four children. She lives primarily on public assistance and works intermittently.

“Andre” is Pearl’s son, who since this inquiry, has dropped out of high school due citing academic and behavior problems and a lack of interest in school.

“Nic” is Pearl’s youngest daughter. She is a middle school student who is excelling in her studies.

“Michael,” “Ethel,” & “Jays” are Shuntay’s first born, second born, and third born children respectively. Michael is in second grade and Ethel is in the first grade. Jays is a kindergartner.

The Implications

Constructing meaning of the African-American experience through my family’s cross-generational experiences in poverty will help politicians, educators, psychologists, sociologists, religious leaders, the business community, and general public understand the long term affects of generational and intergenerational poverty. My inquiry is vital to the development of culturally relevant teaching strategies and programs that address issues of poverty and education in an effort to understand and eradicate the cultural bias that exists in American schools and society and on standardized tests. This inquiry may potentially increase African-American high school graduation and college retention rates. This inquiry also may have the potential to identify the cultural bias and discrimination in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001, which was supposedly designed to address the achievement gaps that exist among African-American, Hispanic, special education, ESOL (English as a Second Official Language), and other low achieving students. However, NCLB simply promotes the status quo – existing inequalities in American society – without addressing the inequalities of poverty, education, and the educational, political, and public policies. Without taking these variables into consideration, NCLB actually penalizes underprivileged students for things that are beyond their control.

According to NCLB, every state is required to develop standards and a system to measure the progress of all subgroups of students to verify if all students are performing

according to grade-level standards. The term AYP or “Adequate Yearly Progress” is used to determine whether or not each school district and school have met their standards. If a school district or school does not meet AYP, then the school district or school receives a NP or “Need Improvement” status and is given three years to meet the standards. After three years, if the school district or school does not meet AYP, the following consequences are possible: (1) the state board of education or a private firm takes over the school district, (2) all faculty and staff are replaced, and a new regime is brought in to turn the school around, and (3) the school district loses federal and/or state funding. Such consequences affect students in poverty whose parents cannot afford to move to better neighborhoods with better schools nor can afford to send them to private schools with or without a government issued voucher. In order to see significant changes in the performance of African-American students in the classroom, we must first address the need for “social and economic racial reform in the greater society” (Lynn, 2006, p. 118). We must scrutinize the affects of educational, political, and public policies on people in poverty. If we do not, classroom-based solutions, as advocated by NCLB, will continue to yield little results or completely fail.

Having constructed meaning of the African-American experience through my family’s cross-generational experiences in poverty and the educational, political, and public policies that affected their lives will challenge current teaching practices that may not include the most effective learning styles for African-American students. I hope that I have helped to dispel the persistent myths that African-Americans are lazy and not as intelligent as members of the dominant culture; I also hope that I have illuminated the

educational, political, and public policies of the dominated culture that have had an adverse affect on African-Americans.

Questioning the African-American experience through my family's cross-generational experiences in poverty and various educational, political, and public policies has caused dis-ease. I have occupied contradictory spaces addressing "issues of power, ownership of knowledge, and political and economic contexts" (Schram, 2003, p. 4). By presenting an African-American perspective, my research sought to reveal flaws in the dominant culture's ideology. Dominant culture perceptions are reproduced in every aspect of American society. Most images in the media (television, print, movies, videos, etc.) reflect the dominant culture's standard of what is morally, ethically, culturally, socially, economically, and historically correct. My inquiry has "generate[d] questions that raise fresh, often critical awareness and understanding of problems" (Schram, 2003, p. 6). These questions have the potential to create new perspectives or reveal ones already in existence and operation to rival or openly coexist with the dominant culture's perspective. We know what the dominant culture says about the African-American plight in poverty and educational views, but how does the experience of African-Americans contradict the dominant culture's version?

I hope this inquiry assists in breaking cycles of generational poverty and isolating educational, political, and public policies "that operate against policy changes in such settings" (Denzin, 2003, p. 38). Socially, I hope my inquiry will "create spaces for those who are studied (the other) to speak" (p. 38). The African-American voice has often been silenced through marginalization. My inquiry presented the personal experiences of my family, members of the African-American community, that speak to the issues of

poverty, education, and the affects of educational, political, and public policies on the African-American experience. This exposure explored the role dominant culture policies have played in the navigation of their destiny.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

*I long for her to quench my thirst
Comfort she gives and companionship too
Success she brings to life to see me through
Career, money, homes, and travel to behold
She gives success and fulfillment precious like gold*

*In love with her since three
She still touches the inner recesses of me*

In this world, I could not function

With her, my beloved Education

I despise and reject her

She is a dis-ease

That rots my family's-Tree.

She repulses me; no love resides here!

For her brand of love she offers no cure

A killer of dreams, she doesn't work alone

If you let her in she will take your home-

Your mind, your spirit, your finances that be

I can't stand that trick - Her name? Poverty!

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I sought to understand the African-American experience through my family's cross-generational experiences in poverty and how educational, political, and public policies have affected their lives. I studied the works of educational theorists and philosophers that have analyzed the affects of poverty in American society and offered possible solutions as well as those who somewhat blame African-Americans for their own plight in poverty and offer only the old protestant work ethic as a solution – “Pull yourself up by your boot straps” – when the issues of poverty are much deeper than that!

Through his works, educational theorist Jonathan Kozol advocates social consciousness concerning the plight of the poor. Educational theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings advocates the implementation of culturally relevant teaching in American schools to combat poverty and other social inequalities. Former educator and theorist Ruby Payne wrote *Understanding Poverty* in an effort to educate teachers on the characteristics and behaviors of the poor and disadvantaged for which she has been criticized by other theorists and philosophers. I present their criticism of Payne and offer their point of view. I have discovered throughout my studies that where I found issues of poverty, I also found issues of racism and nihilism as well as generational and intergenerational poverty. All of these issues concerning poverty have affected African-American Culture and how schooling, education, and educational, political, and public policies perpetuate the status quo.

Raising Awareness: The Social Consciousness of Jonathan Kozol

In order to adequately be able to interpret the affects of educational, political, and public policies on my family, I first had to answer one basic question: What is poverty? Poverty is relative to the standards of living in a society. Poverty occurs when people do not have adequate income for their material needs and are unable to "...play the roles, participate in relationships, and follow the customary behavior which is expected of them by virtue of their membership of society" (Iceland, 2003, p. 11). Resulting problems are unemployment, lack of education and skills, low income, poor housing, high criminal activities, and deterioration of the family structure.

These resulting problems are what educational theorist and social justice activist Jonathan Kozol refers to as "savage inequalities" in American society. He questions classism and racism in American society and how it preys on the inability of the underprivileged, especially children, to compete with the privileged. Kozol asserts that American society is indifferent to the plight of people in poverty. "With privilege goes the opportunity to earn enough money so that you can live in a wealthy suburb and perpetuate this inequality by passing it on to your children" (Kozol, 2000, p. 541-543). He further asserts that the dominant culture, affixed from a position privilege and power, benefits from the existence of these inequalities and must recognize that their "...victories are contaminated because the game has been rigged to [their] advantage" (Kozol, 2000, p. 541-543).

Through educational research, Kozol seeks to awaken public consciousness to the plight of African-Americans and other minorities. "He fights to eradicate injustice and to create equal opportunity for all members of society, especially the children"

(www.learntoquestion.com). In order to awaken the consciousness of the dominant culture, Kozol examines the plight of those in poverty through a social justice lens.

Kozol's social consciousness theory has eight tenets: (1) the theory of value, (2) theory of knowledge, (3) theory of human, (4) theory of learning, (5) theory of transmission, (6) theory of society, (7) theory of opportunity, and (8) theory of consensus.

The theory of value asserts that universal literacy and education are vital for the African-American to experience social mobility and economic success. Poverty hinders African-Americans from using education as means to socioeconomic mobility. What little access African-Americans have acquired to education has been only to train African-Americans for menial, low-paying jobs. I recently ran into one of my students who is now a shift leader at an Atlanta area McDonald's. The first thing he said to me was, "Well, Mr. Tennial. I am right where you said I would be if I did not get an education." I chuckled at the time, but upon second thought, I questioned in what ways did the educational system fail this obviously bright young man? As a teacher, I had succeeded in training this young man to flip burgers and drop fries at a fast food restaurant? What a sad indictment the education system!

The theory of knowledge claims that knowledge gained through literary skills and social interaction is essential to the survival and ultimate success of African-Americans. Kozol contends that literacy is the foundation of American society. As mentioned, for hundreds of years, the dominant culture used educational, political, and public policies to deny African-Americans access to literacy. African-Americans continue to be denied literacy competency through substandard educational systems. Moreover, for the last two

decades, African-Americans have had the lowest level of literacy amongst all major ethnic groups.

The theory of human nature contends that before children can excel in the classroom, their basic needs must be met. It also contends that children learn best in a socially integrated environment that promotes higher expectations. Many children in poverty often do not have their basic needs (food, clothes, and shelter) met. How can they concentrate on excelling in the classroom if they are hungry and do not know from where their next meal will come or if they have a place to go home to after the school day is done. In my 10 years as a teacher, I have seen this scenario numerous times. Just recently, a female student came to class wearing socks with thong sandals. When a staff member inquired about the whereabouts of her shoes, the student responded that her mother was going to buy her some shoes the next time she got paid. I have also had students return to school after being absent for a couple of days explaining that they had to move in abruptly with their grandmother because their parent(s) could not pay the rent and were evicted. Over the years, I have fed more students than I can name because they did not have any food at home; at the end of the food and food stamps, there was still some “month” left! According to Kozol, children of privilege do not have to contend with these issues. Their parents have the money, power, and privilege to meet their basic needs and to make sure they receive the education and social interaction skills necessary to be successful in American society. “[A]ffluent parents pay surprisingly large sums of money to enroll their youngsters, beginning at the age of two or three, in extraordinary early-education programs that give them social competence and rudimentary pedagogic

skills unknown to children of the same age in the city's poorer neighborhoods” (Kozol, 2005).

The theory of learning contends that integrated curricula that stress humanities, political awareness, and critical thinking must be implemented if African-American children in poverty are to break free of poverty’s grip. Kozol claims that inner city schools are culturally and creatively barren due to the overemphasis of standardized testing. He refers to many inner city schools as “large, extraordinarily unhappy places” (Kozol, 1991, p. 5) that exist merely to reinforce the caste system of American society, where the rich continue to get richer and the poor get poorer. Presently, public schools exist “not [to] give these children a sufficient education to lead healthy and productive.”

The theory of transmission maintains that students must be given the opportunity to apply the information they have learned in the context of their environment and culture. As a result, knowledge and learning become meaningful. Over the years, I have had students to ask, “Why are we learning this? Is this going to help me in the real world?” My immediate answer was “Yes!” However, when I thought about it, many of these students failed to see the connection between knowing and applying. After such occurrences, it became my mission to make sure my students could apply subject objectives to their own personal lives, to their culture, and to their communities. One thing poverty does is it robs an individual of the ability to *see*. If all a person living, eating, and breathing in poverty can see is his or her immediate circumstances, then he or she never becomes open to the future and more meaningful situations.

The theory of society contends that social order overlooks the needs and concerns of people in poverty. The dominant culture often turns a blind eye and a deaf ear to the

plight of the impoverished, thus contributing to the continued deterioration of society.

The dominant culture conveys the nonchalant attitude of “If it does not affect me, it does not exist,” which leads to it blaming the impoverished for their poverty. What Kozol maintains is that issues of poverty will eventually affect everyone – no matter how rich or poor. “I don’t think the powers that be... understand, or want to understand that if they do not give these children a sufficient education to lead healthy and productive lives, we [the wealthy, the privileged, the poor, middle, and upper classes] will be their victims later on. We’ll pay the price some day – in violence, in economic costs” (Kozol, 1991, p. 89).

The theory of opportunity argues that people in poverty will continue to receive an inferior education due to inadequate resources. These inadequate resources include, but are not limited to, the erosion of the tax base in predominantly African-American areas due to white flight, violence and crime, which results in less money for books, computers, qualified teachers, and other school resources essential for African-Americans to compete with the dominant culture. Kozol further argues that “denial of the ‘means of competition’ is perhaps the single most consistent outcome of the education offered to poor children in the schools of our large cities” (Kozol, 1991, p. 83). What poverty does is unconscionable, but the educational, political, and public policies reinforce the downtrodden position of people in poverty who continued to have the hope, the faith, the love, and eventually the life sucked out of them, thereby creating inner city wastelands of African-American liminality. I worked briefly at a predominantly African-American school, where the Parent-Teacher Organization, several principals, and the faculty and staff had been trying for more than ten years to get the school board to allocate funds to build a new high school. This particular school was originally built to serve 1000

students; however, at the time of my arrival and subsequent departure, the school's population increased to more than 2,500 students. To help ease the overcrowding, the school used portable classrooms. The area adjacent to the main building looked like a trailer park because there were so many. In addition to the overcrowding issue, the textbooks were inadequate. The computer labs were insufficient; they were at least 10 years old, with Microsoft Windows 98 as the operating system. There were only three labs of 30 computers – which worked *some* of the time. The semester after I left, the board of education finally broke ground on a new facility. However, in the 10 years that it took the board to *decide* to build a new school in this area, the board of education had allocated and built three new, state-of-the-art high schools in a more affluent area that did not have an overcrowding issue. How could my students in a dilapidated structure with outdated books and technology ever compete with the students in more affluent areas? There was no way possible!

Finally, the theory of consensus charges society with neglect of the poor. Kozol argues that when trying to help the poor, the government only succeeds in furthering the interest of the dominant culture – particularly the wealthy and upper-middle class. He also contends that due to racial isolation many of the dominant culture do not see or understand the issues of poverty that plague those in urban areas. “Many Americans...live far from our major cities and...have no first-hand knowledge of realities in urban [areas]... [and] seem to have a rather vague and general impression that the great extremes of racial isolation they recall as matters of grave national significance some 35 or 40 years ago have gradually, but steadily diminished in more recent years” (Kozol, 2005, p. 18). According to Kozol, successful, fully-integrated communities have

not been established in the last 25 years. As a result, the dominant culture has adopted a policy of “out of sight, out of mind” which has allowed segregation to return to schools and communities across the country. Kozol further contends that racial isolation and concentrated poverty are synonymous. “A segregated inner-city school is ‘almost six times as likely’ to be a school of concentrated poverty as is a school that has an overwhelmingly white population” (Kozol, 2005, p. 20). In addition, the public schools in the United States depend on local property taxes, state funds, and federal funds. However, he believes that “the property tax is the decisive force...shaping inequality” (Kozol, 1991, p.54). The amount of money produced by property taxes in poor African-American communities is far less than the money from property taxes in affluent dominant culture communities. As a result, even if poor African-American communities tax themselves at a higher rate than affluent dominant culture communities, the poor African-American communities will still generate less money from property taxes than the affluent dominant culture communities. Even with the various tax breaks poor African-American communities receive (also received by affluent dominant culture communities), the educational gulf between the dominant culture and African-Americans is widened because the amount of revenue generated is still vastly different. As a result, the inequality in education is perpetuated. It is safe to say that affluent communities are not going to give their additional money to the poor African-American communities, especially if it means their quality of life and their children’s education suffers.

Over the last 40 years, Kozol has sought to enlighten many to the plight of the poor calling attention to the fact that poverty has many African-Americans by the throat choking the very life out of them. Kozol’s works raise social awareness in an effort to

affect social change. Through Kozol's works, it is obvious that poverty's stance is reinforced by the educational, political, and public policies, but social consciousness is not enough to change the course of history for African-Americans. Social consciousness coupled with education -culturally relevant pedagogy- must be used to deconstruct the existing paradigm in the African-American consciousness in order to reconstruct it properly.

The Culturally Relevant Pedagogy of Gloria Ladson-Billings

Like Jonathan Kozol's theoretical framework, education theorist researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings' framework seeks to raise social awareness in addition to challenging the instructional practices of teachers and teacher education programs of colleges and universities as it relates to the education of African-American students and other minorities. Ladson-Billings examines issues of poverty and education through the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy is an attempt to bridge the gap between students' home culture and school culture. Culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to do the following:

1. Produce students who achieve academically
2. Produce students who are culturally competent
3. Produce students who understand and critique the existing social order

The first tenet of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is to produce students who achieve academically. Ladson-Billings claims that little research has been done on African-American student achievement. In order to prove academic competence, African-Americans students must be able to demonstrate "an ability to read, write, speak,

compute, pose and solve problems at sophisticated levels – that is, pose their own questions about the nature of teacher- or text-posed problems and engage in peer review of problem solutions” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 475). Students must not be allowed to choose failure in the classrooms.

The second tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is to produce students who are culturally competent. According to Ladson-Billings, many African-American students sacrifice their cultural and psychosocial well-being in order to succeed academically. As a result, they are accused of “acting white” and are not accepted by other less academically successful African-American students. Culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to find a way for students to “maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). Ladson-Billings cites an example where a teacher encouraged the African-American males in her classroom to assume academic leadership roles, which in turn affirmed their cultural values and personal styles. “Because these African-American males were permitted, indeed encouraged, to be themselves in dress, language style, and interaction styles while achieving in school, the other students, who regarded them highly (because of their popularity), were able to see academic engagement as ‘cool’” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476).

The third tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is to produce students who critique social order. According to Ladson-Billings, students must be taught to “recognize, understand, and critique current social inequalities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). Ladson-Billings cites an example where students in a Dallas school evaluated the fact that their school was surrounded by a barrage of liquor stores. Using “mathematics, literacy, social, and political skills,” the students determined that the zoning laws in their

communities were unjust. Zoning laws prohibited liquor stores in white affluent communities while permitting liquor store in their communities. The students used “their community circumstances as official knowledge” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 477) and their learning “became a form of culture critique” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 477).

Culturally relevant pedagogy cannot be successfully implemented without culturally relevant teaching. According to Ladson-Billings, three broad propositions or characteristics are present in culturally relevant teaching:

1. The conceptions of self and others held by culturally relevant teachers
2. The manner in which social relations are structured by culturally relevant teachers
3. The conceptions of knowledge held by culturally relevant teachers

The conceptions of self and others refer to the way the culturally relevant teachers view the teaching profession. According to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant teachers (1) believe all students are able to achieve academic success, (2) view teaching as art, (3) consider themselves members of the community in which they teach, and (4) believe teaching is their way of giving back to the community. Teachers committed to these principles demonstrate that commitment consistently. Culturally relevant teachers do not permit students to fail. Seeing their profession as art, they go above and beyond the call of duty to teach important concepts to their students. Culturally relevant teachers also teach community pride to their students by not only working in the community, but shopping, living, attending community meetings and doing other things that demonstrate

“their belief that the community is an important and worthwhile place in both their lives and the lives of the students” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 479).

The manner in which social relations are structured refers to how the teacher interacts with the students in the classroom. Culturally relevant teachers (1) maintain fluid student-teacher relationships, (2) connect with all of the students, (3) develop students into a community of learners, and (4) encourage collaborative learning and individual and collective accountability. Culturally relevant teachers allow the students to assume the role as teachers. They also share their personal experiences with the students and are not afraid to admit their own inadequacies in an effort to foster student achievement. By requiring all students to be successful, cultural relevant teachers set high standards for the entire class insuring individual success as well. Culturally relevant teachers facilitate collaborative learning, which allows students to build confidence in their ability to teach each other and be accountable for the success of others.

The conceptions of knowledge refer to how the teachers view knowledge. According to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant teachers (1) believe that knowledge is shared, recycled, and constructed, (2) knowledge must be critiqued, (3) are passionate about knowledge and learning, (4) must build bridges to aid the learning process, and (5) must provide a variety of assessments that allow students to demonstrate the acquisition of knowledge in a variety of ways. Culturally relevant teachers recognize that they are not the only experts in the class; students in their own way are experts as well. Culturally relevant teachers provide students the opportunity to share their knowledge. They also critique the curriculum to make sure they engage students in ways that not only prepare students to pass standardized tests, but also contribute to their general knowledge bases

and critical thinking skills. Culturally relevant teachers assess student knowledge in a variety of ways which may include but are not limited to tests, essays, oral exams, games, etc. They prepare students for standardized tests while deemphasizing them in order to alleviate test anxiety. Students of culturally relevant teachers view standardized tests as a “necessary evil” on which they score well and “quickly [return] to the rhythm of learning in their classroom” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 482).

Culturally relevant pedagogy will have a phenomenal impact on education! I believe that culturally relevant pedagogy will eliminate or minimize the disconnect between African-Americans and education by making learning life applicable, educating students about the social inequalities (unjust educational, political, and public policies) that exist in society, and teaching them that it is their duty and responsibility to eradicate them. The ultimate goal is for African-Americans to re-engage in the educational process in hopes of understanding and working toward eliminating their plight in poverty.

Understanding Poverty: The Philosophy of Ruby Payne

“We are poor!” I remember being offended by this statement my father made when I was about 12 years old. How can we be poor? The notion of being poor *never* crossed my mind. I always had what I needed when I needed it. I have never known hungry or homelessness. I have never tasted of the bitter water of hopelessness or despair. Even though this was not my plight, it is the plight of many African-Americans, including members of my family. According to education philosopher Ruby Payne, people in poverty often do not realize that they are in poverty because “poverty is relative. If everyone around you has similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth is vague” (Payne, 2005, p. 2). Then exactly what is poverty?

Poverty occurs when people do not have adequate income for their material needs. It is “the extent to which an individual does without [financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules] resources” (Payne, 2005, p. 7) resulting in unemployment, lack of education and skills, low income, poor housing, high criminal activities, and deterioration of the family structure. According to Payne (1995), poverty has its own “culture, [which consists of] hidden rules and beliefs” (p. 102). This definition is more concise than one stated by cultural anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who first popularized the concept of the culture of poverty in the ethnology, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty*. Lewis contended “the culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, high individuated, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feeling of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society” (Wilber, 1975, p. 6). Lewis maintained that the poor did not realize this concept of success because they did not integrate or participate in the activities of the larger society. Today, the term *culture* is now the “politically correct term” used to discuss issues pertaining to poverty.

Not until I came in contact with Ruby Payne’s *Understanding Poverty*, did I begin to understand poverty! The first time I read her work, I thought it was the best thing since *sliced bread!* For the first time in my life, I began to get answers to those questions that had been looming in the back of my mind since childhood as they related to my family. For the first time, I understood that poverty has its own culture, hidden rules, and belief system. Payne’s work opened my “understanding” so much so that I read her other

books. I celebrated her because she had managed to put a face, a name, an identity to that siren holding my family hostage. However, the more of Payne's works I read, the more I sensed something was missing...

As mentioned, Payne defines poverty and identifies characteristics of poverty, and its hidden rules and beliefs, but that is all she does – she identifies! Her works do not challenge the reader to move from conceptualization to actualization! Not one *time* does she does mention the exploitation of African-American by the dominate culture nor does she mention the affects of educational, political, and public policies on those in poverty. I heralded Ruby Payne as “The Great White Hope” until I began to read further and understand that Payne's works continued a discriminatory pattern against African-Americans. No matter what I think of Payne's works now, I must credit her with helping me to understand and organize my thoughts concerning poverty.

In her books concerning issues of poverty, class, and culture, Payne identifies 20 distinct characteristics of the culture of poverty. Payne contends that people in poverty (1) emphasize personality, (2) humor, (3) and entertainment. They also use (4) informal oral communication, (5) participatory conversation, (6) body language, and (7) sexual body language. Payne also surmises that people in poverty are (8) polarized thinkers, (9) believe in faith or destiny, (10) believe in forgiving inappropriate behavior, but do not expect change, (11) focus on the negative aspects of any given situation, (12) view time as an abstract concept, and (13) over emphasize the enjoyment of sensual pleasures. Payne further asserts that people in poverty (14) do not plan ahead, (15) are unorganized, and (16) only know how to survive from day-to-day. People in poverty also (17) view

people as possessions, (18) see men only as “lover and fighters,” and (19-20) women who are the head of most impoverished family as “saviors.”

There are five of Payne’s 20 identifiers of people in poverty that I have observed in my family. Since I was a child, participatory conversation has always been the preferred method of communication of my relatives. Whether on the front porch or in the house, more than one person talks at a time. These conversations are often based on family issues, social issues, current political events, entertainment, and sports. There is almost always background noise present (i.e. television, radio, children playing, etc.). In his book *Black Students. Middle Class Teachers*, Jawanza Kunjufu provides an explanation for this occurrence in African-American homes. “[W]hat makes African American children unique is that a large percentage of them are right-brained thinkers...right brain thinkers perform better with multiple stimuli and more noise” (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 96). What we have is simply is a cultural difference that in no way suggests that African-Americans are inferior or that African-American classrooms where this communication style is practiced are chaotic.

Another prevalent characteristic in my family is polarized thinking. Members of my family often see situations as either black or white - yes or no. If a situation does not have clear, viable solution, they have a tendency to either adopt a negative point of view and simply quit or give up. Instead of accentuating the positive, some family members focus on the negative. According to Payne, “failure at anything is the source of stories and numerous belittling comments” (Payne, 2005, p. 52). They often use other people (particularly others involved in the situations) as the scapegoat or blame the government, organized society, or the dominant culture for their plight and are perfectly content with

allowing them to take care of them because of their distrust of government and organized society. “It’s the white man’s fault” is a popular statement used particularly by male members of my family to explain a person situation or something in society. While *everything* certainly is not the “white man’s fault,” the dominant culture is responsible for positioning of educational, political, and public policies designed to keep African-Americans and other minorities socially, culturally, and economically disadvantaged. “[P]oliticans and the public...[have] little appetite for addressing the social and economic inequalities outside of school that underlay the problems school were expected to solve” (Oakes & Lipton, 2007, p. 48).

The view of people as possessions is another characteristic that is prevalent in my family. People in poverty view other people as possessions according to Payne. They believe that all they have is each other and maintaining these relationships is necessary to survive in poverty. If one tries to escape poverty’s grip, he or she is criticized harshly for attempting to do so. Instead of encouraging the individual to improve his or her socioeconomic standing, the family may deliberately discourage him or her in fear that the individual will leave the family behind in favor of mainstream society. If the way people in poverty view others as possessions is a “problem,” then we must get to the root of the problem to understand why. Slavery is, by far, the single most effective educational, political, and public policy used to subdue African-Americans. This view of people as possessions is one of the lasting affects of the institution of slavery. Since slave marriages were not legal and slaves were considered property, slave masters had *the right* to rip apart families. Slaves did not have any material possessions, so *truly* all they really had was the love, comfort, and support of each other until the slave master tore

them apart. As a result, the African-American family remains fragmented even to this day.

Lastly, my family has a matriarchal structure. Payne claims that in impoverished families the woman is the head of the family. Sometimes the woman may have multiple relationships or several “baby daddies,” thus creating a complex family structure. Not only may the mother have several fathers for her children, but she may also raise the children of other relatives. I have aunts and cousins who have children by several different men. I have two relatives, in fact, who have children by the same man. Therefore, not only are my cousins’ children 2nd cousins, but they also are half-siblings as well. Many times, the fathers of these children remain in the picture for a short period of time and then they disappear (in some cases) never to be seen or heard from again. Once again, this is another affect of the institution of slavery. Families were ripped apart. Fathers, more often than mothers, were sold and thus separated from their families. The mother, if still in childbearing years, was forced to mate with another male to produce more slaves. History often repeated itself with the family being ripped apart if and when the father was displaced. The end result was the restructuring of the African-American family, where the father played a lesser role or no role at all. “The role of father was undoubtedly weaker among slaves than the slaveholding whites, for the primary task of protector was officially denied him” (Stroyer, 1999, p.395). Other women, whose children may have been sold, cared for any motherless children on the plantation. Even though 140 years have passed since the abolition of slavery, its effects remain prevalent in African-American culture. Payne discusses the matriarchal structure, but does not deal with its origin. How can African-Americans be held *solely* responsible for a legacy that

was forced upon them through physical kidnapping and rape, cultural sodomy, and mental incest?

According to Payne, not only does the culture of poverty have its own belief system, but it has its own hidden rules as well. “Hidden rules are the unspoken cues and habits of a group. Distinct cueing systems exist between and among groups and economic class” (Payne, 2005, p. 36), most notably among ethnic and racial groups in the United States. Hidden rules are not exclusive to those in poverty; middle and wealthy classes have hidden rules as well. Payne highlights several hidden rules; however, I found the hidden rules concerning “money” and “education” most relevant for my research. When it comes to money, the middle class believe that money should be managed. The wealthy believe in managing money as well as conserving and investing. However, money is viewed quite differently among people in poverty. Payne claims that people in poverty believe that money is to be spent on enjoyment and shared among family members. “In poverty, the clear understanding is that one will never get ahead so when extra money is available, it is either shared or immediately spent” (Payne, 1995, p. 52-53). Payne believes that the inability to manage money is one of the main reasons why people in poverty cannot improve their socioeconomic status. “How can you manage something you have never had” (Payne, 1995, p. 94)? Payne is correct! How can the poor manage something they have never had? How can someone from poverty manage money when the very economy in which they live is constantly trying to take advantage of them? In his book *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol, contends that businesses, society, and government take advantage of the people in poverty’s emphasis on entertainment and other consumer goods, and thus contribute to their detriment.

The story that is not told is the lifelong deformation of [the poor] by their own society and government... We hear of an insatiable attraction to consumer goods like sneakers, stereos, and video recorders. The story that we do not hear is the aggressive marketing of these commodities in neighborhoods where very poor...people live... (Kozol, 1991, p. 191).

Where education is concerned, Payne contends that the middle class view education as necessary to make money in order to be self-sufficient, and the wealthy need education to maintain family traditions and to network. However, people in poverty value education, but do not see the correlation between education and getting out of poverty. Therefore, education is associated with the abstract concept of the future. Payne asserts that “an education is key to getting out of and staying out of... poverty” (Payne, 1995, p. 124). Education is a part of the essential equation to ending poverty; however Payne does not provide any viable solutions as to how the poor are supposed to pay for college. The cost of college continues to rise while governmental assistance in the form of financial aid continues to shrink. Many families in poverty cannot afford to send their children to college simply because college costs money that they do not have. Children from impoverished backgrounds attend college through the use of student loans – the only financial alternative many have if they want to obtain a college education. Even though student loans provide an immediate solution, they create a long term problem. According to a 2002 report entitled *The Burden of Borrowing*, 84% of African-American students graduate with student loan debt. However, more than 55% of African-American students graduate with unmanageable student loan debt (King & Bannon, 2002, p. 3). Unmanageable student loan debt is defined as more than 8% of the student’s monthly

income (King & Bannon, 2002, p. 1). The overwhelming majority of these African-American graduates are first generation college students from generational poverty. If people in poverty worry about where their next meal is coming from, how can we expect them to prepare for and pay for the rising costs of college?

Payne's prospective is too narrow in its focus. Payne focuses only on *hypothetical scenarios* of the people in poverty in the present (tense). By simply looking at the present without giving deference to the past, Payne's prospective *is 100% truth*. People in poverty are who she believes they are without a shadow of doubt. However, Payne's works suggest that we treat the symptoms of the problems – the present situations – without addressing educational, political, and public policies that created the problems in the first place. Payne's perspective has formulated more questions in my mind about my family's cross-generational plight and the affects of educational, public, and political policies. How did various educational, political, and public policies influence their attitudes and perceptions toward education and their participation in the educational process?

Understanding Poverty: A Broader Perspective and a Payne-ful Critique

Is Payne correct in her assessment of the poor? Or is she simply another cultural deprivation theorist? Cultural deprivation is a concept that became popular in the 1960s to explain the lack of achievement another poor and minority students. A deficit theory, cultural deprivation suggests that the "...social, cultural, and economic impacts of [poor] communities are...important contributing factors in the in the academic failure of some students..." (Nieto, 1996, p. 230). Philosopher Sonia Nieto (1996) classifies these deficit theories as "...not only classist and racist but also simply inadequate in explaining

the failure of so many students” (p. 230). Although her work is primarily celebrated among public school teachers and administrators who serve poor and/or minority students, many in academia consider Payne a cultural deprivation theorist. Payne has been condemned for “...oversimplifying the complexities of poverty in the United States, perpetuating offensive stereotypes of irresponsible, disorganized poor people who play the TV too loud and like to solve disputes with their fists” (www.nytimes.com). Payne’s critics believe that her method of addressing the issues of poverty continue to promote classism and racism instead of reformation; she does not address the discriminatory roles of the American economy and schools against the poor. Paul Gorski contends that Payne’s work and others like it are aimed at preserving “the legacy of privilege for the wealthy at the expense of economically disadvantaged students” (Gorski, 2006, p. 5) by *not* providing an analysis of institutionalized power or classism. Gorski also believes Payne does not look at the conditions that exist in schools in low socioeconomic areas (i.e. unqualified teachers, high class sizes, poor technology and facilities, etc.) (Gorski, 2006, p.5). Her critics are concerned that her work only reinforces the existing stereotypes of people in poverty as lazy, who do not possess the skills or put forth the effort or energy to change their socioeconomic condition. “These stereotypical ways of characterizing the very poor have a long history, and by representing the poor as radically different in their behavior, values, and motivations from other, supposedly normal people, these stereotypes have been associated with the stigmatizing of specific racial and ethnic populations...Over the last generation, they have become distinctly racialized in American popular and policy discourse” (Reed, 1999, p. 186). To many of her critics, Payne embraces cultural stereotypes, blaming the poor for being poor and for their lack

of achievement in school. Payne's critics believe her research will only continue America's status-quo policy concerning the poor where poverty continues to have its arm securely around the necks of African-Americans choking the hope, dream, economic, and psychological life out of them.

In her book *Other People's Children*, urban education theorist Lisa Delpit agrees with other critics of Payne. She contends that a liberal, middle-class education to low socioeconomic children only perpetuates the status quo. It maintains the "culture of power" and ensures that those who possess the power – the dominant culture - remain in power. Delpit's culture of power refers to all of the influences over education from the federal government to the state government to the local school to the principal to the teacher who dominates the student. The student has no control over the quality of education he or she receives; therefore, how can the student be ultimately responsible for his or her lack of achievement? Delpit further maintains various curricula (progressive education) introduced to African-American and other minority students which was supposed to close the achievement gap has, in fact, had the opposite affect. She also states that "...education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and culture difference, and failure and single-parent households...there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths" (p. 172).

In his book *City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education*, Pedro Noguera contends that generalizations such as the ones made in Payne's works are so deeply entrenched in the American psyche that they persist even though empirical data has proven them invalid (p. 44). He further warns against using

cultural stereotypes to explain academic performance. He contends that in doing so, we ignore the fact that so-called cultural customs, beliefs, and practices are "...constantly subject to change" (p. 45). Noguera further concludes that cultural deficit studies, such as Payne's, seek to absolve schools and society from any responsibility concerning the academic failure of African-Americans and other minorities. "Blaming uncaring parents, lazy students, or a society that does not provide adequately for the needs of poor children serves as an effective means to avoid taking responsibility for one's role as an educator" (p. 49).

Like Noguera, Sonia Nieto believes that culture is subject to change and that society is not taking its share of the responsibility as it relates to issues concerning the poor. She contends that culture is treated as if it is a product rather than a process. She asserts that culture affects individuals differently. I agree with Nieto. I grew up around the same environment as my relatives, yet my perspective of education and the world is different. While many of my relatives and their friends were drawn to the negatives of our environments, I was repulsed by many of the behaviors I saw and gravitated toward more positive activities. Nieto also contends that people from impoverished beginnings "...reach unparalleled levels of success...despite tremendous odds" (p. 33). She concludes that culture is no more influential in determining one's success in life than other individual distinctions. "The assumption that culture is the primary determinant of academic achievement can be oversimplistic, dangerous, and counterproductive, while culture may *influence* it does not *determine* who we are" (p. 137).

A study by Larry Bennett and Adolph Reed, Jr. supports Nieto's assertion that culture influences, but does not determine an individual's success. Bennett and Reed

examined the redevelopment initiative of Chicago's infamous Cabrini-Green Neighborhood known for its infestation of poverty and crime. They found that the city of Chicago and the Chicago Housing Authority research and rationale for redeveloping the Cabrini-Green Neighborhood was based upon William Julius Wilson's theory of social isolation developed at University of Chicago in the early 1920s. The theory and research presumed that the problems of the Cabrini-Green Neighborhood were caused by the residents' social pathology or "ghetto-specific culture and behavior" (p. 186). Social pathology refers to "...relatively high rates of teenage childbearing, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed households, drug abuse, welfare dependency, weak labor force attachment, and violent crime" (Bennett & Reed, 1999, p. 186). Bennett and Reed caution against categorizing a culture as being a social pathology. They believe that the City of Chicago and the Chicago Housing Authority's research findings assume that there is *only one* model of healthy social organization (culture). In other words, this research labeled the practices and social organization of the predominantly impoverished Cabrini-Green community as "deviant" because it does not resemble the organization of the dominant culture. Secondly, other functioning aspects of organization and behavior may be overlooked because of the narrow focus on the characteristics of a supposed "normal" culture or society. Therefore, certain behaviors maybe misconstrued as the "breakdown" of the community. Lastly, Bennett and Reed contend that these research findings do "...not take into account the role of political actions, public policy, and larger structural forces in shaping the context of options available to people in communities" (Bennett & Reed, 1999, p. 187).

While deficit studies do not take into account the role educational, political, and public policies, Jean Anyon contends that educational, political, and public policies play a *significant* role in the plight of impoverished people. According to Anyon (2005), the lack of federal and state antiracial discrimination laws, the lack of affordable housing, the redlining of areas to maintain impoverished areas, the suppression of minimum wage legislation, antiunionization laws, the outsourcing of jobs to other countries through free trade agreements, and federal racial discrimination practices are all designed to keep the poor in substandard living conditions (p. 24). Anyon (2005) contends that federal policies are needed “to make the economy more responsive to the needs of working-class employees...” (p. 38). This includes job, educational, and civic programs to reintroduce newly released felons into mainstream society, legislation to keep interest rates low so the poor can have affordable housing, free collegiate education for qualified low income students, and antiracial and discrimination legislation. While Payne advocates the understanding of poverty in an effort to foster academic achievement, Anyon surmises that “...no amount of school reform” (p. 44) can improve test scores unless there are federal laws aimed at increasing the socioeconomic status and overall quality of life for people in poverty.

In his book *Poverty in America*, John Iceland supports Anyon’s assertion that educational, political, and public policies play a significant role in the plight of the poor. In fact, Iceland goes a step further and claims that the poor are a *necessary evil* for the perpetuation of the democratic process and capitalism (status quo that already exists in American society). Iceland contends that the economy of the United States *owes* it success to social stratification. “The term social stratification refers to a set of social and

economic institutions that generate inequality and poverty” (Iceland, 2003, p. 71). Social theorist Karl Marx explored the manner in which economic systems produce inequality between social classes. He argued that the bourgeoisie (the middle-class and wealthy) take unfair advantage of the proletariat (working class poor) by keeping the overwhelming majority of the profit produced by the working class poor. Iceland surmises that the end result is income inequality, which occurs when one segment of society manages to amass wealth (money, property, and others assets) to the exclusion and at the expense of other segments of the population producing an unstable labor market in which the bourgeoisie owners are able to maximize profit and minimize labor costs. “Inequality leads to poverty because many low-wage jobs simply do to keep families from falling into poverty...” (Iceland, 2003, p. 78).

Inequality leads to poverty and poverty often times leads to discrimination. Discrimination occurs when social groups restrict or deny underprivileged groups access to resources and opportunities in an effort to limit the social and economic mobility of the underprivileged and maximize their own social and economic interests. Although there are laws prohibiting *discrimination* based upon race, color, creed, gender, religion, and sexual orientation, Discrimination is *legal* and often used as an apparatus to restrict or deny underprivileged individuals access to resources. Requiring certain credentials (i.e. doctorate, master’s, bachelor’s, training certifications) to be eligible for hire in certain positions is a form of legal discrimination. One of my cousins was a store manager of a successful automotive repair chain. He is a *certified* mechanic with several years of management experience. However, he has discovered that his socioeconomic mobility is significantly hindered because he does not possess a college degree. In order to increase

his (earning potential), he quit his management job to enroll in college full-time. “Obtaining official credentials...is another way access to certain opportunities is controlled and institutionalized” (Iceland, 2003, p. 80).

Through discrimination practice, Iceland states that poverty (social stratification) may affect an individual throughout his or her lifetime. An individual is not simply born poor, but his or her impoverished state is often reinforced through the denial of education and job opportunities as well as other resources. “When stratification is so deeply ingrained in society, ameliorating its effects becomes very difficult” (Iceland, 2003, p. 80). Poverty alone is not enough to subdue someone. Poverty is simply a part of a much more complex economic system. Iceland concludes that “...the overemphasis on individual-level attribution as the cause of poverty... [is] an emphasis that avoids recognition of politics, institutions, or structural inequality” (Iceland, 2003, p. 71).

Unless federal laws change, deficit study critics contend that status quo will continue and educational, political, and public policies will continue to oppress, depress, and suppress African-Americans:

American policy will continue to the present subsistence level, which seeks to keep the undeserving poor functioning at the subsistence level, although that policy may start deteriorating to a survival model, in which help to the poor is supplied only at the level that avoids politically embarrassing increases in extreme misery and death among them (Gans, 1995, p. 103).

While critics conclude that Payne's works do not call for the reformation of classism and racism, her work has been added to the national dialogue fueled by the likes of Jonathan Kozol and Gloria Ladson-Billings.

...[I]f Ruby Payne as a value – and she does – that value lies...in the fact that she's willing to talk about class at all. For that, I give her major props...At least she's shown the courage to start the conversation and face what the rest of us [those "unaffected" by Poverty] are hiding from (www.matewan.squarespace.com).

The –isms: Racism & Nihilism

I have discovered that where there are issues of poverty, there are also issues pertaining to racism and nihilism. Racism affects educational, political, and public policies on civilizational, societal, and institutional levels. It affects how different cultural groups view and interact with the world, how “predominant cultural assumptions, beliefs, habits, and norms are clearly partial to one race over another” (Augulego, Thornton, Bakenhus, Benn, and Holmes, 2004, p. 1), and how “organizations and institutions create and enforce policies and operating procedures that favor the dominant race over other races or when organizational cultures, symbols, or habits creating a biasing effect” (Augulego, Thornton, Bakenhus, Benn, and Holmes, 2004, p. 1). Racism is a chameleon that is “disguised or rationalized with an explanation that society is more willing to accept” (Augulego, Thornton, Bakenhus, Benn, and Holmes, 2004, p. 1).

The dominant culture has used racism or racist practices to insure that African-Americans are seen as insignificant. “Minorities are generally those who do not have the resources, skills, knowledge, or organizational base to create the kinds of dependencies

that characterize the politics such powerful monied interest as oil, banking, or agriculture” (Bayes, 1982, p. 1). African-Americans lack the voice necessary to affect educational, political, and social change on a mass level. Without a voice, African-Americans inadvertently accept the notion that “white is right!” The *default* attitude is “The dominant culture knows what is best for me and my children. It is powerful; I shall comply with whatsoever it dictates.” In other words, the dominant culture still acts as “Master,” speaking for African-Americans whom it believes is inherently inferior and can not properly articulate his needs and desires.

The other –ism associated with poverty is nihilism. Nihilism is present in any impoverished African-American communities. According to prophetic philosopher Cornel West, nihilism is the “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most importantly) lovelessness (West, 1993, p. 14). It is in part because of a nihilistic threat that African-Americans are in a state of despair. This despair did not begin yesterday, but it is the result of over 400 years of social and economic injustice, a bitter fight that has left African-Americans longing and looking for acceptance in the dominant culture’s world. The dominant culture – with educational, political, and public policies- has successfully managed to keep African-Americans oppressed and enslaved mentally, socially, and economically. “The oppressed, as objects, as ‘things,’ have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them” (Freire, 2000, p.60). The purpose of my research was to restore the African-American ‘voice’ – a voice long silenced through marginalization. Through my family, the African-American voice speaks to the past and present issues as it relates to the affects of educational, political, and public policies on African-Americans’ life experiences.

The Twins: Generational Poverty & Intergenerational Poverty

As previously stated, poverty occurs when people do not have adequate income for their material needs and are unable to "...play the roles, participate in relationships, and follow the customary behavior which is expected of them by virtue of their membership of society" (Iceland, 2003, p. 11). Resulting problems are unemployment, lack of education and skills, low income, poor housing, high criminal activities, and deterioration of the family structure. Unfortunately, these "resulting problems" can be transmitted from generation to generation causing generational poverty. "[Generational poverty is]... a predestination of certain people to a life of (economic) poverty.... one inherits poverty through his color, his economic status, or the occupation of his parents [and grandparents]... These become a part of the vicious circle in which each factor acts on the other to perpetuate the social structure and the individual family's position" (Wilber, 1975, p. 8). Families who have been in poverty for at least two consecutive generations are not only engaged in generational poverty, but they are also engaged in intergenerational poverty.

The primary difference between generational and intergenerational poverty is the prefix "inter-," which simply means "between." Intergenerational poverty is solely based upon the socioeconomic background of an individual's parents. If the parents (the first generation) are poor, then the children (the second generation) are poor, thus resulting in a cycle of intergenerational poverty. Generational poverty occurs once the second generation produces offspring and still do not have access to resources to improve their socioeconomic status. Children raised in low-socioeconomic families are at a much higher risk of being deprived of (financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support

systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules) resources. Therefore, in order to interrupt and ultimately break the cycle of poverty that is imminent for them, these children [and parents] must be granted access to "...support and opportunities [resources] essential to a person's sound, balanced, and sustainable development" (Commission of Poverty, 2005, p. 1). These resources include access to "a range of comprehensive and universal services covering healthcare, education, child care, and other support services accessible to the younger generation, rich or poor; [and] ... financial assistance to help...low-income families to get access to basic and essential services; e.g. textbooks and traveling subsidies to enable students from low-income families to benefit from school education" (Commission on Poverty, 2005, p. 2).

Four economic theories are used to explain the phenomena of generational and intergenerational poverty: (1) the economic resources model, (2) the noneconomic resources model, (3) the welfare trap, and (4) the structural/environmental model. The economic resources model contends that parents in poverty do not have the financial resources to invest in their children's education. In turn, this affects the children's ability to obtain high paying jobs. The economic resources model also contends that the parents' lack of financial resources results in poor housing and low quality schools in unsafe neighborhoods. The noneconomic model deals with other resources that poor parents may lack such as a quality education. The lack of a quality education among parents may hinder the transmission of not only healthy educational values, but a healthy work ethic, which increases the likelihood that their children will become poor adults. The welfare trap model claims that intergenerational poverty is perpetuated by the government's welfare system because over the course of time, disgrace and shame are no

longer associated with welfare. The poor simply adapt and accept their circumstance(s) and do not attempt to wean themselves from the systems, developing defeatist attitudes and a poor work ethic, which is transmitted to their offspring. Lastly, the structural/environmental models declares that “labor market conditions, migration patterns, racial discrimination, and racial and class segregation all play a role in perpetuating poverty across generations” (Iceland, 2003, p. 50).

The alarming number of those engaged in generational and intergenerational poverty (25% of the population – approximately 35 million Americans) is what led President Lyndon B. Johnson to declare War on Poverty in 1960s, calling into question the United States’ norms of equality and meritocracy (social stratification). Through an act of congress, President Johnson created the Office of Economic Opportunity. Its sole purpose was to create federal programs aimed at breaking the cycles of generational and intergenerational poverty. Though dismantled in 1973, the Office of Economic Opportunity created such programs as Head Start, Job Corp, and other community programs aimed at annihilating poverty; these programs which still exist today.

While Johnson has been celebrated for his War on Poverty Initiative, critics today contend that it has had limited success:

...Johnson’s War on Poverty...succeeded in removing ‘barriers [to upward mobility]...and a boost up was provided’ to people living in poverty...[E]arly intervention programs like Head Start, underpinned by the proposition ‘that a concentrated dose of mainstream culture would be enough to raise intellectual performance [of poor children] and lead to

success in mainstream schools” had failed poor children (Dudley-Marling).

Not only have I been a member of a generational poverty community, but I have also been a member of an intergenerational poverty community. As a youth, I benefited from the programs created by President Johnson’s War on Poverty initiative aimed at interrupting intergenerational poverty. I was the first one in my family to go to Head Start. When I started kindergarten, I was ahead of many of my classmates. I also benefited from a program that provided free health and dental care at St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital until I was 10 years old when the program was discontinued. If the program had continued, I would have had free health and dental care until age 18. This was only two of several programs that my parents took advantage created by the War on Poverty Initiative. From a personal vantage point, this initiative was successful in that it helped to interrupt the intergenerational poverty cycle.

African-American Culture

The cycle of poverty is not easily broken. Unfortunately, it is interwoven into the consciousness and the culture of those engaged in it. Like poverty, African-Americans have their own culture; much of whom and what we are has been influenced by poverty. The African-American culture “is a synthesis of African culture and American-European culture as they interacted under slavery... While enslaved Blacks from Western, Central, and Southern Africa in the 17th and 18th centuries were diverse in experience, language, cultural practices, and many other aspects, it was their common experience as slaves in America that served as the foundation for the ‘cultural value system’ that was handed down from Africans to their American-born offspring.” (Scott, 2005, p. 4). Slavery still

has a profound effect on African-Americans more than 140 years after its abolishment. It remains prevalent in the foundation of core African-American values. African-Americans were excluded from the activities of mainstream society due to racism and bigotry, which affects the way society treats African-Americans.

According to John Ogbu's theory of cultural ecology, African-Americans are "involuntary minorities." Ogbu's theory of cultural ecology is "the study of institutionalized patterns of behavior interdependent with features of the environment" (Ogbu, 1990a, p. 122). Ogbu asserts that these institutionalized patterns are played out in American schools in relationship to "how society at large and the school treat minorities and how minority groups respond to those treatments and to schooling" (Ogbu, 1999, p. 156). Ogbu divides minorities into two groups: involuntary minorities and voluntary minorities. The difference between involuntary and voluntary minorities is that involuntary minorities immigrate to a host country by force and voluntary minorities immigrate to a host country by choice. Since African-Americans are descendents of African slaves, who were captured and transported from Africa and sold into slavery in the United States; they are involuntary minorities. As previously mentioned, the dominant culture never intended for education to have liberating consequences for African-Americans. "... [T]he history of education for African-Americans is not a story of liberation and prosperity but one of struggle and disappointment...education, as we know it, was never intended to have liberatory consequences for African-Americans" (Lynn, 2006, p. 116). Because of the historic relationship between the dominant culture and African-Americans, both parties have adopted passive aggressive attitudes and practices, thus maintaining already established boundaries (Foster, 2004, p. 372).

Ogbu also contends that people in poverty have a tendency to operate in survival mode. He states that these survival tactics undermine academic success. Ogbu identifies the main survival strategies as clientship/Uncle Tomming, collective struggle, and hustling. All of these survival (and others) strategies are a direct result of slavery. “[African-Americans] have learned since slavery that the way to get ahead even within the limited universe open to them in the status-mobility system is not through merit and talent but through white patronage or favoritism” (Ogbu, 1983a, p. 177). Uncle Tomming/clientship refers to the use of manipulation, dependency, and compliance to solicit favoritism from the dominant culture. Collective struggles are legitimate civil rights activities (rioting and protests) that promise to make more resources available to them. Hustling and pimping are forms of reverse work ethic in which one manipulates others to work for them instead of doing the work. Many assume that impoverished African-Americans believe that organized society and government owes them a living. Students in poverty supposedly try to avoid schoolwork by applying these survival strategies.

Working with at-risk students in poverty, I have seen these survival strategies at work. There were two students, who ironically share the same first name, who consistently tried to get several of my colleagues to complete their college level assignments for them (with a degree of success I might add). These same students as well as others used these survival strategies on female students. A male student asked a female student to help him with his research paper. They set a date and time for a study session. The female student showed up with all of

his research material and was prepared to work. The male student did not show up at all. The next day, he was upset that the female student did not continue the work without him.

Other survival methods that Ogbu mentions are camouflage and emulation. Camouflage refers to a student who becomes the class clown in order to hide the fact that he or she is an honor student. Since a sense of humor and personality are emphasized in the culture of poverty, other students in poverty accept this behavior without question because acceptance and relationships are valued over academic success. As an educator, I have seen students camouflage their academic ability. When I taught 7th grade English in Memphis, a student asked me not to disclose the fact that he did well in school because he wanted to maintain a certain reputation with his friends. Understanding the importance of acceptance among peers during the adolescent years, I honored his request. However, I did make his parents aware of what he had asked me to do and why.

Impoverished African-Americans associate “emulation” of the dominant culture with cultural passing. Cultural passing is frowned upon heavily among people in poverty, especially in African-American culture. In a culture where people are viewed as possessions, the fear is that one will neglect the family for socioeconomic gain. At various times throughout my life, several members of my family have accused me of cultural passing. I have been criticized for my speech. Instead of using slang, I use correct English when speaking. As a youth, I was criticized for my style of dress, which was considered to be that of a “preppie, white boy.” I was also criticized for my choice in music. I preferred pop music

over rap and hip-hop. I also preferred to eat salads, yogurt, and other healthy foods instead of hamburgers and junk food. All of these things were associated with the dominant culture by family members and some of my classmates. Even the academic level to which I have ascended is associated with the dominant culture. When I told one of my cousins that I was moving to Atlanta to pursue my doctorate, she was startled and overtly showed her disapproval by *rolling her eyes*. Some relatives view my educational aspirations as *unnecessary* and refuse to even acknowledge my educational achievements. Sonia Nieto (1996) explains that “[s]tudents from castelike minorities who engage in behaviors that conform to the mainstream culture are frequently ostracized by their peers. They must cope... “with the burden of acting” (p. 239).

I am an African-American. I am male. I am the first person in my family to use education in a major way to escape the grip of poverty. I am uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge -a way of escape- in the eyes of my students and my family. There is a cacophony of voices that speak to the experiences of African-Americans. I sought to add my voice and the cross-generational voices of my family to the discussion.

The Status Quo: Education, Political, and Public Policies of the Dominant Culture

Over the last 110 years, there have been a host of educational, political, and public policies that have had a direct affect on the plight of African-Americans, which is the time span that covers six generations of my family. Perhaps contrary to dominant culture beliefs and historical accounts, these policies have had a negative impact on the lived experiences of African-Americans and have done nothing more than maintain the status quo in American society.

What exactly is the “status quo” in American society? The term “status quo” simply means to keep things the way they are currently. Since the inception of this country, African-Americans have never been considered “equal” to the dominant culture. In fact, many of the dominant culture justified slavery using the Bible claiming that it was “the white man’s burden” to civilize and Christianize African slaves whom they considered barbaric and primal in nature. Furthermore, African-Americans were not included in this country’s original concepts of citizenship and personage. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all men* are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are *Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness*” (www.law.indiana.edu). These words penned by Thomas Jefferson, noted statesman and later third president, to declare the United States’ independence from the England’s rule, excluded all African men, women, and children. Since the abolishment of slavery, African-Americans have fought with the blood, sweat, and the tears of their brows to be a part of the verbiage in Jefferson’s declaration – “*all men are created equal.*” Though one cannot deny the progress made, African-Americans as a race are still not consider equals - counterpart, colleagues, contemporaries, comrades- of the dominant culture. In fact, educational, political, and public policies have been enacted to perpetuate the inequality – the status quo- that exists in American society in which the rich are seemingly getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

Separate and Unequal: Negro Education & the “Ab” Normal School

More than 110 years ago, the prevailing educational, political, and public policy that had a tremendous affect on African-Americans – then called Freedmen and Negroes – was the landmark case of Plessy v. Ferguson of 1896; it effectively reversed the

progress slaves, now freed Negroes, had made since the end of the Civil War. During the Reconstruction Era after the Civil War, federal, state, and local governments tried to rebuild a “kinder, gentler” South. Northern philanthropists, white school reformers, and black leaders successfully established a state system of common schools in the South, a region where universal education was unknown heretofore. The new common schools in the South included the education of white children as well as freed Negro children.

When Reconstruction ended in 1876, southern planters –former Confederate slave owners – returned to legislative power and effectively halted Negro progress. Their main objective was to return the South to its former “glory” and to suppress Negro progress. Former slaves were, after all, a seemingly unending source of cheap labor. To compete with northerners who viewed southerners as inferiors, many southern planters still wanted universal education for their children. Even small white farmers who initially opposed taxation for public education wanted universal education as long as it benefited their children. As a result, funding for public schools for Negro children was diverted to white children and opposition to Negro education grew.

The landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson* altogether reversed the progress made during the Reconstruction Era in the area of public education for blacks. *Plessy v. Ferguson* was a test case brought before the Supreme Court that challenged the separate but equal rail car laws of the state of Louisiana which required separate seating cars for black and whites. The attorney for the petitioner Homer Plessy, who was arrested for sitting in a designated “whites only” area on an interstate train, argued that the Separate Car Act in the state of Louisiana violated the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments of the Constitution, which perpetuated “racial distinction derived from slavery” (Margo, 1990,

p. 68). He argued that the act also violated the equal protection and due process clause of the fourteenth amendment and that it sought “to assort and classify all passengers...according to race, and to make the rights and privileges of all the cities of the United States dependent on said classification” (Margo, 1990, p. 68).

The Supreme Court ruled that “legislation is powerless to eradicate racial distinction” (Margo, 1990, 69) and ruled that separate accommodations for the white race and the colored races was constitutional as long as they were equal. This decision effected black public education immediately. “Every ex-Confederate state...compelled separate schools by constitutional fiat or statutory authority. Children who fit the legal definition of “Negro” were required to attend the schools for their race...” (Margo, 1990, p. 69-70). The problem with this law was that “separate but equal” became “separate and unequal.” Negro schools paled in comparison to white schools. More and more public funds were diverted to white schools while black schools and children suffered the consequences.

In 1910, 49.3% of Negro boys and 30.6% of Negro girls between the ages of 10 and 15 were employed as unskilled agricultural labors (Anderson, 1988, p. 149). As it had been during slavery, the Negro remained the backbone of the labor force of the South. “Many planters, believing that school actually spoiled a good field hand, preferred their laborers illiterate or at best semiliterate” (Anderson, 1988, p. 149). The labor need for tobacco, cotton, and other crop production clashed with the need for formal education of black children. Some white farmers and planters used threats and intimidation to keep Negro parents from allowing their children to attend school.

The resistance of white planters and farmers in the South was not the only problem legislation facing Negro education in the South. The separate but equal legislation highlighted the problem that there were not enough schools to accommodate the overwhelming majority of Negro children. More than two-thirds of Negro children were of elementary age. The separate but equal legislation forbade Negro children from attending school with white children. In addition, the overwhelming majority of white educators refused to teach Negro children, and there were not enough Negro teachers to education their children. Southern white planters and farmers opposing the education of Negroes used this as part of their rationale against Negro education. “Having resisted the development of universal common school for black children, the South provided very little public support for black teacher training” (Anderson, 1988, p. 114).

Negro children had a better chance of receiving a quality education from private elementary, secondary, and collegiate institutions. At the turn of the century, 70% of Negro normal school students were enrolled in private institutions and 80% were enrolled in secondary schools. Many of these private institutions taught classical liberal curriculum much to the dismay of wealthy northern philanthropists who sought to implement the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial normal education and teacher training.

The Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial normal education and teacher training emphasized the training of teachers to fill the demand for Negro teachers in the South and to teach manual labor practices. Advocating the Hampton-Tuskegee model was another way for white southern reformers and northern philanthropists to control “the ideological content of school for the black masses...thereby contributing to the

socialization of black children” (Anderson, 1988, p. 111). These reformers knew that the best way to transmit their ideology to black children was by indoctrinating black teachers. Northern philanthropists used their wealth and influence to persuade small black privately run secondary, normal, and collegiate institutions as well as public normal, secondary, and collegiate institutions to adopt the Hampton-Tuskegee model. This sparked a debate in Negro communities as to which was better for the Negro: a classical education or an industrial education. Booker T. Washington, an advocate of practical Negro education, a graduate of Hampton Institute, and founder of Tuskegee Institute, believed that it was best for Negroes to accept their subservient position in a segregated America, master the manual and industrial arts in an effort to improve their economic status until such a time they became a politically and socially powerful. W.E.B. DuBois, founding father of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), adamantly opposed Washington’s point of view, “claiming that industrial education would merely prepare blacks for a new kind of slavery” (Margo, 1990, p. 48). Federal and state governments did very little to assist small black public and private schools; therefore, the northern philanthropists were successful in exercising “much control over the structure and content of the small private schools because these schools were not under the control of either missionary societies, black religious organizations, or federal or state authorities” (Anderson, 1988, p. 115).

The only alternative some Negro children had was private normal schools. A normal school education often provided substandard teaching and industrial training. Many of the normal schools did very little to educate the Negro beyond the basic skills of reading, writing, and simple arithmetic. Instead of teaching a classical curriculum, most

normal schools focused on a manual labor routine “to teach students steady work habits, practical knowledge, and Christian model” (Anderson, 1988, p. 35). Hampton Institute founder Samuel Armstrong, a founder union soldier, believed “classical studies...stimulated ‘vanity’ in black students, which propelled them toward high-flown notions of politics and professional life. [The Hampton-Tuskegee Model] sought to impress upon its students their ‘true’ place in the southern social order...” (Anderson, 1988, p. 49). The purpose of this “curriculum” was to prepare Negroes for their subservient position or second class citizenry in the South. Ironically, normal schools prepared Negroes for a social stratification – a position which they had been occupying for 300 years (at this time). Unfortunately, the Hampton-Tuskegee model was beneficial to northern philanthropists and southern white moderates who only wanted elementary and normal education for Negroes in an attempt to deny them access to higher education, careers, and equal job opportunities.

Many students who had gone to such institutes as Hampton and Tuskegee were sorely disappointed by the education they received. Normal schools were a part of the educational, political, and public policy of the day that perpetuated the status quo in society rather than provide a quality education designed to enhance the socioeconomic lives of Negroes. “Many came...with the understanding that they would learn skilled trades for future livelihood...some students were disappointed with the absence of technical training and the low level of trade training...school was ‘greatly’ overrated” (Anderson, 1988, p. 59).

Separate and Unequal in the Workplace

Plessy v. Ferguson not only influenced the education of Negro children, but it also influenced how Negroes were treated in the workplace. With the onset of World War I, Negroes began to slowly abandon their impoverished southern roots and the southern agrarian society in hopes of finding economic, social, and educational mobility in the North thus beginning the first wave of what is known as the Great Migration. During the second decade of the twentieth century between 700,000 and 1 million migrated from the South to the North. “For the first time in U.S. history, African-Americans broke the agricultural and domestic ‘job ceiling’ and moved into the industrial sector – iron, steel, automobile, meatpacking, and other mass production industries – in large number” (Trotter, 2001, p. 374). As more and more white males were drafted to fight in the war, Negro workers became their replacements. For Negroes who could not afford to or chose not to go north for various reasons, the next best thing was to leave the rural society in hopes of escaping poverty and move to the city.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau between 1920 and 1930, approximately 70-80% of Negro men and women worked in unskilled labor jobs. “...[D]espite the rise of mass production employments, large numbers of black men continued to work as longshoremen, elevator operators, porters, janitors, teamsters, chauffeurs, waiters, and ‘general laborers of all kind’ whether they had obtained an education or not.

Unfair and unequal wages and work conditions were common place in the South. Not only did Negroes earn less money and work longer hours in industry, but they were also subject to “debilitating heat, deadly fumes, disabling injuries, and even death” (Trotter, 2001, p. 388). They also were subject to the nastiest of job white workers

refused to do. “The discriminatory policies of employers, workers, and urban institutions made it exceedingly difficult for African-Americans to improve their economic position” (Trotter, 2001, p. 390).

Even though Negroes had broken through the agricultural and domestic ‘job ceiling’ into various industries, they soon lost some of the ground gained when World War I ended and the white men returned home to their jobs. Once the war was over, white soldiers reclaimed the jobs they had before the war. Many white employers did not have any loyalty towards Negro workers. For the Negro, there was no such thing as “job security.” The lack of job security led to frequent unemployment among most Negroes in industry. Negroes were often unemployed between 2 to 4 months a year. How could the majority of Negroes in industry concentrate on socioeconomic mobility with a lack of job security? “As a result of frequent periods of unemployment, some black workers ‘didn’t worry about being promoted or getting a raise; you worried about keeping the job you had” (Trotter, 2001, p. 390).

The end result - Negroes found it almost impossible to break the cycle of poverty because of employer discrimination practices. Employers based their decisions to include or exclude Negroes from employability on the following reasons: (1) unable or unwilling to have a bi-racial workforce, (2) Negroes lacked proper training, (3) preferred white workers, and “nature of business.” Other reasons included: (5) violation of separate but equal law which called for separate facilities for the races, (6) union restrictions, (7) never considered having Negro workers, (8) fear of public opinion if Negroes were employed, and (9) fear of trouble from white workers (Trotter, 2001, p. 390-391). Many Negroes had no other choice but to work in menial jobs in spite of the

hostile physical and racial work conditions. With no opportunities for further advancement, their focus merely became daily survival!

The Great Depression

Conditions for Negroes in America did not improve – they only got worse with the Great Depression as the educational, political, and public policies continued to work against them. The Great Depression began as a result of the crash of the stock market and had worldwide ramifications because of the relationships the United States had established with Canada, Europe, and other industrialized nations as a result of World War I. It began on Tuesday, October 29, 1929, after the stock market crash as a result of falling stock prices. Stock prices continued to fall until 1932. By then, they were worth about only 20% of what they had been worth just three years prior. As a result of the stock market crash of 1929, thousands of investors lost their fortunes. More than 11,000 of the 25,000 U.S. banks, whose wealth and lending power were based on now worthless stock portfolios, closed causing people to lose their savings. Furthermore, a reduction in the demand for products because people were not spending more caused companies to close. By 1932, approximately 25% to 30% of the American workforce (12-15 million people) was unemployed. Negroes in urban areas felt the immediate affects of the stock market crash more so than those in rural areas as they were the first ones to be fired so that that white workers could continue to work as long as possible with the worsening economic conditions. The Great Depression “undercut the position of black workers” (Trotter, 2001, p. 434). As a result, Negro unemployment soared to around 66% for African-American men (www.ohiohistorycentral.org). Negroes who managed to keep

their jobs faced brutal treatment from whites who demanded preferential treatment because of their race.

Sharecropping in the “New” South

Even though Negroes in urban areas felt the immediate effects of the Great Depression, Negroes in rural area experienced hardships as a result of the Great Depression as well. Most Negroes in the rural agrarian society of the South were sharecroppers. After the collapse of the South as a result of the Civil War, the institution of slavery was replaced with the sharecropping system. During slavery, the plantation was a highly centralized system operating as one unit. The owner or a designated overseer controlled every aspect of plantation life from the crops planted to the capacities in which the slave labor served. However, under the sharecropping system, the plantation operated as a decentralized unit divided into small plots of land, which were leased on a yearly basis to individual families. Instead of living in former slave quarters, the individual families lived on their tract of land. Each family was responsible for planting and harvesting the crops designated by the landowner. The landowner advanced the sharecroppers farming supplies and equipment; in return, the sharecroppers repaid the landowner with 33% to 50% of the crop and kept the remaining portion to do with as they willed.

There were several inherent problems with the sharecropping system that made it detrimental to Negro sharecroppers. First, sharecropping did not liberate blacks from the agricultural job market nor did it transfer considerable amounts of land into Negro ownership and control. The land remained in the hands of former slave owners and northern investors. Secondly, sharecropping placed Negroes under the authority of their

former owners or the owners' overseers. Many landowners and/or overseers managed the sharecropping system in a manner similar to the plantation system. Thirdly, the "true power" remained under the control of the landowner and the suppliers. Negroes did not have the power or authority to set market standards or prices in an effort to maximize profit. Fourthly, Negroes remained socioeconomically dependent on the landowners. Finally, the sharecropping system left many black sharecroppers indebted to their landowners. Many sharecroppers could not read or write. As a result, many landowners cheated them out of their crops and profits, thus leading sharecroppers to believe that instead of making money and getting ahead at the end of the harvest season; they were, in fact, more in debt. The landowners would *so generously* keep an "accurate" accounting of the sharecropper's debt. The sharecropper would then hope that enough money would be made the next season in order to pay off the outstanding debt with the hopes of getting ahead in the next year. However, the sharecropper never got ahead and remained indebted to the landowner. As a result of their indebtedness, their socioeconomic mobility was severely restricted by laws that imposed several penalties and jail time for breaking their sharecropping agreements with the landowners, thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty and economic dependence on the landowner. The sharecropping system proved to be nothing more than slavery – without the physical chains.

Sharecropping, ultimately, failed to secure for freed people a strong enough economic base from which they could establish a political foothold. The economic and political vulnerability of black sharecroppers...rendered them effectively powerless in the political arena, unable to promote their economic interests and protect their civil rights...Freed people agreed to

sharecropping...because southern whites managed to close off to them other possibilities, including employment opportunities outside of agriculture (Royce, 1993, p. 218).

The impact of the Great Depression on Negroes in the South was devastating. The price of cotton continued to fall. In 1933, cotton reached its lowest price point of six cents per pound (Trotter, 2001, p. 435). Suffering from the Depression as well, white landowners often cut monthly stipends to almost nothing as banks failed and their financial future became uncertain. The only hope that sharecroppers had during the Depression was if they worked for benevolent planters who understood and were sympathetic to their plight.

One of the most damaging factors of the sharecropping system in the new South for Negroes was that it caused education to be deemphasized. By the 1930s, Negro education, particularly in rural areas was still under funded. Many areas in the rural South “double” taxed themselves in order to fund education. In addition to paying property taxes, Negro citizens took on the burden of financing the “public school” out of their own pockets. “Black teachers, parents, and citizens taxed themselves for school improvement costs, and this practice became increasingly difficult as poor rural communities experienced the Great Depression” (Anderson, 1988, p. 176). Many Negroes still believed that education was the only way out of poverty and did what was necessary in order see that their children received a proper education with little or no help from state and local governments. “Studies of southern school finances for the period demonstrated that school offices were reluctant to appropriate money for school houses

and teachers for black children, expanded virtually no funds for school maintenance, repair, supplies, and transportation” (Anderson, 1988, p 176).

As a result of the lack of funding from state and local authorities, many Negro public schools provided an inferior education. Also, some southern states adopted policies requiring a specific attendance rate at Negro schools. If the attendance rate fell below a certain level, then the school was closed and funding diverted to other “more deserving” white schools. School attendance in Negro schools was a problem – not only because of the inclement weather that would prohibit the students from walking the long distances to school – but also because many families depended on the children as well as the adults to plant and harvest crops, do other chores, and perhaps care for younger siblings. The family’s livelihood and survival depended on *all* its members. As a result, when having to make a choice between education - which was *not* providing the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothes - and working to put food on the table, a roof over their heads, and clothes on their backs, many Negro parents deemed school unimportant...by default.

World War II: Jim Crow in Uncle Sam’s Army

The beginning of World War II in 1939 effectively ended The Great Depression as American industries mobilized to help European allies. The United States was thrust into another world war on December 7, 1941, after the Japanese bombed the Pearl Harbor Air Naval Station in Hawaii. History repeated itself: As with the first war, Negroes replaced whites that went off to war in various wartime industries once again attempting to permanently break the “job ceiling” in urban centers across America. During the 1940s, more than 1.6 million blacks fled the South for the industrial jobs of the North

spawning the second Great Migration. As with the previous generation, Negroes were subjected to unfair working conditions and unequal wages; some companies flat out refused to hire Negro employees. Discrimination policies in general continued to make it difficult for Negroes to break the cycle of poverty.

While many Negroes opposed fighting in what they considered “a white man’s war” and fought to break the “job ceiling” in various industries, many Negroes fought to break the “job ceiling” in the armed forces. When the United States entered World War II, it did so with the support of many of Negroes.

The number of blacks selected for military services increased from 2,069 in 1940 to about 370,000 in 1942. By war’s end, nearly 1 million black men and women had served in the armed forces...About 500,000 blacks saw service overseas in European, Mediterranean, and Pacific theaters of war. In the Pacific theater, blacks made up the majority of laborers who cleared “some of the world’s densest jungle” and built the Leda Road leading into China...They were also the advance guard in the liberation of Jewish holocaust survivors in concentration camps...’When the survivors of the Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps were liberated in 1944, the first faces they saw were African-Americans” in all-black units like the 371st Tank Battalion. Many of these young African-American soldiers received a presidential citation for their contribution to winning the war (Trotter, 2001, p. 493).

All of the Negroes valiant and heroic efforts were done in spite of the segregation and discriminating policies of the United States Armed Forces.

In 1940, the United States Congress passed the Selective Service Act that in essence made all men between the ages 18 and 36 eligible to serve in the armed forces and prohibited discrimination on the basis of color or race. The Selective Service Act seemed like a clear-cut victory in the desegregation of the armed services, right? Wrong! A provision in the Select Service Act that gave the War Department the final decision on the “fitness” of any candidate for service provided the loophole necessary for the military to continue to discriminate against Negroes wishing to serve in the military. “The Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and the Army Air Corps still barred blacks completely, and the Navy Department accepted them as messmen only” (Trotter, 2001, p. 491). Recruitments offices in the South used literary tests to deny Negroes the right to serve in the military. Negroes who were permitted to serve in the military worked primarily in noncombat capacities as “laborers, stevedores, and servants. They built bridges, dug ditches, cleaned latrines, peeled potatoes, cooked, washed laundry and dishes, collected and transported garbage, shined shoes, and drove trucks” (Trotter, 2001, p. 497). No matter how educated Negroes were in the military they were relegated to the labor division. In addition, they had separate barracks or living quarters from those of white soldiers and were often subjected to humiliating treatment on and off military bases.

While the United States waged war abroad, Negro military personnel waged war at home seeking equal treatment. Negro military personnel used the media, public officials, and civil rights organizations to expose the violation of what President Roosevelt called the four freedoms –freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Negro military personnel resisted the mistreatment of white military personnel. They rioted, demanding fair treatment in situations where they

felt the military was misusing its authority toward black soldiers. Female Negro military personnel defended themselves against the sexual harassment and attempted rape by white soldiers. Negro military personnel fought against the exclusion of Negroes from officer and specialist schools and discrimination in military promotion practices.

“...[S]ome brilliant Negro officers...[were] never promoted. Some of these officers had degrees from the nation’s outstanding universities, while white officers...ignorant as the days are long...in a few months...[were] captains” (Trotter, 2001, p. 497).

Negro military personnel won their fight against inequality in the armed services after World War II. On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which states, “It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale”

(www.trumanlibrary.org/9981). This order officially integrated the armed services. The integration of the armed services was a major victory for Civil Rights and paved the way for legal challenges to segregation that would lead to the fall of Jim Crow Laws in the South.

Renewed Hope: The Second Civil War

The end of World War II brought renewed hope and enthusiasm for Negroes across America. The integration of the armed services showed that educational, political, and public policies were, however slow, include equality for Negroes. The integration of the United States Armed Forces was the first of three significant events in the Negroes’

fight for equality. The second was the Supreme Court ruling on *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) that overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) which had been used to deny Negroes equal accommodations and educational opportunities under the law.

Brown vs. Board of Education was a lawsuit filed against the Topeka, Kansas, school board, challenging an 1879 Kansas law that allowed, but did not mandate, separate but equal schools for black and white students. A class action suit sponsored by the local chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), *Brown* named 13 parents of 20 Topeka students as plaintiffs. The plaintiff for which the lawsuit is titled was Oliver Brown, a Negro welder and assistant pastor, whose daughter Linda was a third-grade student at Monroe Elementary who had to walk 21 blocks to the bus stop to ride a bus to her school -an additional mile away- when there was Sumner Elementary, a white school, a mere seven blocks from where her home was in an already integrated community. Mr. Brown was chosen by the NAACP as chief plaintiff because he had a traditional American family, which appealed to the court system, as opposed to a single-parent family. The Board of Education won the initial lawsuit. The District Court, using *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) as legal precedent, ruled that the Topeka school met the equality clause as stated by *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896).

The NAACP appealed the ruling all the way to Supreme Court. By the time *Brown vs. Board of Education* class action suit reached the Supreme Court, it was combined with five other similar cases. The Supreme Court ruled that “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (Trotter, 2001, p. 521). This meant that states could no longer operate separate dual education facilities and curricula for white students and

black students. A year later, the Supreme Court demanded that school districts implement desegregation plans with “with all deliberate speed.” (Trotter, 2001, p. 521) after hearing various arguments from school districts concerning the insurmountable task of desegregation.

The third event which signaled change for the Negro was the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement began on December 1, 1955, when seamstress Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery City Bus resulting in a city-wide bus boycott led by civil rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. For more than a year, Montgomery’s black citizens refused to ride city buses that required them to enter through the rear door of the bus, stand over empty seats in the “whites only” section of the bus, and give up their seats to any white person if the white section became full. Negroes comprised more than 75% of the passengers on the city buses. As a result of the boycott, the city of Montgomery transportation system lost money as Negroes walked, took black taxi services that offered competitive rates in support of the bus boycott, or used organized carpools to get to work, school, and other places. The boycott was not without its problems: The homes of boycott leaders, including that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were bombed; hundreds were arrested and harassed by the white citizenry; and some employers fired boycott participants. Nevertheless, the boycott was successful in initiating a Civil Rights fire that could only be extinguished with the water of justice. After 386 days, Negroes were victorious in their quest to integrate the transportation system.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott propelled Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to national prominence; he became the voice and the face of the Civil Rights Movement as Negroes

around the country mobilized and clamored for equal rights. From 1955 to 1968, Negroes fought the heated battles in a “Second Civil War” before a live television audience. The new medium of television captured the sights, sounds, and unimagined horror of violence, police brutality, and inhumane treatment of Negroes by the dominant culture for all the world to see, inspiring people of different ethnicities and nationalities to join the non-violent protest movement.

One of the defining moments of the Civil Rights Movement was the March on Washington that took place on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, where Dr. King delivered his famous “I Have A Dream” speech before a crowd of over 300,000 people. Dr. King claimed that the American government had failed to provide the freedoms it promised in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we've come to our

nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds" (King, 1963).

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, America was beginning to make good on its check, which according to Dr. King had been marked "insufficient funds" by changing educational, political, and public policies that adversely affected Negroes. One of the implications of the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling was that it helped to bring an end to sharecropping in the South. After Brown vs. Board of Education and Brown II, not only did the federal government enforce the integration of schools, but they also made states enforce compulsory attendance laws for school age children. Sharecropping families were no longer able to keep school age children from attending school in order to work. In addition, technological innovations in farming allowed southern landowners to decrease their workforce. Southern landowners began to use machinery to do the work formerly done by sharecroppers, thus reducing the demand for sharecropping labor. "A single cotton-picking machine performed the work of fifty farm hands and drove the cost of production down from over \$39 per bale by hand to under \$6 per bale by machine" (Trotter, 2001, p. 519).

Additionally, after successfully passing in the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law on July 2, 1964. For Negroes, Independence Day came early that year. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 effectively ended segregation. It also ended discrimination in schools and public facilities. No longer did Negroes have to enter through the back door of establishments or be denied service at restaurant lunch counters. No longer did Negroes have to use separate restrooms or drink from different water fountains. No longer were Negroes in the South subjected to Jim Crow Laws that included literacy tests, pole taxes, and grandfather clauses that prevented them from voting. All the rights that Negroes had been stripped of after the Reconstruction Era were restored. New opportunities were also made available. Negroes were finally making progress; however, a new educational, political, and public policies enacted by the dominant culture would prove to be a blessing and a curse for the immigrating new Negro – the Afro-American. That new policy was AFDC –better known as Welfare!

Welfare: A Blessing and a Curse

Welfare or Aid to Families with Dependant Children (AFDC) was established through the Social Security Act of 1935. However, for the first time in the late 1960s, it was made openly available to Negroes; Negroes in the South had been historically denied access to government programs through Jim Crow laws. The widespread availability of AFDC to Negroes came as a result of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty Initiative. President Johnson declared war on poverty due to the fact that the poverty rate in 1964 was an overwhelming 25% of the American population – approximately 35% million men, woman, and children. Through an act of Congress, President Johnson

created the Office of Economic Opportunity, which developed federal programs aimed at ending American poverty. The Office of Economic Opportunity successfully relaunched AFDC and created the Food Stamp program. Just nine short years after its creation, the Office of Economic Opportunity was dismantled by President Richard Nixon's administration. However, in just nine short years, it created programs like Head Start, Job Corp, and other community programs aimed at annihilating poverty, which still exist today.

The Office of Economic Opportunity required states to provide "cash grants" to "needy children who had been deprived of parental support or care because their father or mother was absent from the home, incapacitated, deceased, or unemployed" (Page and Larner, 1997, p. 21). Prior to 1964, many states had rules that excluded unwed mothers and Negro mothers from receiving welfare. However, that was no longer the case. In order to qualify for welfare or AFDC, a family had to meet the following criteria:

- Have at least one dependent child under the age of 18
- Be naturalized citizens or legal residents
- Be considered deprived of parental support (no father in the home)

Each state developed its own formula to determine how much welfare a family would receive. The amount of a family's welfare check depended upon (1) the size of the family, (2) the amount of money earned by the parent(s), (3) and certain expenses. The federal government then matched the amount the state gave to each family. If a family qualified for AFDC, then they were automatically received other free government benefits such as healthcare, childcare assistance which paid for day care services and after school programs, subsidized housing which paid a significant portion of the family's

rent, and the federal food stamps which provided coupons for food, which “added significantly to their purchasing power by reducing the portion of the [welfare payment] that parents had to spend on food” (Page & Larner, 1997, p. 21).

President Johnson’s War on Poverty Initiative was a success! In the 1970s, the official national poverty rate dropped dramatically from 25% to 11%, where it has remained ever since. However, economists claim that the official rate of poverty for African-Americans has never dropped below 30% (Rodgers, 1997, p. 402). Although it provided needed assistance for many black families, the welfare program did not do much to reduce the poverty rate among African-Americans. In fact, many critics claim that AFDC and other welfare programs were designed to perpetuate the status quo in American society and did not provide families in poverty with enough resources to eradicate poverty. “The cash assistance and eligibility for additional benefits that AFDC offered to poor families with children lifted few poor children out of poverty, yet the program did provide a guarantee of minimal income to those families who qualified for it” (Page & Larner, 1997, p. 26).

Welfare was a blessing and a curse. While it provided minimal income for its recipients, it did not provide them with a clear-cut path out of their impoverished circumstances. For those who desired to work and still needed welfare to cover expenses such as childcare and transportation, their benefits were cut. The government viewed working parents as being “self-sufficient,” and therefore did not need governmental assistance. This unspoken ideology punished working parents and discouraged those who wanted to stand on their own two feet and provide for their family from working. It became more profitable to remain unemployed and receive welfare than to go to work

“since most of their earnings were offset by reductions in the family’s AFDC grant”
(Page & Lerner, 1997, p. 21).

This aspect of welfare did not favor single-parent families nor did it favor two-parent families. Many critics claimed that not only did the welfare system discourage parents from working, but it also discouraged couples from marrying, thus perpetuating the feminization of poverty – single-female-headed households. Two-parent (married) families were often denied welfare benefits because they failed to meet welfare’s primary eligibility requirement – single parent households. In 1972, statistics showed that out of the households receiving AFDC, 48% were headed by single-female parents that had never been married, 23% of the households were headed by single-female parents that were either separated or divorced, and only seven percent of the households receiving AFDC were headed by two-parent families.

While the two-parent family was the exception, the single-parent family was unfortunately the rule. Between 1950 and 1980, the birthrate of children to black teenage unwed mothers more than quadrupled, increasing from 4% in 1950 to 18.4% in 1980. In 1980, more than 55.3% of all black children in America had an unmarried teenage mother. (Rodgers, 1987, p. 410). As a result, welfare dependency increased from about 2 million families in 1970 to about 3.5 million in 1977. This increase gave rise to the stereotype of the “welfare queen” characterized by the media as a “slovenly, overweight, black woman who produces a baby a year in order to [increase] her welfare checks” (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 294). Like married couples on welfare, the welfare queen was the exception rather than the norm. However, there were women who literally lived off the system. Typically, these women were “never-married young mothers with infants, no

high school degree, and little [or no] work experience...” (Page & Lerner, 1997, p. 23) were products of their environment. They grew up with their parents living on the welfare system. Many critics believe that children who grow up in welfare dependent homes are “destined to grow up poor and...pass the legacy of single parenting” (Hymowitz, 2005) to their children, thus perpetuating generational poverty and generational welfare.

As the teen pregnancy rate increased, the high school drop out rate increased as well. During the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, the drop out rate among unwed teen mothers was 80%. With the income they received from welfare benefits including AFDC, food stamps, and subsidized housing, some unwed teen mothers made the decision not to return to school while others *could not* return to school because many school systems did not have alternative education programs nor services such as parenting, time management, life planning classes, and daycare services to aid teens in their new role as mothers and to discourage subsequent pregnancies. Once again, the education system was failing to serve a portion of its population – the pregnant teenager. In this fashion and overall, education was still separate and unequal.

The Miseducation of Integration

Not only did education system fail to serve the pregnant teenager, but it continued to fail black students after schools across the country were successfully integrated. Integration may have eliminated “separate” schools for the races, but it still did not make education “equal.” Black students who attended formally all white schools faced discrimination particularly from white teachers and guidance counselors who were more attentive to their white students and discouraged black students from educational pursuits.

Also, schools were not effective in providing options to pregnant teens in order to ensure they returned to school after the birth of their children. In addition, black male students were often misplaced into the special education program.

In the 1980s, as integration became a shining reality, racism hid its face in the educational, political, and public policies. Many African-Americans experienced institutional racism. Schools as well as other institutions controlled by the dominant culture used various procedures, doctrines, and policies to discriminate against black children, particularly black males. In disproportionate numbers, African-Americans were misplaced in special education programs across the country. According to educational consultant Jawanza Kunjufu (1995), African-American children are only 17% of the public school population; however, they make up 41% of the special education population, and 85% of African-Americans in special education programs are male.

Ironically, the astronomical increase of African-Americans in special education programs coincided with the release of President Ronald Reagan's 1983 Nation-At-Risk Report, which claimed that American students were failing in math and science compared to other industrialized nations. Nation-At-Risk created a wave of local, state, and federal education reform resulting in schools becoming increasingly more data driven with an emphasis on standardized testing. Culturally-biased tests that reflect the dominant culture ideology were reconceptualized and placed African-Americans at even *more extreme* disadvantage. If African-American student did not score well enough on standardized college entrance exams such as the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) and the ACT (American College Test), they were denied admission into college and scholarship money to finance their education. During the 1980s, African-Americans were attending college

for the first time in record numbers. Many were first generation college students, whose families could not afford the rising costs of college tuition.

Reagan's Nation-At-Risk report also coincided with the continuation of white flight from the inner city. *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Right Movement, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had successfully ended separate but equal in society at-large and integrated schools, as a result, white flight from the inner city and de facto segregation affected school funding. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, white Americans left the city and moved to small town suburbia where they did not have to face the issues of integration, resulting in the erosion of the tax base of many urban cities. Public schools in the United States depend on local property taxes, state funds, and federal funds. However, the largest amount of school funds comes from property taxes. Poor African-American communities produce far less property tax revenue than more affluent white communities. As a result, more affluent white communities continued to have better schools with the latest technological advances, new text books, new buildings, etc. while formerly white schools – now urban black centers – suffered from economic deprivation which in turn translated into lack of technology, text books, and qualified teachers. The overall end result was the ill-equipping of black students to meet the demands of the new Information Age and global society. Schools that were integrated as a result of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) were once again segregated. In order to ensure schools remained integrated, school systems around country bused black students to schools in affluent white neighborhoods.

However, busing did not eliminate the inequality in newly integrated schools; it only exacerbated the public education problem. While affluent white students had more

technological resources at school and at home, black students did not. As mentioned, Reagan's Nation-At-Risk coincided with the integration of technology in the workplace, the advent of the personal computer, and the Internet. American schools and homes now had the responsibility of educating students to compete in a global market. Not only did affluent white schools have the revenue to make sure it educated its students to compete in the global market by outfitting all classrooms with the latest technology, but affluent white parents made sure their children had the latest educational technology at home. Many African-American students were not afforded the luxuries of the latest technology at home. As a result, African-American students were unable to properly compete.

The integration of schools in many ways still failed to provide a quality education for many black students. Many schools in black areas were dilapidated and deficient in terms of various resources before and after integration eventually resulting in the closing of neighborhood schools in the African-American community. The schools that did remain open were still under funded and inferior to integrated schools in affluent white neighborhoods.

Black Nihilism

By the early 1990s, Black America was in crisis! The inequality of education due to the educational, political, and public policies coupled with the media exploitation took its toll on black youth as inner city violence erupted around the country. African-Americans were committing senseless crimes, killing each other in record numbers across country over items such as Nike's Air Jordan basketball shoes and NFL (National Football League) Starter jackets. Why? With the rise of Hip-Hop music and the black celebrities in the entertainment and sports industries such as Michael Jackson, Michael

Jordan, Shaquille O’Neal, etc, “black culture became more marketable...and white corporations found that they could make big bucks off of it” (D, Jah, and Lee, 1997, p. 1). Through carefully executed marketing strategies, corporations manufactured the “desire” for these commodities in impoverished communities. As a result, African-American youth did whatever they had to do obtain the latest hot ticket item by “any means necessary” even if that meant robbing and/or killing the person with jacket or shoes on, or robbing and/or killing someone else or a business to get the money needed to purchase these items. Jonathan Kozol contends that “the manufacture of desire for commodities that children of low income can’t afford also pushes them to underground economies and crime to find the money to appease the longings [corporations/the dominant culture] have often fostered” (Kozol, 1991, p. 191).

Contributing to the crisis in Black America was a new drug called crack-cocaine. Crack-cocaine is a solid form of cocaine which can be smoked. Highly addictive, it is often called “crack” due to the sound it makes when it is cooked. Crack hit the streets of inner city in the late 1980s ravishing many African-Americans communities. “Crack heads” – those addicted to crack – would do anything to buy crack, so they could get their next high including prostitution, robbery, and murder. Families were destroyed – children were left without mothers; some were left without fathers. The crack epidemic left the African-American community even more fragmented than it was already.

The crack-cocaine epidemic reflected the nihilism that was present in the African-American community. African-Americans were tired of the day-to-day frustration of life in the inner city. In the early 1990s, unemployment, gang violence, teen pregnancy, and drug use among African-Americans was at an all time high. Philosopher Cornel West

contends that nihilism (400 years of social and economic injustice) had taken its toll on a people looking for educational, political, and public acceptance. “We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks – family, friends, school – that sustain some sense of purpose in life. We have witnessed the collapse of the spiritual communities that in the past helped Americans face despair, disease, and death and that transmit the generations dignity and decency, excellence and elegance” (West, 1993, p. 5). The problem with the black community in the early 1990s was “too much poverty and too little self-love” (West, 1993, p. 63). The primary reason that there is nihilism in black America is that African-Americans do not have communities, but clusters of plantations. In the book *Fight the Power*, the term “community” is defined as the following:

A community environment that has control over the three E’s: education, economics, and enforcement. Without control of these vital aspects of our existence, we’re like robots existing in an environment with no real control. In the days of slavery in the South, there weren’t any gates around the plantations, but there was a control over the plantation, which told Black people that they were not allowed to educate themselves, employ themselves, or write any laws. As a people we still exist in a similar state to this day (D, Jah, and Lee, 1997, p. 31).

How did the dominant culture respond to the nihilism – the loss of hope – in the African-American community? Two Words: Welfare Reform!

Welfare Reform: Extreme Makeover

The Welfare Reform Movement grew of the Republican controlled Congress' "Contract with America" in which all but two Republicans pledged to (1) shrink the size of government, (2) lower taxes, (3) create more economic opportunities for entrepreneurs, (3) reform tortuous laws, and (4) reform welfare. The clamor to reform welfare came as a result of the media stereotype of the welfare queen and the over exaggeration that a huge portion of the federal budget funds welfare programs. The media successfully portrayed the welfare queen as women, particularly black women, who received excessive welfare checks through fraud or through having more and more children to increase the amount of their welfare checks while living "lavish" lifestyles in the ghetto. Furthermore, the media portrayed so-called welfare queens as loud, obnoxious, immoral, lazy women who refused to work. Future President Ronald Reagan used such a stereotypical portrayal in his 1976 presidential campaign.

She has eighty names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names (www.nytimes.com).

This "welfare queen" hyperbole was reincarnated in the early 1990s as the Republican dominated Congress of the Clinton Administration clamored for welfare reform. In addition to the stereotype of the welfare queen, the media also over exaggerated the increasing amount of the federal budget spent on welfare program. "AFDC benefits increased from 15.5 billion to \$22.3 billion during the 23 years from 1970 to 1993" (Page & Larner, 1997, p. 24) Even though the amount of families receiving AFDC increased

from about 800,000 in 1960 to 5.1 million in 1995, AFDC, disability income, food stamps, and other social government programs, never exceeded 4% of the federal budget. In addition, statistics show that individual states never spent 5% of their total budget on welfare programs.

In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 replaced AFDC with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. While the eligibility requirement for AFDC and TANF remained the same, there were some fundamental differences in the administration of the block grant program. Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 or TANF:

- The federal government gave each state a block grant regardless of its number of AFDC recipients and more control over the administration of the grant
- States are not required to match federal funds
- Recipients are required to work or do community service
- Families are limited to 5 years to receive federal TANF assistance
- TANF offers incentive for states to reduce their TANF caseload.
- Childcare assistance no longer guaranteed
- The budget of the federal food stamp program, though still available through the federal government, was severely cut

Many “career” welfare recipients had to go to work for the first time in their lives. One of the criticisms of AFDC was that it did not give recipients a time limit to be on the program nor did it provide nor require job readiness training. As a result, an unwed mother with multiple children fairly scattered apart in age could realistically remain on

public assistance from the time she gave birth to her first child until her last child reached 18 years of age.

TANF has been successful in its efforts to get welfare recipients off welfare and into the work place. Between 1996 and 2001, welfare caseload dropped dramatically. “The number of white families on welfare showed the steepest decline, falling by 63 percent, while the number of black families on welfare fell by 52 percent, and the number of Hispanic families by 44 percent...” (Besharov, 2002, p. 6). What caused such a dramatic decline in 7-short years? Many critics believe that the welfare caseload dropped because expectations surrounding welfare changed. Welfare changed from being a program that provided a “hand-out” to one that gave a “hand-up” by encouraging and mandating that its recipients seek and find employment. Also, welfare reformers believe the strong economy of the later half of the 1990s can also be contributed to the decline in welfare cases.

While TANF has been a success, the program is not without criticism. Welfare reformers claim that TANF fails to provide enough work-preparation programs. “In 2000, only 5 percent of TANF families included an adult receiving education or training” (Besharov, 2002, p. 7). Another criticism is that few states offer workfare programs through which recipients can perform the community or public service as required by the TANF. In 2000, only 3% of TANF programs included this mandated feature. Also, only 40-50% of mothers who left welfare have steady full-time employment, which means that 50-60% of those left welfare are either working part time or not working at all. Many of the “mothers who have left welfare, ranging between 15 to 30 percent, cycle on and off

welfare as they alternately find a job or someone to support them and then lose the job or support.” (Basherov, 2001, p. 12).

One of the major criticisms of TANF is that even though it mandates that recipients find a job, it does not emphasize that recipients seek higher education beyond high school. Without training for high tech jobs of the global society of today, TANF recipients will be relegated to continue to work minimum wage jobs that only require unskilled labor. Therefore, TANF recipients will continue to struggle and live below the poverty line without obtaining a degree or certification, thus perpetuating the classicism in American society. The only way TANF recipients will get ahead and live above the poverty line is only if the President and the U.S. Congress decide to “make work pay.” A catch-phrase popularized by President Bill Clinton, it was his goal to “ensure that no one with a family who works full time has to raise their children in poverty” (Basherov, 2001, p. 17). This means that wages and benefits across the board would have to increase in an astronomical way so that a mother with one or two children will be able to support her family without struggling. TANF program will definitely benefit single-parent families if the President and Congress decided to “make work pay.”

What are states doing for TANF recipients who reach their five year limit? Some states are exempting those TANF recipients who have maxed out. They are also seeking alternative sources of funding in order to keep recipients on welfare citing that the economy is weak. “If enough recipients are simply exempted from mandatory work related activities and time limits, welfare reform may come to be seen as a grand bluff.” (Basherov, 2001, p. 16). Currently, states have the power to exempt 20% of their caseload from a time limit (Page & Larner, 1997, p. 26). Even though welfare has been

reformed, it is starting to resemble the old AFDC system as states begin to waive the TANF time limit restrictions. In the long run, TANF may prove to be the same old wolf in sheep's clothing – not offering a permanent solution or path to independence to those who find themselves gasping for air while pinned under the wolf's belly.

Negro Children Left Behind

Another educational, political, and public policy that has proven to be a wolf in sheep's clothing is President George W. Bush's education legislation No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The initial purpose of NCLB was to address the achievement gaps that exist among African-American, Hispanic, special education, ESOL (English as a Second Official Language), and other low achieving students. NCLB does not address the real issues concerning the underachievement of African-Americans and other minorities. NCLB does not adequately consider the inequalities that exist in American society that can affect the performance of underprivileged students in American schools. Without taking these variables into consideration, NCLB actually penalizes underprivileged students for things that are beyond their control.

According to NCLB, every state is required to develop standards and a system to measure the progress of all subgroups of students to determine if all students are functioning according to grade-level standards. The term AYP or "Adequate Yearly Progress" is used to determine whether or not each school district and school has met their standards. If a school district or school does not meet AYP, then the school district or school receives a NP or "need improvement" status and is given three years to meet the standards. After three years, if the school does not meet AYP, the board of education has the right to replace all faculty and staff and a new regime is brought in to turn the

school around. Students whose schools do not meet AYP are given the option of a choice transfer to a school that has successfully made AYP (presumably in a more affluent neighborhood), or they can receive a voucher from the federal government to attend a private school. These “solutions” negatively affect students in poverty, whose parents cannot afford to move to more affluent neighborhoods with better schools nor can afford to send them to private schools - with or without a government issued voucher.

What sense does it make to take money away from schools (and districts) that do not make AYP? It stands to reason that schools that do not make AYP need more resources – more teachers, more supplementary materials, more technology for educational use – in order to engage students in the learning process. Taking away funding would only ensure that these students will fail – not only in school, but ultimately in life, thus keep the poor oppressed and subjected to a life in poverty.

NCLB does not take into consideration the correlation between tests scores and economic backgrounds. “In thinking about why children perform differently, we need to examine the larger patterns of resource distribution in the society: unequal access to medical and dental care; unequal access to housing; unequal access to labor markets and adequate incomes; unequal access to vibrant communities with high levels of social capital’ and yes, unequal access to educational resources” (Karen, 2005, p. 168). NCLB places all children – regardless of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background – on a “leveled” playing field when it is clearly not unbalanced, unequal, and unfair; it continues to offer classroom-based solutions and standardized testing when clearly the relationship between race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background must be analyzed to determine

how various factors affect student achievement. If we do not, classroom-based solutions will continue to yield an increasingly high drop out rate in America.

Every 26 seconds a high school student makes the decision not to return to high school and subsequently becomes what is known as a high school dropout. More than one million students (33% of all high school students) make this decision every single year and are more likely to become menaces to society – unemployed, in and out of state and federal prison systems, living in poverty, in poor health, with multiple children, and on welfare. More alarming is the drop out rate among African-American students. More than half of African-American students fail to graduate from high school, which is the highest among any ethnic group.

Why do students drop out of high school? According to the organization Silent Epidemic, among the top reasons today why students drop out of high school are: (1) to work, (2) to become a parent, (3) lack of interest in class, (4) lack of motivation, and (5) lack of parental involvement (www.silentepidemic.org). The reasons why students are dropping out have not changed since the 1970s, which indicates that despite the fact that the world has changed from a modern to a post-modern society with the death of the Industrial Age and the birth of the Information Age, social classes still exist and are more prevalent than ever. There still remains a disproportionate number of Americans living at and below the poverty line in this country. Even though the national poverty rate has hovered around 11% since President Johnson's War on Poverty Initiatives in the 1960s, the African-American poverty rates remains at 30%.

As mentioned, in today's society, two of the primary reasons students drop out of high school are lack of interest and lack of motivation. Since we live in the Information

Age – the digital and wireless age – students are now able to get information off the Internet with the click of the button; they are able to download music into their iPods and MP3 players; they are able to send emails and chat via instant messenger to people all over the world; they use their Xboxes, Wiis, and Playstations for entertainment purposes. Then we ask students to enter into a “traditional” classroom with book, paper, and pen in order to prepare them for a world – a modern, industrial society – that does not exist when they clearly live and interact in a post-modern, digital society.

Also, many African-American students drop out because they do not find what they are learning in school relevant to their personal lives. The information presented in school fails to connect to their personal lives. Gloria Ladson-Billings advocates that classroom teachers should become culturally relevant teachers. using her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy is an attempt to bridge the gap between students’ home culture and school culture; it seeks to produce students who “an ability to read, write, speak, compute, pose and solve problems at sophisticated levels – that is, pose their own questions about the nature of teacher- or text-posed problems and engage in peer review of problem solutions” (Ladson-Billings, 1991, p. 475) in classrooms where failure is not an option. Culturally relevant pedagogy also seeks is to produce students are who culturally competent – students who are able to “maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (Ladson-Billings, 1991, p. 476) without feeling as though they are “acting white.” Finally, culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to produce students able to “recognize, understand, and critique current social inequalities” (Ladson-Billings, 1991, p. 476). Culturally relevant pedagogy must be implemented in every aspect of education in order to ensure that education is working

to maximize student learning potential and to give every student every opportunity to succeed in the classroom and subsequently in life.

If educators do not become culturally relevant teachers who teach children to make sense of their environments and critique the world around them, then the racism, classism, sexism, and every other “-ism” will continue to dominate African-Americans through the educational, political, and public policies. The status quo will continue...

The earning potential of high school drop outs has decreased significantly over the last 30 years. In 1971, male drop outs earned \$35,087 a year (in 2002 dollars); however, their earning potential fell a full 35% to \$23,903 a year. The earning potential for female high school drop outs is even less falling from \$19,888 to \$17,114 a year. The income gap between high school drop outs and college graduates widens with each degree level. In 2003, annual earning potential of drop outs fell to \$21, 447. High school graduates earned an average of \$32,266 while associates degree graduates earned an average of \$43,462, and those with a bachelor’s degree earned an average of \$63,084 – three times the amount of high school drop outs. In the global economy of today and tomorrow, African-American high school drops will continue to be unemployed, in and out of state and federal prison systems, living in poverty, in poor heath, with multiple children, and on welfare.

As today’s generation of impoverished African-American children come of age, they face the incredible challenge of continuing an already established legacy of poverty imposed upon them by the educational, political, and public policies or defying the status quo and break the cycle of generational poverty. Two policies have already been established by the dominant culture geared to prevent them from ending the cycle of

generational poverty: TANF and NCLB. As mentioned, the TANF program was renewed by Congress in 2005 giving the states more control over the program and relaxing restrictions making the TANF appear to be more and more like the old AFDC program. Ironically, in a *desperate attempt* to solidify his presidential legacy – one marred by incompetence - President George W. Bush successfully bullied Congress to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act with more punitive measures that will only hurt poor African-American children. Poor African-American children continue to be subjected to educational, political, and public policies designed to keep them in social, economic, and psychological bondage.

More than 110 years after Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and more than 50 years since its repeal through Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), African-Americans have been subjected to a plethora of educational, political, and public policies that have affected them in one way or another resulting in their misrepresentation, miseducation, and misuse.

CHAPTER 3

HOW I WROTE UNTO THE THIRD & FOURTH GENERATION

OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS:

THE STORY OF A LIFETIME

And the Lord passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the father upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation” (Exodus 34:6-7).

The above verses reference a passage of scripture in the book of Exodus after Moses successfully leads the Hebrews out of Egyptian bondage into the wilderness and attempts to organize them into an independent God-fearing nation. After witnessing the Hebrews unwillingness to obey the laws of God, Moses in anger breaks the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. God calls Moses up to Mt. Sinai instructing him to bring two new stone tablets so that he can reissue the Ten Commandments. Displeased with the Hebrews murmuring and complaining, unwillingness to obey, reluctance to learn from their mistakes, and refusal to prepare for their future, God explains to Moses that each Hebrew’s response –whether positive or negative- to the policies set forth would not only affect him, but his children and his children’s children for at least three or four generations....

The story of the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt, their prolonged sojourn in the wilderness, and their eventual possession of the Promised Land is one of my favorite Biblical stories. The primary lesson it teaches is that policies – whether religious, educational, political, public, or social- can have a positive or negative affect on our lives. Due to the original Hebrew refugees improper responses to the laws and mandates of God, all except two died in the wilderness and did not get to see the Promised Land. The first generation died, having passed on their belief system, cultural practices, personal habits, and familial practices to their children, and their children did the same, and so forth and so on. The lesson of this Biblical story is timeless: The actions and responses of one generation will have a direct affect on the ones to come. This reoccurring theme is seen throughout the world in the lives of people regardless of race, class, and ethnicity. Seeing this reoccurring theme in my family inspired me to write my dissertation on my family and title it using a portion of the aforementioned scripture.

I grew up in Memphis around both sides of my family; however, when I was with my father's family, I did not feel as if I quite belonged. I can remember as young as age four wondering whether or not I was actually related to my father and his relatives. As a matter of fact, I was confused as to exactly where I fit. Although I visited them on most weekends, even spending the night, and at one point and time wanted to transfer schools, so I could go to school with my cousins, I could not relate to many of my paternal relatives in many ways, which remains true to this day. Repeatedly throughout my childhood and adolescent years, I questioned the differences between them and me... When I was about thirteen years old, my mother –Beverly Ann Cole Tennial – “prophesied” that I would write a book about my paternal family. Prophecy is defined as

“the foretelling or prediction of what is to come” (www.dictionary.com). Little did my mother know or little did I realize, I had been noting memorable family events and collecting the family’s oral history since I first recognized that I felt *different*. I felt as if I was an “outsider” eavesdropping, and I used that awkward, but unique space to learn vicariously. Vicariously learning allowed me to be close enough to my relatives’ fiery experiences without suffering any 1st, 2nd, or 3rd degree burns. From my perceived position as the “other,” I captured situations and experiences, learning the family’s history in an unacknowledged quest to find out why I did not feel as if I belonged...

I took a step toward answering this question during my senior year at Memphis Central High School. I was a student in the first-ever African-American literature class. The class was taught by Mrs. Dessie Walker – a wonderful teacher- who had been my junior English instructor and one of several educators who inspired me to become an educator. Our major project for the semester was to do a presentation on our family tree. I was so excited about this project that I decided to do something I knew no one else would do – a video presentation. Using the video camera I bought my mother the previous Christmas, I interviewed my maternal great-grandmother Connie Mae Cole Faulkner Atkinson, my maternal grandfather Alton Johnson, Jr., my maternal grandmother McQuilla Cole, my paternal grandmother Helen Lindsey, and my paternal great-grandmother Lurline Campbell Lindsey. I captured their thoughts and perceptions about their lives and their parents’ lives on video. It was a truly wonderful experience as I learned information about each one of them that I had never known. It was doing this video presentation that my mother’s prophesy from years before took root in my spirit. I then knew that what she said was going to come true. I was going to write about my

family. At the root of this new desire to learn and write about my family was the question that had been in my mind since age four – *Why did I feel like I did not belong in my family? What was this “difference” I felt?*

I took another step toward the answer to this question early in my teaching career. When I began teaching in 1998, former educator and administrator now turned consultant and philosopher Ruby Payne’s book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* was all the rage! School districts, particularly those with a high urban population and Title I classification, were mandating that all faculty and staff read Dr. Payne’s book. The school system in which I was teaching was no exception. At this particular time, I did not intend on staying in education very long and simply elected not to read this *required material*. However, several years later, after moving to Atlanta, I came into contact with the philosophy of Dr. Payne at a school district, which prompted me to read the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. The book provided insight to the questions to which I had been seeking answers...

Reading Payne’s book was an eye-opener! In her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne defined the term “generational poverty” as “the extent to which an individual does without [financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules] resources” (Payne, 2005, p. 7) resulting in unemployment, lack of education and skills, low income, poor housing, high criminal activities, and deterioration of the family structure. It all of a sudden clicked. I realized that even though had grown up in and around poverty, instead of gaining knowledge of the hidden rules and beliefs of generational poverty, I somehow acquired middle-class hidden rules and beliefs – which

alienated me from my family. The reason I felt like I did not belong in my own family was because I did not seemingly understand the culture – the hidden rules and beliefs- under which they were operating. Now all of the experiences and oral history that I had stored in my long term memory began to make sense as I examined through the context of my family’s cross-generational engagement in generational poverty. By the time I began the doctoral program at Georgia Southern University in the summer of 2003, I already had a preliminary dissertation topic – The Affects of Generational Poverty on My Family. As I began to learn about various curriculum theories, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies, I tailored my papers towards my preliminary dissertation topic as advised by students in the doctoral program.

By the spring 2004 semester, I added another component to my dissertation topic. As a part of the required coursework, I took the course History of American Education in which I had to write a paper on an aspect of American education. I elected to do my paper on the acquisition of education by American slaves and how the acquisition of education led to the downfall of the South and the end of slavery. As a result of writing that paper, I began think about how important education was in liberating the slaves and the value they placed on education. I questioned the value my family placed on education and what influenced these values cross-generationally. I also questioned whether my family had experienced liberation through education like our slave ancestors. By the end of the spring semester, my preliminary topic had changed. My study would identify the characteristics of the culture of poverty, distinguish between two of poverty’s offspring – generational and intergenerational poverty, and explore the influence of

socioeconomic factors on the educational values and lived experiences of my family, which has been immersed in poverty for six consecutive generations.

Even though this was what I considered to be a very good topic, my dissertation chairperson Dr. Ming Fang He suggested that I make some changes when I presented her with the first draft of my dissertation proposal in the fall of 2006. Dr. He found that my proposal was too heavily laden with the work of Dr. Ruby Payne. After I read Ruby Payne's *Understanding Poverty*, I read everything else she wrote and incorporated it into my candidacy exams as well as my dissertation proposal. When Dr. He suggested that I consider other perspectives and tone down my emphasis on Ruby Payne, I resisted at first! Tone down Ruby Payne? Never! After all, it was because of her book *Understanding Poverty* that I began to understand my family. What I did not understand was that I made Ruby Payne's works a starting point and an ending point. Yes, through her work I found answers to the questions I had been seeking as it related to my family; however, Payne's works merely identified how people in poverty look, act, think, and respond without giving any regard to the stimuli that causes people in poverty to look, act, think, and respond in the way they do. Not only did Dr. He suggest that I tone down my praise and adoration of Ruby Payne, but my dissertation committee (Dr. Bill Ayers, Dr. Ronald Bailey, and Dr. Sandra Nettles) suggested exactly the same. They challenged me to consider other perspectives – other non-cultural deficit perspectives.

Over the next nine months, I immersed myself in the works of social consciousness theorists Jonathan Kozol, culturally relevant pedagogy theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings, the works of Lisa Delpit, Sonia Nieto, Pedro Noguera, Jean Anyon, and others that broadened my perspective of people in poverty. I discovered that it was not

merely enough to say that this is how a generational poverty community *looks*, but the causes of poverty needed to be explored and practical solutions suggested as well. To merely describe how a generational poverty community looks is to blame those in generational poverty for their impoverished state. I realized that my family was not engaged in generational poverty because they wanted to be in it; there were reasons that I had not begun to consider that were at least partly responsible for the perpetuation of generation poverty – namely educational, political, and public policies. I looked deeper than Ruby Payne and when I did, I found her perspective lacking. My dissertation topic evolved again. No longer was I seemingly trying to validate Payne’s work through my inquiry, but now I was trying to challenge myself to present a fresh perspective – one that was even new to me. By the fall of 2007, I decided that for my dissertation I would collect the stories of six generations of my family engaged in generational poverty and address the affects of educational, political, and public policies on them.

I had hoped to graduate by the fall of 2007, but that did not happen. Graduation was still two defenses away; I had only defended my dissertation proposal. I had to defend my prospectus - how I intended to conduct the research itself– and then the final dissertation defense – the presentation of my findings. The way it looked, it would be January 2008 before I could defend my prospectus due to the fact that my dissertation chair Dr. He was in China teaching at the University of Hong Kong for a semester. Rather than wait to conduct my research after I defended my prospectus, I decided to conduct my research before my prospectus defense. I had already decided to use oral history as my research methodology. Ironically, I had been using the research methodology (collecting the generational stories of my family) my entire life; I just did

not know it! Oral history was the perfect research methodology because I could focus on my relatives' individual experiences and construct meaning of those experiences in order to understand the attitudes and beliefs of each generation. Collecting the oral history of my family supported my theoretical framework – critical race theory (Matusda, 1993; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Augulego, Thornton, Bakenhus, Benn, and Holmes, 2004). Critical race theory recognizes the importance of storytelling to give people like my family whose voice has been silenced through marginalization to tell their stories, which may counteract the stories of the dominant culture. Critical race theory seeks to find the “missing information from the ‘official story’ that will make the problems of the oppressed more understandable” (Ayers, 2006, p. 88). Using both oral history methodology and critical race theory as my theoretical framework, I was challenged to (1) look beyond individual circumstance to the root of the problem, (2) raises awareness in an effort to effect change, (3) identify hidden meaning behind established power structures and traditions and its adverse affects, and become “prophetic” by understanding the past and making predictions about the future based upon the given circumstances. I had already planned how I was going to collect the generational narratives. By conducting my research before my prospectus defense, I would be ahead and almost guaranteed to graduate in December 2008.

I held two storytelling sessions – during my summer visit home in 2007 and during Christmas break. These storytelling sessions took place in my grandmother's on the front porch during the summer visit and in the living room during my Christmas visit. I chose the front porch and the living room to collect the stories for this inquiry because those are two places where the “great debates” of our family take place. These debates

move inside to the living room when it becomes too cold to be on the front porch. I wanted my family to be in their natural environment, so they would feel comfortable sharing their stories. My original intent was to speak with each family member I had asked to share lived experiences one-on-one, but my grandmother's house is a very transient place – there are always people coming and going – so that became impossible as other relatives (even my littlest of cousins) stuck around to hear our conversations. However, this worked to my advantage. The more people around, the most comfortable my family members became. Eventually my one-on-one conversations evolved into participatory conversation. My storytellers ranged in age from 73 to 4 and represented five of six generations of our family. My storytellers – my grandmother Helen Lindsey, my father Johnny Lee Tennial, my aunts Linda Lindsey, Lurlean Lindsey-Perry and Nina Lindsey, my uncle Rennie Lindsey, and my cousins Tyrece Lindsey, Kenneth Randle, Kendria Lindsey, Mardquies Lindsey, Nicole Lindsey, Jordan Lindsey, Jamya Lindsey, and Jadynd Lindsey – were surprisingly very willing to share their life experiences. I also gathered some additional information about my great-grandfather from my great-great uncle and my great-grandmother's only living sibling Herman Lee Campbell, my great-uncle Klyde Lee Kones, my great-aunts and his daughters – Carolyn Jean Lindsey and Dorothy Rene Sullivan. We had general conversation at first and then gradually moved into conversations about their fondest memories from birth to present. Since my great-grandparents are deceased, I relied upon my grandmother as the most senior storyteller to tell stories about her parents who represent the first generation in my inquiry before she told her story. I also relied on the stories of my father and aunts who were raised by their mother, as well as her parents, to further gather stories about my great-great grandparents

and my great-grandparents. As mentioned, my relatives were surprisingly candid about their life experiences which came as a shock to me. I have known some of my relatives to develop “selective amnesia” when talking about the past because of shame, embarrassment, or unresolved issues. I was also concerned about my family’s perception of me. Not only do I view myself as an “other” or “outsider,” but I *know* that some of my family members perceive me this way as well. I did not want them to see me as “disrupting the past” and infringing upon their rights, which would hinder the accuracy of their stories.

I learned a lot of new information about each one of my storytellers that I had not known before – stories that I thought should have been general family knowledge, but for some reason were not. For example, I knew my father was a high school dropout, but it was not until the storytelling sessions that I learned that he dropped out in the 10th grade and attended the now closed and dilapidated Lester High School. I have passed that school on the way to my grandmother’s house for *years* and never knew that that was where my father attended high school! What a revelation! I never knew my grandmother met my grandfather in church. I never knew my 43-year old aunt, the mother of nine children and five grandchildren, wanted to be a stewardess as a child. I never knew! A lot of the new stories I heard connected to stories that I did know, allowing me to share my experiences, and giving further clarity and insight to existing narratives, allowing me to see my relatives and their experiences in a new light.

I concluded my storytelling sessions with a new respect for my family – their love, their sacrifices, their perceptions. I returned home to Atlanta to write their stories, but I was not exactly sure how I was going to articulate their stories in words. After

some careful consideration, I decided that I would create five different stories – each narrative revealing the influences of educational, political, and public policies prevalent during each generation as told by a fictitious character that resembled one or more of my relatives. To avoid offending or embarrassing my relatives, I decided to disguise their identities and stories through the use of fictitious names, events, general terms, and layering their stories with similar stories of other relatives in the family. My extended paternal family in many ways mirrors my immediate paternal family. Many of my relatives will be able to read these narratives and find examples from their life stories.

However, after I began writing I decided to make one fundamental change. Instead of using five different fictitious characters to represent each generation in my family, I decided to use the voice of only one character to tell the stories of all six generations. That character would be the voice of someone I really never knew, someone who died when I was only three years old, someone who is the only father my father and his older siblings have ever really known, someone whose life was a mystery to the family in many ways, yet he was respected by everyone in the family, and someone whom I had learned a lot about during my storytelling sessions with my grandmother and my father. I decided to tell my family's stories through the voice of my great-grandfather Norris Lindsey for all of the aforementioned reasons, but also for another very important reason.

In her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne states that in families engaged in generational poverty “the mother is the center of the organization, and the family radiates from that center” (Payne, 2005, p. 54). Through my narratives, I wanted to paint the portrait of a patriarch who was the head of the family until his death.

Even though there are other families with matriarchal structures within my family, there are still traditional two-parent families within my family. My brother Darnell and I are products of a two-parent home, and there are other examples within my family. My great grandfather's voice had been silenced by death; however, I wanted this work to raise him in consciousness so that he would speak to present generations who did not have the privilege to know him, so that they might learn their heritage as I have. In a 1976 episode of the sitcom *Good Times*, the principal character and father James Evans, Sr., posed a question to a psychologist who recommended that his son attend trade school after scoring low on the Standard-Binet IQ Test. He asked the question, "How do you know where I'm at, if you haven't been where I been? Understand where I'm coming from?" (Good Times, 1976). I believe that my family and other African-Americans families cannot take a firm hold of the present and fully execute a plan for the future because they do not understand how the past affects their present and future. So much of who we are is shrouded *not* in our immediate past, but in the lived experiences of our fore-parents. Throughout my life, I have discovered that a lot of who I am *really does* come from my parents (nature) and from my environment (nurture). I have also discovered that I have some personal habits and lifestyle practices that I have no clue from whence they come. These things are not evident in my parents or any of my immediate family members; however, they are the product of ancestors subjected to various educational, political, and public policies that have had generational affects.

I began writing my family's stories using the voice of our patriarch, my great-grandfather Norris Lindsey who was born in 1899. In keeping with my decision to fictionalize various narratives, I named my principal character and narrator "Kaleb

Norris.” I decided on this name for a couple of reasons. Several years ago, one of my favorite cousins was pregnant. An ultrasound determined that she was going to have a little boy. I asked her had she decided on a name for him. She informed me that his first name was going to be “Kaleb” and his middle name was going to be “Norris” after her grandfather, my great-grandfather. I thought that it was the *perfect* name for him since no one in the family was named after my great-grandfather. My grandmother named my aunt Lurlean after her mother Lurline. There are several other cases in the family where female relatives were named after or for other female relatives, but it is a rare occurrence for a male to be named after another male. What a wonderful way to pay tribute to “Big Daddy” by giving his first name to a new generation! However, by the time my cousin gave birth to her son, she had changed her mind and decided to name him after his father, which is understandable.

Secondly, the name “Kaleb” means “bold one” (Lansky, 1985, p. 85) and the name “Norris” means “to nurture” (www.dictionary.com). If you put the two names together, Kaleb Norris simply means “a bold one who nurtures.” According to my grandmother and other relatives, that is the essence of what my great-grandfather did throughout his lifetime – he was a bold man who nurtured and cared for his family in face of overwhelming odds.

Thirdly, the name Kaleb coincides with the name of one of the Biblical characters in the narrative from which I got the name for my inquiry. Kaleb was one of two of the original Hebrews who left Egypt and actually made it to the Promised Land; He along with Joshua were sent by Moses into the land of Canaan to see if the land was as rich and beautiful as God has promised. Kaleb and Joshua’s report to Moses was that the land was

exactly what God has promised; however, there were inhabitants that the Hebrews would have to subdue in order to possess the land, but they were confident that the Hebrews could successfully obtain the promise of God. It is this message that I hoped to communicate to my family through the consciousness and voice of our patriarch. As a family, we are “well-able” to withstand the educational, political, and public policies and successfully fulfill our purpose and destiny individually and collectively.

Using the voice and consciousness of my great-grandfather through the character of Kaleb Norris, I wrote five different stories – each story representing a generation (10 to 30 years) of my family’s history with a title given to each describing the prevailing policies and their affects on my family. The first generational narrative, “The Lost Generation: 1899 -1930,” covers the period from Kaleb Norris’ birth to the early days of the Great Depression. We know very little about my great-grandfather’s family or early life although over the years we have managed to piece together some facts. However, much of that information is simply lost to us like much of Negro promise and progress which was halted due to the implementation of Plessy v. Ferguson which led to more inequality in American society during that time.

The second generational narrative, “The Sharecropping Generation: 1930-1940,” continues with Kaleb Norris’ surviving The Great Depression and establishing a second family. To survive, Kaleb Norris becomes a sharecropper which has long term effects on his family even as things began to change with the desegregation of the armed forces. Kaleb Norris’ children simply follow in his footsteps, accepting their lot in life and operating within the boundaries that society had set for them. They did only what was

necessary for them to survive. They did not have the socioeconomic means nor education to challenge the educational, political, and public policies.

The third generational narrative, “The Interchange Generation: 1940-1970,” follows the life of Kaleb Norris as he becomes a grandfather and deals with his family’s response to changes in educational, political, and public policies – namely Brown vs. Board of Education, the Civil Rights Movement, the end of sharecropping, and The Civil Rights Act of 1964. Kaleb Norris and his family exchange one form of poverty – sharecropping- for another form of poverty – welfare, perpetuating the cycles of generational poverty and intergenerational poverty through lack of education and multiple out-of-wedlock births.

The fourth generational narrative, “The Welfare Generation: 1970-1990,” follows the life of Kaleb Norris and his ever expanding family as they adjust to life in the city after moving from their rural community. Kaleb Norris’ grandchildren and great-grandchildren contend with school integration, the affects of black pop culture icons on their self perceptions and aspirations, the educational, political, and public policies of the Reagan Administration, their growing dependence on welfare, and the transmission of educational values to the next generation.

The fifth and final generation narrative, “The Stagnation Generation: 1990 - Present” follows the life of Kaleb Norris great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren and their families as they deal with the Nihilism in their community and family, generational welfare, welfare reform, No Child Left Behind, a high dropout rate in the family, limited family achievement and success, and the affects of future educational, political, and public policies on the family. This generation is stagnated –

slowly moving- yet repeating past mistakes of previous generations. Instead of being better than the previous generations, they are seemingly worse. In spite of the past and present situations, Kaleb Norris is yet encouraged that his family will be able to overcome any obstacles set before them.

The five generational stories of my family are fictionalized snapshots of the lived experiences of six generations as affected by various educational, political, and public policies. Telling these stories from the perspective of my great-grandfather beginning with his birth in 1899 gave me the opportunity to learn about my great-grandfather Norris “Big Daddy” Lindsey, who died in 1978 when I was only three years old. I remember him vaguely. I remember being afraid of him. To a little kid, he appeared very tall, old, and literally moved like “death.” I remember going to his funeral at the family church in Cayce, Mississippi, on a cold November day. I remember my father, whom he raised, being very sad for weeks following his death. Prior to conducting my research, I knew next to nothing about him. Yet, his life’s decisions have had a profound impact on six generations of my family, including me. This inquiry has brought me closer to my family. Whereas before I felt like an outsider – “the other” – what I learned through their own personal stories gave clarity, depth, and understanding to my family’s cross-generational plight in poverty and how educational, political, and public policies influenced the course and discourse of their lives. It is upon their shoulders – the triumphs, trials, and tribulations of six generations – that I am now able to stand and demand that their marginalized voices, once silenced through educational, political, and public policies, be heard!

CHAPTER 4

KALEB NORRIS'S GENERATIONS

As told through the voice of our family patriarch, these are our generational stories...

The Lost Generation: 1899 - 1929

Know where you fit end?

Know where you belong?

One thang's for sho' what you thank you know is wrong?

Born into a word – lighter than others!

It ain't yo' fault – still judged by your color

An exception to the rule – an enigma and a mystery

Come to find out you don't know your own history

All of it snatched away in a blink of an eye!

Born into a world separate & unequal?

It'll damn sho' make you cry!

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Born into a World Separate & Unequal

I was born on January 21, 1899, on what used to be the Cooper Plantation in Tunica County in Mississippi. I was my mama's first and only child. My grandma used to tell me that when I was born I was pink with gray eyes and sandy red hair. She say I was a peculiar looking thang – the funniest looking baby she ever did see and she had seen a heap of chillun born around the county. She was a mid-wife. She say after my mama come to after birthing me, she took one look at me and yelled, "That's a white baby!" From what I was told, if you laid me and a white baby born at the same time side by side, you wouldn'tve been able to tell which one was white and which was colored. My grandma say I was a peculiar child born in a peculiar season under peculiar circumstances...

I never know'd exactly what she meant by that, but I guess she was talking 'bout the way thangs was between white folks and Negroes when I was born. As a little girl, my grandma see'd the end of slavery when the Yankee soldiers come. She say by the time they made to Tunica County, there wouldn't hardly no slaves to be freed. Most of 'em had don' already run off. A few who was loyal to they Massa stayed on the plantation. One of 'em was my granddaddy John, who was born on the Cooper Plantation and stayed on after the war to work for ole Mister Cooper. My granddaddy John didn't have no family on a count of slavery. Before the war, his folks died and his brothers and sisters were sold off. No idea how to find 'em or where they was. But on the Cooper Plantation is where my grandma Lucy and my granddaddy John met. My grandma come to work for Old Mister Cooper as a cook when she was 'bout twenty years old. She was never no slave – she was a Chickasaw Indian – her family was one of the

handful of Chickasaws living in Tunica County after the gov'ment bought the land of de other ones and moved them out west years before. She growed up around a little area called Austin. Her daddy help 'stablish the county; she say they had a couple hund'ed acres of land and owned a few slaves during slavery time, but the Union Army took most they property and thangs during the Civil War. She went to work on the Cooper Plantation after the Yella' Feva killed off the rest of her family – 'cluding her first husband and two young chillun – and she didn't have no way to take care of herself.

It was when she went to work on the Cooper Plantation she met and married my granddaddy John – he was a few years older than she was. There, they worked and lived together; my grandma working in the house and my granddaddy working in the fields. Not long after they married, my grandma Lucy had my mama. She named her Phronnie. There, on the Cooper Plantation, my grandma and granddaddy raised my mama. A few years before I was born, my granddaddy died... and My grandma and my mama moved into to the main house on the Plantation to see after old Mister Samuel Cooper's – the old Massa – and his four chillun including Mister Jim. Mister Samuel Cooper's wife was dead on count of the Yella' Feva too. So my grandma raised my mama long side Mister Samuel Cooper's chillun in the big house...

By the time I come along, ole Mister Samuel Cooper had died. His younger son and two daughters had married and moved away, and his oldest boy Mister Jim took ova the property and the land. Just like my granddaddy and my mama, I was born on the Cooper Plantation – in the big house as a matter of fact from what I was told. And I grew up there with my grandma Lucy, my mama Phronnie, and Mister Jim...

Growing up on the Cooper Plantation was nice. It was a great big ole house with two levels. Grandma told me that as soon as I could crawl good, I would be all ova the place! She say I loved that ole house! She say I act like it belong to me the way I would roam 'round when I little, but she say it didn't seem to bother Mister Jim none either.

Well...all I'll say is Mister Jim really didn't have no family. Fact is...me, my mama, and my grandma was all he had. He was one of the nicest people in the world – black or white. At a time when most white folks didn't care 'bout Negroes, Mister Jim did. He treated us Negroes with dignity and respect. 'Cuz of that, lot of the white folks in the county didn't like Mister Jim. They called him a “nigga lover” 'cuz of the way he treated Negroes, but that didn't stop him. He kept on being nice to everybody. That just the way he was...Fact is...He believed that Negroes shoulda had the same opportunities as white folks...and he did his best to make sho' that I had a chance in this life.

Soon as I was old enough, Mister Jim made sho' that I went to the Tunica County Negro School. As far as I can 'member, even when I was a little ole thang, he and my grandma both use to say to me, “Kaleb Norris, I want you to get your learning. A Negro can't be nothing in this world without some learning.” 'Cuz I loved my grandma and I respected Mister Jim, I 'tended to do exactly what they said... I 'member when I was 'bout five or six years old, I went to school... 'cept it really wouldn't no school. It was an old barn made into a school. I 'member the first day of school. Mister Jim took me hisself. 'Magine all Negro chillun looking at me walking up to this ole raggedy school with a respect white man holding me hand? It was somethin or other to see. The chillun were in shock and so was the teacher too. If I recollect, her name was...Miss Russell...Miss Mary Russell from over in Holley Springs. Somehow or other, my

grandma know'd her peoples. I 'member she got her schooling at Tuskegee down there in Alabama... Poor thang, she didn't know what to do when she saw Mister Jim holding my hand. Mister Jim bent down and told me to be a good boy and he'd be back to get me at the end of the day. I looked at Mister Jim and then I looked at that school and I say to him, "Mister Jim, this ain't no school; this here's a barn for the animals like at home. Don't leave me, Mister Jim! Please!" Mister Jim laughed, and told me it was a school and that it was good to stay so I could learn new thangs. It took him a while, but he talked me into staying...

I 'member that "school barn." That...building just wasn't no count. I 'magine that if a strong enough wind had come along, it would have just knocked the whole thing down. You could look up and see the sky through the roof. And I know'd from that first day that everytime it rained, it was gon' rain on our heads. I 'member that first day the school being full of chillun. A lot of them were 'bout my age, but there was some older ones too. As time went on, Miss Russell would get the older chillun to help the younger chillun with the lesson since she was only teacher. Not only was the building raggedy, but we didn't have no desk or books. We had to scrape and get everything we needed right down to pencil and paper. What we did get was the hand-me-downs from the great-big ole white school just cross the field...

Now, the white chillun had a new school pretty with white-wash – It was called...Tunica County School. I noticed they school when Mister Jim was taking me to school. It wasn't made out of no wood either – it was a brick school with more than one room and more than one teacher; they had textbooks, desks, and supplies too. My school got they hand-me-downs – books and thangs that weren't no good no more. We didn't

have no desks and thangs. We had this long wood benches and a piece of slate for us to put in our laps and write on.

I ‘member that evening at supper I asked Mister Jim why the Negro school was so different than the white school. I thank he was surprised to know that at that age I know’d ‘bout color. Hell, you couldn’t not know ‘bout color and race growing up in Tunica County, Mississippi. It was with you everyday of your life. He tried to ‘splain best he could that it was not right and it was not fair. And Mister Jim got a good look at how unfair thangs were between white schooling and Negro schooling. Not only were the buildings different and the books and thangs too, but the time we went to school was different than the white chillun. A full school year for the white chillun was ‘bout nine and half months – after Labor day ‘til ‘round ‘bout the middle of May, but we only went to school from ‘round the first of October to the early spring – I say....’bout....mid March. The Negro school was only open for ‘bout six in a half months...nearly half the time the white chillun went to school. They got out in the middle of May or early June, but we got out in mid-March a lot of times on the count of Negro chillun had to help they folks in the fields during planting and harvest times. Then too, we didn’t go to school on rainy days or snowy days on a count the building had a leaky roof or it was too muddy. Most folks did not have no wagon and thangs to bring they chillun to school, so they just let ‘em stay home.

Some of Negro chillun didn’t go to school at all. You see, just like my granddaddy don’, after the war, lot of Negroes were sharecroppers. It all depended on who they folks worked for. Some of the white folks they parents sharecropped for didn’t wont no chillun – especially Negroes – going to school. They threatened to fire ‘em and

kick 'em off the land if they let they chillun go to school. They even used the Nightriders to keep 'em from going. They said they would burn down the school with they chillun in it if they let them go. The Negroes were scarred...and a lot of them didn't let they chillun go. But Mister Jim wasn't like that...he wanted to chillun of folks that sharecropped on his land to go to school...to make something out they self. Some parents let they chillun go, some of 'em keep 'em home and made work the land...

I was one of the lucky ones...I got to go school and I didn't have worry 'bout getting up before day and working the land and then going home after school and doing it all over again. I go to just go to school and come home and get my lesson – nobody bothering me. Yes sir, I was one of the lucky ones...my grandma Lucy made sho' that every night I got my knees and thanked the Lawd that I didn't have it as hard like most Negro chillun. It was a blessing...Not only did I get to go school, but I got to go to private school at that...

Mister Jim didn't like the way the folks from the county operated the Negro public school, so he got with some Northern do-gooders and some nice white folks around the county and started a private Negro school. It was for the chillun of well-to-do Negroes in the county –doctors, lawyers, teachers, preachers, and Negroes who owned their own land...we had quite a few. Mister Jim paid out of his own pocket for me to go to that school... I 'member hearing him and my mama fussing and carrying on 'bout going to the private school. My mama was concerned that he was doing too much for me...sitting me up too high in the world for a Negro, but Mister Jim wouldn't take no for an answer! No sir! He told my mama that I was going to that school and that was final! In all my young life, I had neva heard Mister Jim raise his voice 'cept that one time. My

mama didn't change a word with Mister Jim. For I know'd it, I left the public school and went to the private school. Mister Jim 'splaind to me that going to the private school was better for me 'cuz I would learn more and it would make me to be a better man when I got grown. With some good learning, I could grow up and be something. I was happy 'bout going to the private school, and boy, let me tell ya, it was whole heap of a lot better than that public Negro school.

My private school – Tunica County Academy for Negroes - was somewhere in between the white school and the Negro school. Our building wasn't as nice as the white school building, but it sho' wasn't as bad as the public Negro school. It was a little store front school in town; had 'bout six rooms, but each room had a teacher, and it was split into six classes for four different sets of age groups. 'Stead of only going to school six months, I went to school ten months just like all the white chillun. This made for some tension 'tween me and other Negro chillun. All through grade school, they use to pick at me and say that I thought I was *something* 'cuz I was getting "a white man's education, but I wouldn't be no more than a nigga just like them." I told my grandma Lucy and she told me not to pay them chillun no mind – they was just jealous 'cuz the good Lawd had blessed me. I believed what my grandma say, but it hard hearing them thangs from the chillun...and the adults too. They say, "You thank you *something* 'cuz you got *good* hair and high *yella skin* and a *white* man's education and you living in Mister Jim house." But I didn't thank I was no better than anybody else! They made the difference 'tween us. It was hard for me 'cuz a lot of Negroes wouldn't let they chillun play with me 'cuz they say I thought I was better than them. I spent a lot of time by myself. My mama and grandma would try to get me to go outside and play with the other chillun...but naw, I

would just be to myself thinking ‘bout different thangs. I kept more to myself...
'specially after my mama died...

I never will forget it. Thursday, July 13, 1911. My mama hadn't been feeling too good. She was having these *real* bad headaches and dizzy spells; she had even fell out a few times. Mister Jim had sent for the Negro doctor....I thank his name was....Dr. Ellington or somethin like that...but anyway...he couldn't find nothing wrong with her. That day I was in my room reading this book by W.E.B. DuBois called... *The Souls of Black Folks* – Mister Jim had bought it for me for my twelfth birthday – when I heard all this noise coming from the kitchen...sounded like plates and glasses and thangs breaking. I ran in there and I see'd my mama lying in the floor. I yell, "Mama, Mama!"

In a weak voice, she say, "Kaleb Norris, get...me...to...my bed!" I helped her up as best as I could. I put her arm around my shoulder and hope her to her bed. She laid down and I asked her what she wanted me to do. She say, "Just sit with me, son." I sat down...I was scared as hell! I couldn't believe that I was looking at my pretty mama with her red skin and long black wavy hair lying there as pale as a ghost...She couldn't catch her breath! I say, "Mama, I'm going to get the doctor." She say, "Ain't enough time for that!" She looked up at me and told me, "I love you so much. You the best thang that don' happen to me. You take care of your grandma and look after Mister Jim too. They love you so much." By this time I started crying 'cuz I could see her slipping away. I begged her, "Mama, don't go! Mama, don't leave me!" ...And it's like all of a sudden, she got better. She grabbed my hand so tight tell it ne'bout scared me and I stopped crying. She say, "I'll *always* be with you!"

By that time, my grandma run in and knelt down side Mama. I got up and stepped back. She say, “Phronnie! Phronnie, my sweet baby!” Long tears running down her face....Mister Jim – had been to town that day – come back – he run in too...he knelt down side her too. I had never seen Mister Jim cry, but that day...he cried like a baby! My mama told my grandma and Mister Jim somethin, but I couldn’t hear what she say. The last two words... I heard my mama say....before she took her last breath...was...

“Tell him!”

Those two words she said before she died haunted me for months after we buried her in the Negro cemetery next to my granddaddy. I asked my grandma what was Mama talking ‘bout when she said, “Tell him” before she died, but Grandma never would say. It was almost like she pretended that I hadn’t even asked the question. I asked her time and time and time again, but she would either ignore me or say, “Oh, Kaleb Norris, that ain’t important!” I couldn’t even get a straight answer out of Mister Jim. He wouldn’t tell me what my mama was talking ‘bout either. He would look me straight in the eyes and say, “Kaleb Norris, you’ll find out in due time!” He was right...it would be years before I know’d what my mama meant when she said “Tell him” on her death bed!...

I had finished Tunica County Academy for Negroes the spring before my mama died. By the time fall had come, the Julian Rosenberg High School was open. It was private too, like my elementary school, named after a Jewish fella up north who had give money to help start the school. It was the first high school for Negroes in the county. The Negro public school only went through the sixth grade. Most white folks felt Negroes school didn’t need to go no further than the sixth grade – lot of ‘em felt like Negroes didn’t need no education at all! I don’t know how it worked, but by law the

county gov'ment didn't have to provide no high school for the Negroes – only elementary grades. If I 'member correctly, they's had these policies in place that say that a certain number of Negro chillun going to the school had to be present at all time. Every now and then somebody from the county would drop by to see how many chillun was at school. They say that enough Negro chillun didn't attend school often enough for them to give 'em a high school, but the white chillun had a high school! A lot of them was po' just like Negroes. They had to stay out and work the fields too, but they still had a school – Tunica County High School. As I told you, there was a heap of a difference between the white school and the Negro school. So if you was a Negro and you wanted to get your learning beyond the lower grades, you had to pay to go the private school. The county did provide no high school for Negro chillun. And how many Negroes had money to send they chillun to a private school? Most of 'em could barely 'ford to feed they self...sharecropping and all!

But Mister Jim sent me on to the Tunica County Negro School and Training Institute. It was different than the elementary grade. We moved away from basic reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. It was harder, but I guess we were all the better for knowing it. We studied algebra, geometry, and science. Algebra was my favorite subject! I lik'd numbers and measurement. I lik'd history, but Algebra was my favorite subject and I got high marks in it too! I lik'd science too – learning how to build thangs, but I didn't like that part of science where they made us *farm!* There was a little farm right out behind the school, where we growed fruits, vegetables, raised chickens and hogs, and cotton too. Most of us hated that part 'cuz we...they had to do it early in the morning too. They would complain and say, “our folks ain't sent us to school to learn how to farm!” Most

of us there wanted to be doctors, lawyers, teachers, and preachers...things like that...not no farmer! All in all I enjoyed learning...and I thank Mister Jim enjoyed it 'bout much as I did. Soon I got home, he asked me, "Kaleb Norris, what you learn today, boy?" And I would sit down and we would talk 'bout it. Then one day, he surprised me with somethin!

We was sitting in the kitchen talking after school. My grandma was cooking supper. Mister Jim say to me, "Pretty soon you gonna be a man and you go off into the world and find your own way. What you wanna be? A lawyer, a doctor, a teacher?" I sat there a spell... 'cuz I didn't know what to say. Then I says, "I don't know. I never thought 'bout it, sir." Then he say, "Time you thought 'bout it....And while you thinking 'bout it, I want you to think 'bout this." Then he say, "You ever thought 'bout going to college." When... Mister... Jim say... that... I lik'd ta fell out my seat!" My grandma was just as shocked as I was, but I could tell she was happy 'bout it. She nodded at me as if to say, "Boy say yes." Then I said, "Yes, sir, I hear some of the chillun that close to finishing talking 'bout going on to Fisk in Nashville or Hampton in Virginia or Tuskegee in Alabama and a number of other places. I thank it would be good to go somewhere like that!" Mister Jim smiled at me and say, "Good, then whatever school you want to go to, that's where you'll go!" I didn't know what to say, other than, "Yes sir, thank you, sir!" Mister Jim left the kitchen...my grandma gave me the biggest hug and told me how thankful to God she was that I was going to finish high school and go on to college. She made sho' that I never forgot how blessed I was...and how many Negro chillun didn't have a chance to go on to school like me. Not only was I gonna finish high school, but I was going to go to college....or so I thought...

I graduated high school on Sunday afternoon, May 14, 1916 – it was Mother’s Day! It was bitter sweet ‘cuz my mama Phronnie wouldn’t there to see me graduate, but my grandma Lucy made sho’ they told me how proud she was of me and how proud my mama was too...in heaven. Mister Jim was proud of me too. I ‘member all that day he walked around with his chest stuck out!!! He was somethin or other to see! We had made the decision that I was going to Nashville to Fisk to college. By that time I had made up my mind that I wanted to be a teacher. Mister Jim supported that and my grandma too. Everything was all set up for me to take a train to Memphis and then one to Nashville, but everything in life don’t as you plan. Mister Jim, proud as he was of me that day and how he bragged to anybody that would listen ‘bout how proud he was of me, died in his sleep a week before I was supposed to leave for Nashville....and full of grief ...my grandma died three days later after Mister Jim’s funeral!

I found her lying on the floor in the kitchen when I got up that Friday morning. I guess the stress of Mister Jim dying was just too much for her. I was all alone in the world now – my mama Phronnie was gone – her last words were “Tell him” and the two people who were supposed to be tellin’ me, never told me what she was talking ‘bout. All three of ‘em sleeping in they graves, left me all alone wondering what they know’d and I didn’t. I buried my grandma next to my mama and my granddaddy John. Mister Jim was buried not too far from them in the white cemetery with his mama and daddy. After my grandma funeral, I was standing over by her grave – the men had just covered it up, and I heard Miss Minnie and Miss Clara, two of my grandma’s friends who sharecropped down the road on the Watson Place, say, “They’d been together so long that I guess Mister Jim and Lucy couldn’t *stand* to be apart.” In part, I agreed with ‘em; my

grandma and Mister Jim had pretty much worked and lived together for a long time...but a part of me felt like Miss Minnie and Miss Clara was talking 'bout somethin else 'cept I didn't know what it was...

Here I was....sixteen years old...and I didn't have no family. To makes thangs worse, I lost the only home I had ever known. The day after I buried my grandma Lucy, I was sitting on the front porch of the house just thinking...I couldn't believe all the people in the world that I know'd loved me was gon. I was sitting on front porch of the house and this man rode up in an automobile – black, Ford - Model T. It was the first I thank time I ever see'd an automobile like that. He come up on the porch and when he see'd me, he stopped dead in his tracks...like he had see'd some sort of han't or somethin. He stared at me for the longest! I got scared - I didn't know who he was or why he come there. Finally, he asked me who I was and I told him, "My name is Kaleb Norris, sir!" He say my name back to me, "Kaleb Norris?" Then I 'splained to him that my mama was Phronnie and my grandma was Lucy – they both had worked for Mister Jim before they died and before he died. He then know'd who I was, but the look of shock never left his face. He say he was Mister Jim's brother. I was shock 'cause this was the first I had don' ever heard of Mister Jim having a brother. He say they had don' lost contact- check this out - years ago. You know, I found it mighty strange that he lost touch with his brother, but not even a week after he dead, he all of a sudden show up at his house...and it aint like he lived a long way off. He said he lived over in Helen, Arkansas – just a ferry ride 'cross the Mississippi. He say he know'd my grandma and my mama. My mama had don' hope raise him after his mama dead. He telling me this and all the while, he couldn't take his eyes off me...He said that he was going to go into the house 'cuz

being family, he needed to tend to Mister Jim's business affairs. They was nothing I could say. He didn't gimme no reason not to believe he weren't who he say he was...and too he favored Mister Jim some...so I say sho', but before he went into house, I asked him one question, "Pardon me, sir, but what your name is?" He looked me dead in the eyes and say, "My name is Matthew Norris Cooper, III!"

It took a minute for me to realize what he say...then it to come to me. His middle name was the same thang as mine. I went on in the house behind him once I realize that. I ask him, "Mister Matthew, we got the same name?" He say, "Yeah, I reckon we do...just like your first name is my brother Jim's middle name. His name was James Kaleb Cooper." In all my years of growing up, I didn't know nothing else other than Mister Jim's name being "Mister Jim Cooper." Mister Matthew see'd the look my face. I turned ne' bout as white a ghost 'cuz I never had no reason before to question my name. Now all of a sudden I find out my first name – Kaleb – come from Mister Jim's middle name and my middle name – Norris – come from Mister Jim's brother Matthew. Mister Matthew see'd the look on my face. He say, "You never know where your name come from?" I couldn't say nothing...just shook my head, "Naw." He told me to sit down and we start talking – rather he talked and I listened...And what Mister Matthew told me answered all the questions I had had my whole life. I now understood what my mama Phronnie meant on her death bed when she told my grandma Lucy and Mister Jim, "*Tell him*" before she died! I guess it had been right there in my face my whole life and I never paid no 'tention to it. I guess I couldn't see the forest for the trees, but there it was...and now I know'd the whole ugly...shameful...truth! And I know Mister Matthew wouldn't be lying to me 'cuz so much of what he say made sense...and then after he told

me what he told me, I went down to the Watson Place to see Miss Clara and Miss Minnie. I *begged* ‘em to tell me anything that my grandma Lucy had told them ‘bout my mama, my birth, and anything else they could think of. They see’d the pain on my face and how much I wanted and needed to know. And we walked off down the road a piece, and they told me what my mama, Mister Jim, and my grandma Lucy had took to they grave...and it was the same thangs Mister Matthew had don’ told me. And I made a promise to myself that day that I would never tell another living soul the thangs they told me!

A week later after he come, Mister Matthew come and told me that he had got all of Mister Jim’s business in order and that he had sold the house and the land. He then told me that I had three days to find me somewhere to go and all I could take with me was my clothes ‘cuz all the other stuff had been sold with the house. I couldn’t believe what was happening to me. Just like that, the place I had called “home” my whole life was *gone*! My world was turned upset down. Here I was supposed to been going off to college at Fisk University in Nashville and them dreams were *gone*! Mister Jim took ‘em with ‘em when he died. I couldn’t believe that he’d left me like this...Lawd knows I didn’t have the money for the tuition. Everythang I ever needed, Mister Jim see’d to it that I had it. Now I had nothing!

Education: The Unequal Opportunity Employer

I left Tunica County, Mississippi, walking...in the year 1916; I was sixteen years old, and I had sixteen dollars in my pocket that I found in my grandma’s pocketbook. I never will forget the day I left the Cooper Plantation. I was hurt down in my soul! I couldn’t believe that I was having to leave *my house, my land* and the thangs I had

grew up around – the only place where I felt close to my granddaddy, my mama, my grandma, and Mister Jim! Lawd ah mercy! The only things I took with me was my clothes, like Mister Matthew say ‘cuz he was watching me to make sho’ I didn’t take nothing else – not even a picture of Mister Jim or none of the stuff he had don’ gimme over the years...nothing! Mister Matthew had grewed cold to me too. He kinda was nice to me the day he come, by telling me all thangs he did that my mama, my grandma, and Mister Jim wouldn’t tell me. It was almost like he was being secret...like there was somethin else he know’d that he didn’t want me to find out...somethin he was hiding. I *felt* it, but I couldn’t prove it. The mornin’ ‘for I left, I walked around the house one last time thinkin’ ‘bout all the good times I’d had in that house. ‘Sides my clothes, all I was taking was them good times with me. I didn’t even say good bye to Mister Matthew, but as I walked down the road, I felt his eyes on me. I turned back to see him watching me from the upstairs window – looking mean as a rattle snake. I turned ‘round and kept on walking with my one bag in my hand. I decided that there was no looking back and that I would never step foot in Tunica County again!

In the three days Mister Matthew had don’ give me, I decided that I was going to go to Memphis first, get a job, save a little money, and then go on to St. Louis or Chicago; I was gon’ try to save some money so I could get some mo’ schooling. I heard that thangs were better for Negroes up north so that’s where I wanted to go. It took me a few days to get to Memphis walking and all. I’d stop and rest and sleep where I could – in old barns, in fields, wherever I could lay my head and rest, eating fruit from the trees and drinking sprang water from wells.

Crossing over the state line into Tennessee was the start of a new life. It was the first time I'd ever been to Memphis. Hell, it was the first time I had ever been *anywhere*... When I got to Memphis, first thing I did was find me a newspaper, so I could find me somewhere to stay. I see'd an ad in the paper for a rooming house over off Vance... It was quite a ways from where I was, so I kept walking and by night fall I found my way. I was so hot, tired, and hungry 'til I didn't know what do!!! I knocked on the door of the rooming house and sweetest little lady who 'minded me of my grandma Lucy answered the door. "For I could say anything, she say, "Chile, you must be tired and hungry? Come on in here and lemme fix you somethin to eat." And before I know'd it, I was sitting in this woman's kitchen who didn't know me from the man in the moon eating some *pork chops, ham, collard greens, candied yams, and cornbread*. And Lawd ah mercy, it was so good! First *real* meal I had had in a few days. In between bites of bread, I manage to tell her that I had come 'bout the room she had for rent. She 'splain to me the room was upstairs. She was a widow and her chillun was grown and had chillun of they own, so she decided to rent out rooms in her house. She say she liked being 'round people, especially young folks 'cuz kept her spirit young. She say she only had two rooms to rent and one of 'em was mine if I want it 'cuz I seemed like a nice 'enuff fella. I asked how much the room was and she told me that it was \$20 a month and that 'cluded the room, the laundry, and a meal 'cuz she loved cooking for people. And for what I had just tasted, that woman *sho' could cook*! I 'splained the situation to her – that I had just come from Mississippi, and I didn't have nothing but sixteen dollars on me. She told me to just pay her eight dollars for the rest of the month and we would talk 'bout the rest of it when I got settled and got a job!

After I got through eating her good food, she was showing me upstairs to my room when it come to me that I didn't even know her name. Here I was a stranger 'bout to live in her house and I didn't know her name and she didn't know mine. I say, "Ma'am, I don't know yo' name." She laughed and say, "My name is Amanda Louise Johnson, but everybody call me Miss Mandie." I told her my name and we went on upstairs to my room. It was a nice enough room too...with a little bed, desk, and chifferobe...it was nice and clean too...not as nice as my room back at Mister's Jim place, but it did just fine. So I got settled in and got me a good night sleep! I must have been tireder than I know'd, 'cuz the next mornin' Miss Mandie told me that all night long I called the "sheeps and the hogs!" That Miss Mandie was somethin else! Next mornin', I woke up to the smell of breakfast coming from the kitchen. I went downstairs and Miss Mandie had breakfast laid on the table – fried fish, grits, eggs, and homemade strawberry preserves. I felt like I was back at Mister Jim's kitchen with my grandma. It sho' was nice to be looked after again. It hadn't been long since my grandma Lucy died, but I sho' was missing her...and I thank the Good Lawd for sending Miss Mandie when he did...

After I paid Miss Mandie...and I only had ten dollars in my pocket, so I had to get a job to take care of myself. The sooner I got a job the sooner I could save enuff money so I could move north and continue my schooling. I had never had a job before in my life – all I ever did was go to school. I didn't know what I could do, but I thought my schooling would count for somethin, but I sho' found out quick that my education was as useful as a fur coat in the middle of a heat wave, 'specially being a Negro. Everythang in the paper and every place I went to...the only jobs open that they was hiring Negroes fo' was a driver, a waiter, a cook, a janitor...thangs like that...I wanted a job where I could

at least learn a trade, so when I went north I wouldn't have no trouble getting another job. So I was concerned 'bout that, but the Lawd made a way...

I got my first job down at a company call...Forrest Steele. I got hired on a count that most the company's white workers had gon' off fighting the war over yonder in Europe. The owner still had orders and thangs coming in, 'specially with the war on. Weren't enough white men 'round, so he had to hire Negro workers. It was a decent enuff job. I made \$2.50 a day and I worked ten hours a day. That was pretty good, 'cuz them other jobs I had been to wouldn't paying no way near that! The only problem I see'd with the job was that the few white workers that was there made almost two times what I was making – they made \$4.50 a day and they too worked 10 hours a day. Now that wasn't right, but there wasn't nothing we could do 'bout it. Either we could work there or go somewhere else and work for less money. All us Negroes know'd they was being paid more, but we dealt with us. Thangs had never been equal between the Negro and the white man, so we didn't 'spect it. Then, on top of that, we worked in the hottest parts and did the hardest jobs too. You know, we couldn't work with the white workers either...on count of the law...and then, 'cuz they didn't wanna work 'side us...to tell the truth. Hell, we didn't wanna work side them either! It was peaceful that way and kept down confusion. It was bad enuff the way the owner treated us...

Mister Nate Forrest! *Ooooooh weeeee!* That man didn't take much to Negroes. I thank he forgot slavery was over 'cuz he tried to work us to death at times. He treated old dogs better than he did us, and he looked like a dog...a bull dawg...wrangle face, saggin' cheeks, and he walked around trying to make folks 'fraid of 'em. Everyday he threatened to fire a Negro worker for not working hard enuff... His bark was worse than

his bite...but he was just as mean and hateful as they come. He tolerated us 'cuz he didn't have no choice! He needed us, even though he'd never admit that...but we kept him from having to close his business on a count there wasn't no white workers 'round there to hire. He didn't say much to us long as we got the work did. So it really wouldn't that bad a place to work!

For I know'd it, a year had passed. I was still living at Miss Mandie's; we had don' really become close...and I had managed to save up almost two hundred dollars. I decided that I was gon' work and wait another year...then I was going to go north. I had set my sites on Chicago. I heard say it was really nice up there and there was good jobs for Negroes up there...so, I was excited 'bout that. Just when I set my sites on going...out the blue...I got a moved up on my job!

The war was still going on over yonder in Europe. Almost all of the few white workers Mister Forrest had went to fight the war, so he hired even more of us Negroes to work. We was working one day and he come in and asked, "Can any of you *boys* read and write good?" Nobody said nothing...I looked 'round for a spell...then I say, "Yes, sir...I can read and write pretty good." I say, "Fact of the matter is I graduated high school." Mister Forrest cut his eyes at me. If looks could kill, I'da been dead that day! He pulled out one of the work orders for me read. I read that work order like nobody's business and told him exactly what it meant! He couldn't believe it. He then told me that I was the new overseer of the Negroes. As he walked off, with his old ugly self, he say under his breath, "Ain't no nigger got no business with a white man's education," and that I wouldn't gonna be no more than I already was. He built me up and tore me down in the same breath! I learned right then that white folks ain't got much 'preciate for

Negroes until they figure out a way to use ‘em...and even then they don’t want him to feel good ‘bout hisself. I got the job ‘cuz the Negro overseer Linc Patterson got drafted to go fight in the war. Mister Forrest needed somebody who could read and write and understand the forms to make up the orders and pack the shipments and things. So he promoted ‘cuz he didn’t have much of a choice, ‘specially when no other Negro man would own up to knowing how to read and write. I laugh ‘bout this to this day...ole Mister Nate Forrest...I guess I was his “Great White Hope!”

As happy as I was to be the Negro overseer, my own kind didn’t make it easy for me. Some of the other Negro workers teased me and say that old Mister Forrest hired me on ‘count of how I looked. They say I got the job ‘cuz I looked white with my high yella skin and my sandy red hair. I told ‘em that my looks had nothing to do with it. It was ‘cuz I could read and write. I had the courage to speak up when he ask for somebody who could read... and I know’d I wasn’t the only Negro man in the place that could read and write – I graduated high school and I was the better for it and *proud* of it. What I say that for? That only made things worse! They started teasing me ‘bout having a “white man’s schooling.” I tired to ‘splain to ‘em ‘bout how I got my schooling hoping they would understand, but it just made things even worsen. They told me that I thought was better than ‘em, but I was still a nigga just like ‘em. I felt like... I wasn’t Negro enough for ‘em....They started treating me diff’reent. They wouldn’t half speak to me. They even stopped eating lunch with me. I tried to let ‘em see that nothing had changed – that I was still the same ole Kaleb Norris I had always been, but they didn’t see that. They looked at me just liked they looked at a *white man*... I ‘pect my skin color and hair color didn’t help things none!

Anyway, I still had a job to do...and I did it! I was a good worker... 'spite of how they now treated me...they had no choice but to respect me as they overseer if they wanted they job. That was the *bottom line!* Fact is too...I was younger than most of 'em. They didn't like that either. I tried to treat everybody with respect. I didn't try to throw no weight 'round 'cuz there was none to be throwed. I wasn't no better than the rest of the Negroes. But...with my job came an increase in my wages! I wouldn't make as much as the white workers, but I was making more than the other Negro workers. Even though he didn't take to Negroes much, Mister Forrest couldn't deny that I was the best worker – Negro or white – that he had! I worked as Negro overseer for almost two years 'til the white workers started coming back from the war and wanted jobs.

Yeah, the white workers came back...and Mister Forrest didn't have no more use for Negro workers all of a sudden. With the 'ception of me and a few others, he got rid of all the Negro workers to hire mo' white workers; he kept his *'best boys'* as he called us – his best Negro workers. He say, "It wouldn't be right for him to keep on Negroes when there was good God-fearing, decent, white-men who had served they country and needed jobs. Make thangs worse, he took my job as overseer from me with no warning – no nothing! One Monday mornin', he brought in this white fella by the name of Richard Hill and introduced him to the Negro workers as the new Negro overseer. The only thang This was out the blue. I didn't hear him tell of it 'til that mornin'. Only thing he say to me 'bout it was, "I don't need no uppity nigger in charge. If I let you stay in charge, you might start to think that you can tell a white man what to do, and I won't stand for it!" That cut me to the quick! I ain't gon' lie, it cut like a *knife!* I was the best worker that Mister Forrest had...***and for him to do me like that!....Lawd ah mercy!...***

It hurt, but I got over it...and Richard Hill proved to be a decent enuff white fella. He felt mighty bad 'bout what Mister Forrest had don' to me, but I told him not to worry. It wasn't his fault. As it worked out, he and I became...friends...'bout as much as a white man and a Negro could be friends in those days. I taught him the job and we worked together, but that thang hurt me! Here I was...twenty years old...had mo' schooling than most of the white fellas that worked there. Hell, I prob'ly had more schooling than the owner hisself, but all Mister Forrest saw when he looked at me...all he saw was *my color*. He didn't see my good sense or my schooling. He didn't see my hard work and loyalty I had don' give 'em. No matter what I did or how good of a worker I was, Mister Forrest only see'd what he wanted to see ...he used me until he had no more use for me.

To pour salt in my wounds, the Negro workers that had worked under me *laughed* in my face! One of 'em told me, "See, you a nigga just like the rest of us." Funny thang is...after I wasn't they overseer no more, they started talking to me again. My skin color didn't change, but I somehow I became Negro enuff again...

In Search of His Own

I thought for a while that losing the overseer job was a blessing. I had stayed in Memphis far longer than I tended to stay. I had more than enuff money to go north like I planned, but Negroes from everywhere seemed to be doing that! I had don' got comfortable with my job at Forrest Steele 'spite the fact of what happened to me. I didn't thank 'bout goin' to get mo' education either. My schooling had hoped me when I got the overseer's job, but it didn't matter 'bout no education...Mister Forrest took it away from me as he saw fit. I really didn't see no need to try to go North...I had a good job

right where I was...I was doing just fine! I was living the good life! I came and went as I pleased...I took up drinking and smoking too. That was 'bout the time Prohibition come along. The gov'ment say that society was too loose and they outlawed liquor, but that didn't stop folks from drinking. Fact is, it just made 'em wanna do it the mo'. Since folks couldn't sell liquor, folks went to making it theyselves. I grew to like whiskey, and I hung with "Rusty" Jones and "Junior" Johnson – Miss Mandie's oldest son – and they made the best corn liquor there was! We drank that stuff and got so drunk...Pass out on Friday and didn't wake up 'til Monday mornin' when it was time to go to work.

I spent a lot of my weekends down on Beale Street... didn't live too far from it. Go down there and eat and drank. Them good time gals *loooovvvveeeedddd* to see us men coming on Fridays with a pocket full of money so they could help us spend it, but I didn't let 'em close enuff to get to my money. I'd go to the park and listen to ole W.C. Handy when he come to town...I see'd and know'd all of 'em jazz and blues players. Out there in Church Park is where many of 'em got they start. I tell ya, we'd have a time, sho' nuf, we would be cutting a fool and messing with the ladies! *Oooooohhhh* boy I tell ya the truth! For years...I partied from the time I got off work on Friday 'til I went back on Monday morning...that was the life!...Then the time came when I got sick and tired of all that foolishness...I wanted to settle down...I wanted a family... 'cuz I didn't have none of my own.

On June 18, 1926, I married Henrietta Bond. I met Henrietta one day while I was walking home from work. She stayed on the next street over from Miss Mandie's. I was walking that day and she was sitting on the porch drinking some lemonade, and she spoke. I say, "Hey!" Then I told her I have never see'd her round here before ...and I

hadn't... We started talking – she was on the porch and I was on the other side of the fence. She told me that she hadn't been too long moved to Memphis...that she had come to work at the new Negro high school being built up on Lauderdale and she was staying with her uncle and auntie. She told me that she was from Humboldt, Tennessee. 'For I know'd it, I was sitting there on the porch drinking lemonade with her. She was a real fine lady...carried herself in a real fine way...always neat, clean, head always don', clothes pretty, smelt good...just real fine. So we started keeping company on the regular. I cleaned up my act a bit, 'cuz I really liked her...I stopped so much drinking and smoking like I had been doing...and on occasion went to Beale Street Baptist Church with her and her folks...courting and keeping company on Sundays.

Miss Mandie had become like family. After a few months, I care'd her 'round to her house to let her meet her. She was pleased and thought Henrietta was a pretty fine girl. She later told me after I walked her back 'round to her house and come back... Miss Mandie say, "Kaleb Norris, I can tell you sho' sweet on her! You love her?"

I said, "Yes 'um, I believe I do!" Then Miss Mandie say, "What you waiting on, boy, ask for her hand!" She then went to the buffet in the parlor, looked in the drawer and got out a little jewelry box. She handed it to me and say, "Ask her for her hand." I opened the box and it was a ring. She 'splained to me that it was the ring her husband had don' give her when they married and she wanted me to give it to Henrietta. I say, "Miss Mandie, I can't 'cept this...Yo husband giv' you this ring," but there was no arguing with Miss Mandie. Not only did she gimme the ring to give to Henrietta, but she told me that we going to stay there with her once we got married...

...And stayed there we did...just like Miss Mandie wanted. I met Henrietta in June of '26...we married in June of '27. We made a pretty good life for us. We were living with Miss Mandie. I thank it did Miss Mandie's heart good to have us in the house...She would make a fuss over us...more so than she did when I had come to live with her almost ten years before. But nothing compared to the fussing she did when Henrietta found out she was pregnant. Miss Mandie wouldn't let her left a finger! Even though Henrietta wanted chillun, she hated she got pregnant when she did. She was just starting her second year teachin' at Booker Washington School...and she had to quit 'cuz they had this rule that you couldn't be pregnant and teachin'...so she had to quit...She lik'd to went crazy being in the house with Miss Mandie all day 'cuz Miss Mandie would fuss over her so. Then, by the time the baby come...she made a fuss of the baby too. On November 13, 1928, the Good Lawd smiled on me and Henrietta. We had a precious little baby girl. Henrietta decided that her name was gonna be Rose Amanda – after her mama and Miss Mandie. I thought that was a pretty fine name...and Miss Mandie did too! She fussed over little Rose so. We didn't have to worry 'bout getting up in the middle of night or nothing 'cuz if she started crying Miss Mandie be in our room before we know'd it to see after her. Yes sir...I had a good life and I thanked the Good Lawd for it...I had a good life...until the crash of '29 messed thangs up!

The Sharecropping Generation: 1930-1940

Depression & Oppression go hand and hand

In a country where you're considered less than a man

Educated you might be - for a Negro it's no certainty-

That you won't find that place, especially designed for the Negro race

Back where you started! It's your histories

In the cotton fields of Mississippi to build your legacies...

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The Re-Education of Kaleb Norris

Black Tuesday....the 29th of October of '29. I was at work and overheard some of the white workers talking 'bout the Stock Market had crashed in New York! I 'membered a little bit 'bout the stock market from school. They was hoopin' and hollerin' and carryin' on so. Long and short of it... the prices of stocks fell and folks got scarred and pull they money out of these different companies and thangs causin' the market to crash. I didn't know what none of that meant and too much didn't care 'cuz I didn't own no stocks no how and didn't know nobody that owned none either. I didn't care 'bout no stock market crashing 'til a few days later when I went to the bank to draw some money out and found out the bank was closed and there was no way for me to get my money out! Seems that in the first days following the crash, folks came and took all they money out... 'cept me with my dumb self. When folks come and do that, the bank didn't have the money to give 'em 'cuz they had don' invested folks' money in the market to make the bank some money. So they closed

I had only 'bout...five hundred dollars or so that I had been saving, and I was mad too that I lost all my money 'cuz I had worked for years to save it, but I couldn't 'magine what folks was going through that had thousands in the banks and they couldn't get they money! I read in the paper that after the crash some folks killed they self – jumping off building and bridges and shooting they self in the head 'cuz they had don'

lost everything – they life’s saving! I lost my life’s savings *too*, but it didn’t make me wanna go blow off my head like that! First, no body I know’d ‘sides myself wouldn’t worried ‘bout it, seeing us Negroes didn’t have that type of money no how, but we was hurt by the market crash too.

For the crash, we had gon’ to working twelve hours days ‘cuz we had so many orders to fill, but all that changed overnight. New orders stopped comin’ in and folks who had made orders cancelled them ‘cuz they couldn’t pay for them. Soon we found ourselves with a whole warehouse full of products and no place to ship them to. Most of the day, found us just standing around, talking, doin’ nothing, ‘cuz there was no work to be did. The business wasn’t making no mo’ money and Mister Forrest couldn’t afford to pay us. So the first thang he did to try and save his company and hissself was to let us Negroes workers go. That Monday ‘for Christmas – the 23rd - we showed up for work, and Mister Forrest met us at the gate and told us, “Boys, I can’t afford to keep you on.” I stopped and looked. What the hell was he talking ‘bout? Then he went on to say, “Last week was your last week working here!” And without ‘splaining hissself no more, he turned and walked away. You talking ‘bout *somebody mad*! All of us was mad. Here I had give his company thirteen years and it was over with just like that! But what could we do ‘bout it? Nothin! Absolutely nothin! Mister Forrest let the Negroes workers go first ‘cuz he couldn’t dare put a Negro worker over a white worker. It woulda not been right ‘cording to him! We had to feed our families and thangs just like the whites workers!!! But Mister Forrest didn’t care ‘bout us Negroes at all. And I didn’t care ‘bout him either. Here it was a couple of days ‘fore Christmas and I lost my job!

Henrietta was upset when I told her. My losing my job didn't make things no better between us. Our marriage was in trouble. We went from loving each other to damn near hating each other in a matter of months. It was like...Henrietta grew restless with our life...like what we had wouldn't enuff for her. She wanted to move away from Miss Mandie, but Miss Mandie was getting on in years and she had been so *good* to me...I couldn't stand the thought of leaving her. And I told Henrietta right off that we wouldn't be going nowhere, so she might as well get moving out her mind, but she didn't! I thank losing all of our money when the bank closed and me losing my job was the straw that broke the camel's back for us...

Christmas that year was sad! Me and Henrietta barely said two words to each other. Miss Mandie, who had don' took to her bed sick, noticed it too, even though I tried to make like everything was alright. Little Rose sensed it too. After Christmas, I tried to find work, but there was none to be found. More and more businesses were closing up 'round Memphis every day! Every day when I came back without a job seem to tick Henrietta off. She had gon' back to teach schooling...so we was living off her money...which didn't make me feel good. A man is 'posed to be able to support hisself and take care of his family. What type of man I was?...couldn't take care of his wife and daughter...we was living...now rent free...with Miss Mandie. She wouldn't charge us no mo' 'cuz we were talking care her...doing the things for her, her own chillun wouldn't do.

'Bout three months or so passed. I was out...still trying to find work...and I run into ole Richard Hill. He was out looking for a job too. Come first of the year, Mister Forrest had to let *all* the workers. He closed the company...say he couldn't 'ford to pay

nobody no' mo. Richard 'splained to me that Mister Forrest had lost a whole lot of money in that crash... and that night after he let the workers go, he went into his office and put a bullet in his head. I couldn't believe what Richard told me! Sent chills all *through* my body. Me and Richard talked a spell and I learned somethin else 'bout Mister Forrest.

Richard Hill told me that Mister Forrest grew up during the Civil War. His folks had a lot of money, but lost it all after the war; they had made the mistake of putting all they money in Confederate bonds 'cuz they was sho' the South was gonna win, but when the South lost the war, they lost it all! So they had to start all over again – they worked they own land, bowing and scraping to folks – they had never don' that before. Somehow he made a lot of money in steel. I guess when he lost everything in the crash, he couldn't bare to be po' all over again and was too old to start over. I guess he felt that death would be better than being po'...Now I kinda understand Mister Forrest and why he hated Negroes so. He blamed us for the Civil War and his family losing everything...I thank that's why he treated us like dogs. He wanted to make sure that he kept us in our place. He blamed us for the way things were, but this time around, he couldn't blame the Negroes 'cuz we didn't create the problem with the market. I felt sorry for ole Mister Forrest, but I come to believe that there was worse thangs than having no money...like having no family and not knowing 'bout your people and who they is and where you come from...*really come from!*

But anyway, me and Richard kept on talking...I ask him what was he gon' do if he couldn't find no job...'cuz there was none to be had for Negroes or whites. He told me if he didn't find work by spring, he was gon' take his wife and two chillun back to

Mississippi where they come from. Turns out his family owned 'bout 400 acres out down in Marshall County. He then told me that I should thank 'bout comin' with him...me and my family. He say that he was sho' his family could make some room for me on they place. I didn't know 'bout that. Sharecropping?! I mean...I had growed up 'round it my whole life, but I'd never *really* don' it. While the other chillun on Mister Jim's place and other places 'round where I growed up, worked in the fields mornin's and evenin's and some of 'em all day long. I went to school and got an education...Then as I was thanking 'bout it, I hear my grandma's voice in the back of my head...Mister Jim's too...saying, "Kaleb Norris, I want you to get your learning. A Negro can't be nothing in this world without some learning." But what was I? Here I was...thirty years old! I was on my way to college at one time...I was on my way north...but I never got there. What good was my education doing me? I was just another out of work Negro just like the rest of 'em I see'd day in and day out. You know, I didn't really know the first thang 'bout sharecropping. Sho', I had pick cotton and thangs befo', but it was mo' play to me than real work 'cuz my grandma and Mister Cooper didn't really make me work hard at it 'cuz of my schooling, but I know'd it could be hard work. We did a little bit of growing some thangs in school, but it weren't sharecropping. Funny thang is I hadn't thought 'bout sharecropping at all 'til ole Richard brung it up.

I told Richard I didn't know the first thang 'bout sharecropping and he 'splained to me that right now they was no real money to be made 'cuz things were so bad and all, and thangs were probably gon' get worse before they got better. But he said, at least we wouldn't have to worry 'bout a place a live or food to eat 'cuz a portion of what we growed would be ours, and then once things got better we could come back to the city if

we wanted. I had just lost my job and from what I could see, it was gon' be hard to find another one. Thangs were starting to get mighty bad! Day in and day out all you saw was men walking the streets looking for work. Everybody was out of work...If thangs got any worser I told Richard that I might have to take him up on his offer. Before I know'd, thangs got worser...

'Bout two months later, come to find out, Miss Mandie's house...wasn't Miss Mandie's house. It belonged to her dead husband's first wife. What happened was Miss Mandie's husband Silas Johnson moved into that house with his first wife...I thank Miss Mandie say her name was Bernice...when they married. They divorced and Miss Bernice moved to Missouri, got remarried, and had some more chillun and everything. Well, I guess she got homesick for Memphis or somethin or other. All I know is one Sunday evening, her and three of grown chillun showed up at Miss Mandie's door talking 'bout this was her house and we was gon' have to move. I couldn't believe it, but it was true. Miss Mandie said it was and Miss Bernice had the deed to prove the house was hers. They told us we had to move...and they give us a week to do it!

None of this set well with Henrietta! We had one helluva of a fight that night! She blamed me for everything that had happened. She told me that if we had a moved when she wanted to, the bank wouldn'tve never closed and took our money. We would have had a place to stay. She blamed me for everything that had gon' wrong... I told her what's don' was don', and I couldn't do nothing 'bout that. We just had to look forward and focus on the future. My first concern was Miss Mandie! We could take care ourself, but what was gon' happen to her? She was up in age now. Well, her oldest boy Junior decided his mama could come stay with him and his family. That was settled fairly

quickly and took a load off my mind. My next question was where was me, Henrietta, and Rosie gon' go? I told her 'bout Richard Hill's offer. Hmmp, what the hell I do that for'?

When I told Henrietta 'bout Richard Hill's offer, she told me that her mama and daddy did not raise her and send her to school to be no sharecropper. She say to me, "I ain't raising no family on a farm – sharecropping! Sharecropping ain't nothing but slavery without the chains for Negroes. Once you get in it, you can't get out of it!" I tried to 'splain to her that we didn't no choice... We didn't have no money saved, I wouldn't working, and we had a week to find some place to go. We had to do somethin to *survive*! She say we ought to go to her parents place up in Humboldt, but I told her naw, I wouldn't going 'cuz I didn't want to take no handouts from her folks when there was a way we could make it on our own. She looked me straight in the eye and told me, "I don't care what you say, Kaleb Norris, I ain't gon' be no sharecropper and I ain't moving to Mississippi. Sharecropping ain't nothing but slavery all over again..." Years later... years after Henrietta took off with Rosie in the middle of the night I come to see that she was right. Sharecropping didn't mean Negroes no good...

I woke up the next morning to find Henrietta and Rosie gon'. I don't know how she did it, but somehow, she managed to pack a suitcase and slip out. Hell, for all I know, she might've had that suitcase already packed. She might've just been waiting on the chance to leave! I was worried sick 'bout 'em. She didn't leave no note, no nothing, saying where she was going. She just left in the middle of night. I tried not to worry too much. I just focused on trying to get Miss Mandie settled at Junior's house and make sho' all her thangs was packed up and sent over there and whatever else she wanted me to do.

Once I got her settled, me and Miss Mandie sat and talked a spell. She lying in her bed resting...I sat 'side her. She ask me, she say, "Kaleb Norris, what you gon' do now, boy?" I say I am gonna go down here to Mississippi and try my hands at sharecropping." Since I didn't have Henrietta or Rosie to thank 'bout, didn't know where they was or how to find 'em, I decided to take Richard Hill up on his offer. I called him at the number he gimme to his folks place and told him I was coming. Him, his, wife, and chillun had don' already moved. Miss Mandie looked up at me and say, "I understand, Kaleb Norris. Sometime we gotta do what we don't want to do!" I said, "Yes, ma'am." Then she say, "I love you son, don't ever forget that Miss Mandie loves you, and I couldn't be mo' proud of ya than if I born you myself." I know'd Miss Mandie loved me. She had don' too much for me not to know. I told her I loved her too. I kissed her on the top of her head and promised I'd be back real soon to see her. And I left. That was the last time I ever see'd Miss Mandie. Two weeks later, she died...

The Lack of Knowledge: The Cost of Survival

I left Memphis walking just like I had come. The 45- mile walk to Marshall County gave me time and space to thank 'bout my life...and everything that don' happen to me. Here I was thirty years old...had better chances to be somebody than most Negro mens....here I was going backwards...back to Mississippiand of all thangs...to be a sharecropper. I know'd my mama, my grandma, and Mister Jim was turnin' over in they graves. This ain't the life they had planned for me. Hell, this wouldn't the life I had planned for myself...but here it was...I had my education...unlike most Negroes...I shoulda been mo', I shoulda don' more, but there was nothing I could do to change it...Then I thought 'bout everything Mister Matthew told me that day when he come to

Mister's Jim's house...for years I had kept all what he told me bottled up inside. Slowly, I felt it eating away at me. Hadn't told nobody what Mister Mathew told me...not Miss Mandie...not even Henrietta. How could he?! How could she?! Why didn't they just tell me the truth?!.....And I thought 'bout Henrietta and Rosie. I had a wife and a lil' girl and I still hadn't heard from 'em...didn't know if they was dead or alive...once again...I was all by myself.

I spent nearly two days walking back to Mississippi – to Richard Hill's folks' place. They was waiting for me. Ole Richard greeted me with a big smile and hug when he come to the backdoor. The rest of his family come out to meet me too. His mama and daddy, sisters and brother, wife and chillun seem like real nice peoples. After I met everybody, Richard's daddy Mister Tom and Richard walked to where I was gon' be living. As we walked, Mister Tom told me 'bout everything. He say they had a lil' over 400 acres of land – mainly cotton! The land was divided into eight plots – 50 acres each. They was seven families already there. My plot use to belong to a family that decided to go north...just like I was 'pose to... Mister Tom told me that on count of the Depression, the price of cotton was falling and to make up the diff'rence, they had to plant twice as much as they did before. That way, they sold mo' cotton, but at a cheaper price to beat out the other farmers. He also told me that he would give me a monthly wage of ten dollars and supply all the tools and seeds that I needed. At the end of the season, we would sell the cotton and other crops. He would get three-quarters of the cotton growed and half of the other crops; whatever was left would belong to me. From the money I made, I would pay him for the tools, supplies, and rent for the land. I could grow or raise whatever else I wanted to the land, but cotton would be my main crop.

Dividing the crops and the money sounded...fair, but what I didn't know at the time was that no matter what I did, I always owe Mister Tom mo' than I made. Sharecropping was hard work- harder than I 'membered and harder than anything I had ever don' at Forrest Steele. I sometime spent twelve hours a day in the fields – sun up to sun down. I ached from the top of my head to the soles of my feets. I worked the land by myself...couldn't afford to hire nobody, so I planted the cotton, picked the cotton, and raised chicken and hogs, and had a lil' vegetable patch outside my lil' house. At the end of the first year, Mister Tom took the cotton and weighed it at the gin. He say I raised three hund'ed and fifty-eight pounds of cotton. I coulda swore I raised a heap mo' than that! Mister Tom sold it for 12 cents a pound, which come to 'bout forty-five dollars. Well, three-quarters of that went to Mister Tom. Then, once he took away how much I owed him for the monthly wage, seed, tools, and rent, I was left with 'bout sixteen dollars for six months worth of work! It was almost like I was workin' for nothin! I didn't want to thank that Mister Tom would cheat me, but I 'spect he did plenty of times over the years 'cuz I know'd 'bout how much cotton I raised and how much I should of got when he sold it...

Mister Tom wouldn't be the only one who tried to cheat me. You see this limp I got here in my right leg? That came from being beat by some white men. After my first harvest sharecropping, after I had give Mister Tom his portion, I went over to Mister Riley Phillips' cotton gin mill to sell some cotton I kept for myself... Mister Riley was a low down dirty snake in the grass; he hated Negroes. He called every Negro man a "boy" and every Negro woman a "gal" no matter how old or young they was... He 'minded me a lot of old Mister Forrest I used to work for. I 'member I put my cotton on the scale. It

weighed in... 'bout 117 pounds. The going rate for cotton was 'bout 12 cents a pound. I already done the math in my head. That came up to \$14.04, but ole Mister Riley tried to cheat me. He took the cotton off the scale and gave me \$7.00 for it. I asked him where the rest of my money was. He told me that that was it! I told him that he owed me seven dollars and four cents. He laugh and say, "Ah nigger that can read, write, and do 'rithmetic? Ain't you somethin.'" White folks didn't like Negroes make 'em look like a fool, especially in front of other white folks. I showed him up to be a cheater. He had been cheating folks out of they money for years...and nobody said nothing to him – a lot of 'em ...on account they couldn't read and write. I stood there until he gave me my money.

Later that night, he and some his boys showed up outside my place. They drugged me outside and each one of 'em took a turn beating me...All I heard as they beat me was, "Kill that nigger." Mister Riley kept yelling at me, "Count this nigger!" and each time he'd hit me. He told me he better not hear more talk of me being able to read, write, and do 'rithmetic. He says, I better act like I had never learned it. They beat me so bad. My face was all bloody and swollen...and they broke my ankle...it never did set right. On top of that, they took all my money I got from him for selling my cotton. If it wasn't for ole' Richard Hill, they would don' killed me. He got wind of what they doing and ran down and put a stop to it. He got me to my house and hope clean me up. He even called for a doctor – *a white one at that* – to come set my ankle...and he gave back the money they stole from me. Ole Richard was a good man. He didn't like the way things were back then – between Negroes and whites- but I don't figure he knew what to do 'bout it no more than I did or nobody else. He just did what he could.

That right there showed me that Henrietta was right! It didn't take long for me to see that...Sharecropping was like slavery. After that first year, the price of cotton fell, and wouldn't stop falling and the amount from the harvest got smaller and smaller and I ended up owing Mister Tom mo' and mo'. See, the money I owed 'em would carry over to the next harvest. And if I didn't make enuff money to pay for what I owed 'em from the last harvest and new harvest, I owed him mo' money. Making no more money, the debt just kept getting bigger. I thought 'bout taking my wife and chillun and moving north, but you couldn't leave until your debt was settled or else they would get the law after you and plus my new wife didn't wanna go no how...

The Students of Sharecropping: A New Generation

In 1931, I got married again. The first time I married my first love, but the second time I married my true love – Lurlene. Her family sharecropped down the way on Mister Tom's land too. She already had a young boy 'bout two years old when we married. His name was Clive and he took to me right off. So I had a family again. It filled the hole left in my heart after Henrietta run off with Rosie. Not long after I got on Mister Tom's place, I got a letter and some papers in the mail. I don't know how Henrietta know'd exactly where I was, but somehow she found me. In the letter, she told me she was sorry for running off like she did. She took Rosie and went to live with family in Cleveland, Ohio. She say Rosie was fine and that she wanted to get married again and needed me to sign those papers...He was a doctor. It hurt, but I didn't want to stand in the way of her happiness, so I signed 'em and sent 'em back to her...and I closed that chapter of my life and started over.

Right down the way on Mister Tom's land, Lurlene lived with her family – her mama Miss Nettie, her papa Mister Ed, sisters, brothers and other kin...*real* big family – the likes I'd never seen befo' I don't know how all of 'em fit in that lil' house they lived in. It weren't better than mine, 'cept it was a little bigger – but it was raggedy just the same. A little shack...look like it was gon' fall down at any time. She and her family come down to welcome me when I moved on the place, but at that time I didn't have eyes for nobody but Henrietta. I could tell Lurlene was sweet on me the day I met her. She brought me a pineapple-coconut cake! *Oooohhh weeeeeee!* That was the best cake I had ever don' taste! It just melted in my mouf! That's how she got me...*I married her for that coconut cake...*I'm just joking...but the cake was good....Anyway, a few months later, her papa Mister Ed invited me to come down to have some whiskey and chewing-da-bacca with 'em after suppa'. I love me some whiskey...couldn't turn it down! So I went on over there and we sat on the front porch drinking Mister Ed's corn whisky – it show was good too – and talked 'bout the going-ons in the world! Just before it got too late, Lurlene come out on the porch with guess what? *A slice of pineapple-coconut cake!* When Lurlene come out, Mister Ed *eased* inside to let us talk. Before I know'd it, either Mister Ed or Miss Nettie or Lurlene be inviting me to suppa every evening. Same thang would happen...me and Mister Ed would be drinking whiskey and chewing-da-bacca and Lurlene would come out with a slice of cake and Mister Ed would *ease* inside. 'For long, I told Mister Ed, I say, "You aim to have me as yo son-in-law, don't ya?" He just sat over there in that rocking chair, drinking his whisky and smoking his pipe, and laughed at me! I know'd what that meant... I liked Lurlene. She was a real gentle woman and know'd how to make a man feel like a man. She treated everybody real sweet. She was

younger than me – by twelve years – but that didn't make no difference to us. We liked keeping company together. She was good to me and good for me. I asked her papa for her hand on April Fool's Day, 1931...On the count of it being April Fool's Day, he thought I was joking and so did Lurlene, but Miss Nettie know'd I serious and she told 'em so....Once Mister Ed and Lurlene both come to see that I was fo'real, Mister Ed look at Lurlene. He see'd the happiness on her family and then he look at me and laugh with that pipe in his mouf...then he say, "Yes, I'd be proud to have you take my daughter's hand in marriage!" We didn't waste no time...that Sunday, April 5, 1931...it was Easter Sunday matter of fact – me and Lurlene got married after church and celebrated at the church picnic and Easter egg hunt!

Lurlene and Clive made me happy again. I weren't lonely no more...and I stopped drinking so much too...Me, her, and Clive settled in my little place. The two rooms just big enough for the three of us. 'Fo' long, there was four of us! The next year - September 11, 1932, I became a daddy again. Lurlene give me another little girl. We named her Halen. After Halen was born, I see'd all the promise and hope for the future in her. I wanted her to have a better than me and Lurlene had had. On our second anniversary, Lurlene made me a special dinner – and you know it had a pineapple coconut cake in it – and I talked to her 'bout somethin that had been on my heart and my mind. I was ready to leave Mississippi and go north...

I asked Lurlene, "Have you ever thought 'bout leaving Mississippi." She say it had never crossed her mind. I told her I wanted to leave. I wanted to go north and try to make a better life for us. She say she couldn't leave her family and go off to some strange place up. She had lived in Mississippi all her life. I told her it better for us to

go...see somethin new...try somethin different! As we talked 'bout it, I come to see that Lurlene's whole world was right there on the Hill Place. She didn't know nothing else 'sides where she was...and I couldn't take her and Clive from everything they don' know'd. In the midst of us sitting there talking, Lurlene ask me a question she had never asked me befo'...not even when we were courting. She says, "Kaleb Norris. Tell me 'bout yo people, yo kin. You ain't never tell of 'em...at all...in this time I don' know'd you...you never say 'bout yourself – your life – before you moved to Memphis. All I know is you were born over in Tunica." I looked at her and smiled and say, "Ah honey, ain't nothing to tell. My mama named Phronnie. My grandma was an Indian named Lucy Hunter...and we lived on Mister Jim Cooper's place...You already know what you need to know 'bout me." Befo' she could ask anything else, I left and went outside on the porch. After hearing her talk and ask me 'bout my family, I know'd I could never take Lurlene away from 'round her family. That's all she had...Knowing what it felt like to have no family at all, I know'd I could never do that to her. So I settled it all in my mind that I would just make the best of the life we had! After all, even with the Depression, thangs wouldn't so bad...had a roof over our heads, clothes, food...we was doing fine...We had a lot to thank the good Lawd for...

Once I made my mind up to stay on in Mississippi, the good Lawd decided to give me and Lurlene mo' chillun. Before the Depression was over, we had two more chillun – Nettie Rue and William Francis...we had a couple in between them, but they didn't live long after being born. With Clive, we had four chillun. I was mighty proud of my family...and with 'em, the years just seem to go by so fast and before I know'd it, the Depression too.

Thangs had been hard, but to tell ya the truth, Me and Lurlene worked the fields and as the chillun grew up, we learn ‘em how to work right long side us planting and picking cotton, pole beans, and thangs like that...There was times when Mister Tom couldn’t pay us ‘cuz wasn’t enough money, but we had everything we needed. There was a store up the road, where we could get what we needed...Mister Tom was just put it on our bill. We pay him out whatever we made whenever we made it... That was the problem with sharecropping; you were still at the mercy of the white folks. We didn’t own the land or the house we lived in. And you was always owing ‘em...with no way out to get from under it.

Always seemed like we was at the mercy of white folks. President Roosevelt started these programs to help out the po’ and needed. They give out food for folks who didn’t have much. By this time, we had hit rough path with cotton on count of the Boll Weevil – it wiped out a big part of the crop. Thangs got kinda bad there for a spell. I ‘member one time, we didn’t have much food to eat. There was a plenty nights that me and Lurlene went to bed...hungry. What little we had, we gave it to the chillun to make sure they had somethin in they bellies. I never will forget this: There was one chicken wing to go ‘round to three chillun – Clive, Halen, and Nettie Rue. One took the drum part, one took the wing part, and the other one took the flat part. We had a little taste of bread...and some pot liquor from some greens and that was it. That was they suppa for the day. It hurt my heart to see my chillun not have enuff to eat; I did everything I could...even went to get free food the gov’ment was giving away...

I heard ‘bout the gov’ment giving away some food and thangs in town....so I went town to get some of this free food ‘cuz I had more mouths to feed, you see. There were

two lines: one for whites and one for Negroes. When the Depression hit, many folks thought that it would be over in a matter of months. Nobody ever 'pected the Depression to drag on for years and years and years. It hurt the white folks more than it did Negroes. Negroes were already po'...so the Depression didn't make that much difference to them. I lost my lil' savings I had in that bank, so I just it hurt me in a way it didn't hurt most other Negroes. Anyway...the white line wasn't nearly as long as the Negro line, but we had to wait 'til all the white folks went through the line first. Now...when of all them had gon' through the line and there was nobody there, we still had to wait. If some white folks showed up, they just went right on and got they stuff. We Negroes was still waiting. Finally, 'bout 30 minutes before they closed, they let some of us in to get the food, but the white folks had got all of the best stuff. Make thangs worse. They told the folks left in the line who had been there all day to come back tomorrow morning. It just wasn't right! Always seem like we was at the mercy of white folks, but we made due...

All we know'd how to do was work... We took joy in the simple thangs – like whiskey and chewing-da-bacca. And church on Sundays for some...and the juke joint for others. Lurlene never did go, but she didn't mind me going from time to time...I had a good time... reminded me of when I was living in Memphis and I'd go to Beale Street. We be back off in them woods at juke joint...dranking, smoking, dancing, cutting a fool, I mean just having a good time! It weren't all bad. We was getting by...but there was still somethang gnawing on the inside of me...I wanted better for my family. I didn't use my learning for much...but I wanted to make sure that my chillun would have some schooling just in case they ever did need it...just like it hope me out when I was working at Forrest Steele.

By the time Halen went to school, things weren't much better from when I first went to school. I care'd her to school the first day 'cuz Lurlene had just give birth to Nellie Rue. As I walked with her, I thought 'bout how Mister Jim took me to school on my first day...Brought back good memories, but they didn't last long when I stepped foot inside that school house! It was just like time had stood still. There was one teacher for what seemed to be hund'ed chillun... in a one room old raggedy schoolhouse- looking *barn* just like I started going to before Mister Jim put me in that private school... no desks...only wooden benches for the chillun...not much paper, no books, no nothing!!! It pissed me off! Just like it happen when I went to school...not too far – cross the field – was a brand new school for the white chillun with plenty teachers, books, everything!!!! They even had a bus to pick they chillun up and care them to school, and my chillun had to walk almost five miles just to get to the school. Then, on days it storm or snow, they couldn't even go 'cuz it be too muddy. I pissed me off 'cuz in thirty years nothing had changed with the public schools for Negroes...

I 'member one day, the principal of the Negro school come and asked me and some of the other folks of the chillun to give some money to school. I ask him, "What for?!" He say to fix up the school. I gave that principal a piece of my mind. *I told him...* The upkeep of the school weren't my responsibility. It was the county's job to make sho' the chillun had good schooling. What was the sense of them having a school if the school was only open five months out of the year and then when it rained or snow, the chillun couldn't get there. Hell, the school was more closed then it was open! Not long after the principal come to house, the county closed the school anyhow saying they couldn't afford to keep no school open that chillun wouldn't going to! They closed the

school down...only opening it ever so often...so Clive, Halen, Nettie Rue, and William Francis didn't go to school all that much when they was lil'.

The Interchange Generation: 1940 – 1970

Everything must change

Sharecropping couldn't remain

Second slavery it be

Robbed us of our socioeconomic liberties

Separate but Equal fell dead

Anticipation for tomorrow started to spread

The generation interchange brought us new hope

When all before we could was cope

With the life meaningless, hopeless too

Nothing much the Good Lawd that saw us through...

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And Baby Makes Three: The Reawakening to Education

The Depression ended with the start of the Second World War. The economy picked up when the gov'ment decided to hope England fight off Hitler. Boy, I tell you that Hitler was somethin or other crazy! Then the United States entered the war when them Japs bombed Pearl Harbor. I 'member that Sunday mornin' when we got word it had happened. It was like a sadness filled the air...didn't matter what color you was...everybody felt the sorry of all them men that lost they life. Lurlene's mama was

'side herself 'cuz Lurlene's youngest brother Jed Lee hadn't been too long joined the army. She was worried 'bout him as any mama would be...

We was all still living on the Hill Place when Pearl Harbor happened. I was forty-one 'bout to turn forty-two years old. I had don' took over another fifty acres of land from the Gillespie Family that had don' moved off the place. We moved into they house too 'cuz it was better and bigger than the one we had. We needed the room, especially with mo' chillun. More land meant more cotton to plant and pick...and I was hopin' more money for my family. Lawd knows we needed it. Clive and Halen had don' got big enuff to help me and Lurlene in the fields. We took on more land, so we had to do what we had to do to survive. Clive and Halen didn't go to school much; I thank Clive when he was 'bout nine when he stopped going, and Halen was seven when she stop going. I didn't have no money to send 'em to no private school. So they just stayed home and hope me and Lurlene work the land. We needed the money...couldn't 'ford to hire nobody, especially with the mo' chillun coming...

Good thang 'bout the war was the Depression ended. And I guess me and Lurlene celebrated the end of the Depression by having mo' chillun. From '41 to '51, we had eight chillun – including three didn't live long...Let me see, we already had Clive, Halen, Nettie Rue, and William Francis. Then come Jenny in '41, then three babies that didn't make it – a girl in 42, a boy in 44, and another girl in 46, then Chess Lee in '47, Doreen in '48, Carol Jean in '49, and my baby girl Phronnie Mae in '51.

My family weren't the only one that growed. Ole Richard Hill became a daddy again by his second wife. His first wife died in...thirty-eight I believe it was...and he married this little young gal who didn't know nothin 'bout being a mama and didn't

wanna be a mama. She run off with some man...and left them chillun on Richard. Good thang Lurlene was there. She was working in the main house – looking after Richard’s mama and daddy and his other chillun. Seeing that we had lost a baby right after Richard’s son, Greg, was born, she was able to nurse him after his mama run off ‘cuz her milk hadn’t dried up. That youngest boy of Richard’s – Greg – Lurlene is really the only mama he ever know’d. Matter of fact, he spent more time at our house than did his own. He *really* thought Lurlene was his mama. So ‘long with our chillun, we hope raise old Richard Hill’s chillun by his second wife...

Funny thang is I became a father for the *last* time and a grandfather for the *first* time in ‘bout seven months of each other. My last daughter was born in August, and I named her after my mama – Phronnie Mae ‘cuz she minded me so much of her when she was born. ‘‘Til the day she was born, Lurlene had never really heard me talk of my mama. The only thang I told her was my mama’s name and how old I was when she died. Too many years had passed to brang up that *other* stuff. It weren’t important! When I held Phronnie, I liked to thank that I was holding my mama all over again. Phronnie was daddy’s little girl and I spoil her too... Seven months after Phronnie come, my daughter Halen had a baby girl named Kay.

Halen got caught up with this ‘fella round the way. He didn’t mean her no good...never had no ‘tention to do right by her. I aint gon’ lie, I was mighty mad at first. I wanted to do that fella harm, but rather than take my anger out on him, I ‘cided to focus on her and the baby. Halen was scared – scared I was mad at ‘er and I didn’t love her no mo’...but there was nothing in the world she could do to make her daddy stop loving her.

Her mama told her that there was nothing sinful 'bout having a baby...the sin was in making the baby, and the Good Lawd had already don' forgive her for that...Amen!

More than that fella, I blamed myself for what happened...and her "getting that way" 'cuz me and Lurlene kept her so close. I knew she was gon' be a good mother – never worried 'bout – 'cuz she had hoped me and Lurlene look after the younger ones...taking um back and forth to school – when they had school 'cuz the school hadn't got no better than they was since I was a young'um and she cooked for 'em and see'd after 'em.... I just wanted *more* for Halen. You should always want mo' for yo chillun than you had. I wanted her to be able to set up house somethin proper like with a husband and all, but that wasn't the way thangs turned out. I 'cided that Halen's baby being my grandchild was my responsibility to hope raise since it didn't look like the daddy was going to do nothin...so that what I did. I hope raise all Halen's chillun 'cuz they daddies weren't no count. So I was Daddy, and I became "Big Daddy" too.

When Kay was 'bout five years old, I see'd somethin one day that hurt me way down deep in my soul. I was walking down to the field to pick some cotton. I was just walking, when in the middle of the cotton field I walked up on my Lurlene, Halen, and Halen's five-year old daughter, my grand girl...picking cotton. My five year old girl was picking cotton! That thang cut me like a knife! I couldn't say nothin! I went on back to the house and, Lawd ah mercy, I couldn't do nothing...but cry! I couldn't believe what I had see'd....a mama, a daughter, and a granddaughter picking cotton – sharecropping. Then I thought back to what Henrietta say to me more than twenty years ago before, sharecropping ain't nothing but second slavery. The one thang I knew I didn't want to be

was the thing I become...I had worked all my life – my wife too – my chillun too – and now grandchillun – sharecropping...

I wanted to get out of sharecropping right then...but what could I do? I didn't have no money...Where was we gon' go if we left? There was too many of us now. I was too old to start over! I didn't have nothing to give 'em. We was in debt...didn't have no money. All I could do was pray that somethin would happen and they would have a chance at a better life than I give 'em... What could I do? Thangs had to change...not for my sake, but for my chillun and grandchillun...

The Access to Education: The Ending of Generational Sharecropping

I thank God that he hears and answer prayers 'cuz not long. Thangs had don' already begun to change. The NAACP got them courts to finally admit after almost sixty years that it was wrong to have separate schools for colored chillun and white chillun. I 'member the day I heard 'bout it on the radio, I thanked the good Lawd that change was coming. Someday my chillun and grandchillun would be able to get a good public education and have an *equal* chance in this world to be somebody. They wouldn't have to sharecrop for a few pennies and be at the mercy of white folks.

When the courts passed the law saying white chillun and black chillun would have to go to school together, there was some white folks that didn't like that. Then the next year after they passed that law, Dr. King and Rosa Parks stirred up trouble down in Montgomery by boycotting the business. Folks 'round Marshall County got scared 'cuz they know'd what was coming and there was nothing they could do 'bout it. Sooner or later, they was gon' have to change they ways. I 'member being at the store up the road getting some flour and sugar and thangs for Lurlene and I hear Mister Riley talking to the

owner Mister Sam Bowie ‘bout the thangs that were starting to happen ‘round the South. Mister Riley, same one that tried to cheat me and beat me all them years ago. He looked right at me and say, “Yeah, I wish some niggas would trying to integrate the schools here in Marshall County or do some of them other thangs they talking ‘bout ‘cuz if they do, they’s gon be some trouble.” Mister Riley meant what he say and say what he meant. I took what he say that day as a warning for me to go back and tell everybody else that we best not ‘spect thangs to change in Marshall County, Mississippi.

I thought ‘bout what he say and I ‘member what he and his boys don’ to me. I could go back and scare everybody half to death so they wouldn’t thank ‘bout doing nothin to cause no problems...or else I could just sit back and watch thangs happen. Colored folks been kept back too long. I wanted better for my chillun and my grandchillun. A few times, I even though to get involved...I wanted to get involved, but I couldn’t... I had to thank ‘bout my family – my little chillun and my grandchillun. If I had got involved in things that cause problems between white folks and Negroes, then Mister Tom coulda turned us off his land. Then where we gon’ go? I was an old man now...there wasn’t much I could do any how. Yes, I wanted thangs to change. It was ‘bout time they changed, but if I did somethin...I mean anything, there coulda been problems for everybody – my wife and chillun and everybody I know’d and I didn’t want that blood on these hands...So I just sat back and let thangs happen the way I know’d they would...

It took ne’bout five-almost six years, but ‘round ’60, we see’d thangs change where the schooling was concerned. ‘Cuz of that law that said white chillun and colored chillun had to go to school together, another thang happened. All colored chillun had to

go to school. No longer could folks just keep they chillun out of school, so they could work. They was gon' get a chance to have a good education. *My chillun and my grandchillun* was gon' have a real chance in this world. I was happy 'bout that. It hurt us 'bout them not being able to work in the fields, but they could still do that before and after they went to school and after the school year was over. What was important was that they got a good education!

White folks in Marshall County didn't like the thought of white chillun going to school with Negro chillun. It was somethin else...I tell you. The white folks didn't like it one bit. Fact is the white chillun set the building on fire to keep from our chillun from going to school...but that didn't stop the schools from integrating! It sho' nuf happened and it was nothing the white folks could do to stop it! But the chillun not working in the fields and having to go to school a full ten months out the year meant less hands to help with the planting and harvest time, but that didn't matter for much longer anyhow...

In February of '65, Mister Tom and old Richard told us that they was gon' bring in machines to do the farming and we would have to find some other place to sharecrop on. I had to leave the place I called "home" a lil' over thirty years. When old Richard come down and told me what was 'bout to happen and that me and my chillun and grandchillun would have to find somewhere else to go, it was bitter sweet. In the thirty years on that place, it hadn't been all bad. Sure, they were hard times, but there were some good times too! That's where I met my sweet wife Lurlene, where all our chillun were born and raised...and some of our grandchillun too. Right outside the gate of the place on the road between the house and the store is where my boy William Francis was killed...

When time come for us to move on, it had only been four years since it happen. Saturday, December 16, 1961. He had got up early and had gon' to the store. He was walking down the road to the house. And ol' crazy Charles Henry – known for pulling knives on folks- come out of nowhere and stabbed him in the chest. I don't know why his family let him roam the streets knowing he weren't right in the head...he shoulda been locked up somewhere in the crazy house!... And he stabbed my boy to *death!* Old Mister Tom found him lying in the middle of road and come to get it us. Me, Lurlene, and the rest of chillun run out of the road. Halen was nine months pregnant – 'bout to have the baby an' day – she got down and cradled her brother in her arms and rocked him and cried. He open his eyes one last time...looked up at all of us...then died in her arms. I'm glad the police got Ol' crazy Charles Henry 'cuz if I'da caught him, I woulda killed him for killing my boy.... But he didn't live too long after that anyway. He died in jail less than two years later... Yeah, we had some good times and bad times on the Hill Place...

Funny thang though is I had spent all that time on that land - working it, tending to it, raising cotton and other crops, hogs, chickens, and thangs-....and none of it belong to me. After thirty years of hard work, I didn't own one piece of that land. All of it belong... to Richard and Mister Tom, and me long with the other families on it was the ones who made it *thrive!* ...Damn shame! With the 'ception of my family, I was leaving the same way I come...with nothin...the same thang I had when I left Memphis to move down there...same thang I had when I left Mister Jim's.

Thanking 'bout Richard and Mister Tom...they was some of the most decent folks I know – white or colored. I thought 'bout how Richard and I met working at Forrest Steele, how old man Forrest hired *him* to replace me and I ended up training him

and we become...“best friends.” I always wondered why Richard was so nice to me. He come to my rescue more than once...the run-in with Mister Riley – he saved my life by comin’ out there. Otherwise, they woulda beat me to death! I thought ‘bout a few years back when he bailed me out of jail. I got drunk and got into a fight with this man...Hell, I don’t even ‘member what for, but I wrote Richard a letter and sent it to ‘em by one of my chillun...That’s when my family found I know’d how to read and write! I had never told Lurlene.... I believed Mister Riley when he say if he ever heard talk of my being able to read, write, and do ‘rithmetic ever got out, he would kill me. I ‘member after Richard got me out of jail, my lil’ grandson Redskin – Halen’s boy, who see’d the letter, come up to me and ask me, “Daddy, where you learn to read and write like that?” I smiled at him and told him, “Ohhh, that ain’t important, son...none of that matters.” Anyway...when ole Richard got my letter, he come right down and got me out. Never asked for one penny of it back!...Thought ‘bout how at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter time, him and his folks would brings gifts and thangs for the chillun...sometimes they would even slip me and Lurlene some extra money on the side. Thought ‘bout how Lurlene raised Richard’s chillun like they were her own. They was good people and I hated to leave ‘em, but we didn’t have no choice. We went on and did what we had to do...

We found another place to sharecrop on – the Crampton Farm – closer to Collierville - but we didn’t stay there no time – only ‘bout three years. Mister Crampton did the same thang Mister Tom did. He brung in machines to do the work. When we went to Crampton Farm, it was harder to sharecrop on the count of the chillun being in school ...and too, most of our chillun had growed up, moved out and was doing for they

self. After Mister Crampton brung in them machines, we decided we wouldn't sharecrop no mo'. Sharecropping was finally over after 35 years...and we had nothing to sho' for it!

After we quit sharecropping, my first thought was how is we gon' make it? What we gon' do to the survive? I was sixty-five years old...too old to start over! Well, come to find out from Richard Hill, I could get a social security check from the gov'ment. But to get it, I had to fill out some papers and sho' proof of my age. Well, I didn't have no birth 'tificate, so I could get my social security. The quickest way to get one was to go to the courthouse in Tunica County! I didn't want to go back to Tunica County....Promised myself when I left, I wouldn't ever going back...Too many memories, too much hurt and pain...but I had too. Me and Lurlene needed that social security to live off of. We was too old to work. So I got Doreen and her husband Howie to take me down there. Lurlene and Halen come with us. I was nervous 'bout going back. Night befo', couldn't sleep at all. All I could thank 'bout was my mama, saying "Tell Him" fo' she died and how my grandma Lucy and Mister Jim wouldn't tell me what she meant...but finally I heard the truth and I was told it from Mister Jim's brother – Mister Mathew...that was the worst possible I coulda 'magine! I thought 'bout that all over again like I had so many times befo....I wondered....why they didn't tell me....

When we passed a sign say "Tunica County," my heart drop to the pit of my stomach. I couldn't believe that it had been ne'bout fifty years since I was there. I kept looking 'round while we drove by to see if I could 'member anything...but right off I couldn't....I didn't get thangs straight in my head 'til we got to town. Thangs looked a lil' different – new buildings and thangs, but the town looked the same for the most part.

We went on into the courthouse – to the Office of Records. I told the young white woman that I come there to get a birth ‘tificate so I could file for my social security. I told her name and my birthday. She say I probably didn’t have a birth ‘tificate on record, but my name was probably on the census report ‘round the time I was born. She went and searched some records and come back and told us she found my name on the county’s 1900 census report. She showed us where when they took the census in 1900, I was 1 years old! On the census, I see’d my mama’s name – she was 18-years old...I see’d my grandma’s name and she was 42 years old. And see’d Mister Jim’s name and he was 30 years old. Then Halen and Doreen asked me who was these folks listed with me. And I told ‘em that those were the names of they grandma, they great-grandma...and they gran-...the man who hope raise me. Then Doreen asked, “What that “W” stand for ‘side his name.” I told her...Mister Jim Cooper was white and my grandma and mama worked for him and we lived on his place. Then we sot down to fill out the papers – on the count of my not having a birth ‘tificate they had to sign somethin right in the office so we could mail it off. Doreen was filling out the papers for me and she got to question that ask ‘bout how much education I had. I waited for a moment ‘cuz I had never told any of ‘em *how much* education I had – they only know’d I could read and write by accident- but I know I had to tell the truth if I wanted to get this money. I told ‘em I finished high school. All they eyes fell on me. They couldn’t believe what I say. Doreen say, “Daddy, why you ain’t never tell us you finish school?” I told ‘em all, “I got my reasons. That ain’t important right now.” We finish filling out the paper work and I took it back to the young lady while my family sat talking ‘bout the fact that I finished high school. From behind me, I could hear Doreen ask Lurlene, “Mama, you didn’t

know Daddy know'd how to read and write and that he had finish high school?" Lurlene looked at her and say, "Baby, Kaleb Norris don't tell me nothing." I acted like I didn't hear 'em. I just kept on walking and give them papers to young white woman...

After I did that, we left...but this time...I see'd some thangs I 'membered. We passed the old public Negro elementary school I went too sitting way off the road – nobody was using it now...it look like *barn* it was more than fifty years ago...then I saw the Negro cemetery where my mama, my grandma, and my granddaddy was buried...cross the field from it was where Mister Jim was buried...then on my way out the county, the last thang I see'd.... was Mister Jim's old house. It wouldn't what it was. They was some men out there with a...bull dozer tearing it down! Half the house was still standing, but the half was....gon'! I see'd in my mind like it was befo' I left all them years ago. It was like I could hear my grandma's voice, my mama's voice, and Mister Jim's voice just like it was a whole house again and I will still living there....I didn't say nothing 'bout what I see'd to Lurlene, Halen, Doreen, and Howie. I just kept it to myself...We passed the Tunica County sign...and that was the last time I ever set foot there...

So we sent off the paper work to get my social security started so me and Lurlene would have somethin to live off of....To support her and her chillun, Halen got a job working in a flower nursery. I don't know what was worse for her – sharecropping or working in that nursery. See, when it got too cold sharecropping, we had sense 'nuf to stop, but in the nursery, the boss man say they had to work no matter how cold it got! I 'member Halen come home one day and told me that it got so cold they had to plastic bags on they feets and hands just to stay warm. It was somethin or other terrible! She

wouldn't making much more than we was sharecropping. Fact is she was making less than dollar an hour...Still not 'nuf to live on...

The Welfare Generation: 1970 – 1990

Everything that glitters ain't gold

An easy way out might be a pitfall – a hole

Exchanging one form of oppression for another

Is nothing but perpetuating the cycle, my sisters and my brothers

So before you take a handout examine the cost

Is it too high to pay

That will cause another generation to be lost?

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A New Education: From Sharecropping to Welfare

In '69, Halen giv' birth to her last baby – Lennie. She had six chillun now: Kay born in '51, Joseph Earl born in '53, Redskin in '56, Sheryl – she had her a few days after William Francis got killed – in '61, Pearl in '65, and Lennie in '69. We quit sharecropping, and we moved to this lil' shotgun house in Cayce. It weren't no count. It didn't have no running water, no indoor plumbing. Rats and roaches all over the place. The roof leaked. The floors creaked. We barely could keep out the cold...worse than any house we had on the Hill Place and the Crampton Place put together. Still with all us living together that was all we could afford: I was gettin' my social security, Halen and Carol Jean was working and they had to see after they chillun too. I know it sho' don't seem like it, but thangs were getting' better...it was just taking a lil' time....

One day, Joseph Earl – Halen’s oldest boy – came home to visit. He had don’ quit school and moved to Memphis to work....He say, “I’m tired of ya’ll living this. It’s time for a change; it’s time ya’ll make a move.” He was serious ‘bout it too, so I figured I’d hear him out...see what he had to say. Well, Joseph Earl told us that we could move to Memphis, get a little apartment with running water and a bathroom, and Halen and her four chillun could get...welfare and food stamps...and Carol Jean and her chillun could get it too. This was the first I had ever heard of... “welfare,” so I had him ‘splain it to us so’ mo’... He say the gov’ment would giv’ po’ single women with chillun money to pay rent, buy clothes, and what not...money so they could do for they chillun. And they would also give ‘em...“food stamps” – money just to buy food with ev’ry month until they got on they feet and could do better. Me and Lurlene talked ‘bout it...Halen and Carol Jean...we figured we couldn’t do no worse than what we was already doing now, so we decided to pack up the chillun and move to Memphis.

In April of ’69, we moved an area called Hampton...neighborhood of po’ working folks– not too far from Forrest Steele which I used to work. We moved in the Stillman Cove Apartments. It was better then what we was use to - a little two bedroom place with a little kitchen. It had indoor plumbing and running water. The first time we had ever had that. We wouldn’t use to having runnin’ water and a bathroom ‘side the house. ‘Fore all we had outhouse and the slop jar...Lurlene, the chillun, and the grandchillun was excited ‘bout being in Memphis and having a decent place to live for a change. They thought they had died and gon’ to heaven. There were ten of us in that ‘partment, but we was use to it. So, it didn’t bother us none. We was together and that’s all that was important...

That Monday after we moved to Memphis, Joseph Earl took his mama Halen and Carol Jean down to welfare office. And sho' nuff they got welfare...just like Joseph Earl said they would. Halen got 'bout two hund'ed dollars in welfare and two hund'ed and fifty dollars in food stamps. Carol Jean got one hundred and thirty dollars and a hund'ed and fifty dollars in food stamps! With that money, we were able to go and get the thangs we needed...and a few thangs we wanted. It felt good to get some of the thangs we wanted, you know. Thangs were looking up; we were doing better than we ever had.

We were doing so much better that we didn't stay in Stillman Cove Apartments long. Getting welfare, food stamps, and social security, we come to see that we could do better than Stillman Cove... So we moved down to 240 North Dunham – not far from downtown. We moved to these 'partments with two floors...you walk up to 'em...Take the stairs to get to the 'partments on the second floor. The rent was seventy-five dollar a month...weren't too bad! There was eight 'partments: Each of 'em had two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. The place was a little bigger than and 'bout nice as Stillman Cove. The neighborhood was full of other po' black folks just like us. There was eight apartments – me, Lurlene, Carol Jean and her chillun got the first one – 'partment one – and Halen and her five chillun got the one right next door – 'partment three. The good thang 'bout it was we was all still together – just right next door from one 'nother. For long, Nettie Rue and her chillun moved upstairs to 'partment four and Jenny and her husband and they eight chillun moved to 'partment eight. Then, my baby gal Phronnie Mae and her two chillun moved in with me and Lurlene. I ne' bout had my whole family with me. All of 'em was getting welfare and food stamps. We had a decent

place to stay; we could buy the things that we *needed* without worrying. The struggle weren't over – Welfare just made it a lil' easier...

The High & Low Cost of Education: Welfare Benefits

Some of my grand-girls had babies said they wouldn't take no welfare... say it was a trap! They say, "Why sit at home all day and do nothin and get a once a month check when you could work and make more money?" When Halen's oldest gal Kay had her first boy Ty, she went back to work two weeks after she gave birth to that boy! Now that weren't no time for her heal; her body was still open, but she went back to work 'cuz she say she couldn't live off what welfare give her - \$97 a month.

Halen's other daughter Sheryl did the same thang! She was on it for only a lil' while after she had her baby boy. She went to school and got a job. She say she couldn't live on that lil' bit a money. I tell ya, that Sheryl had 'cided she was gon' make somethin out herself... She went to business school to learn how to type and thangs and got her a job with this big company out east. This how she don' it. She sent 'em a.... re-su-me she wrote out by hand. Somebody look at it and instead of laughing say, "This young lady wants better out of her life." She got that job and was able to do better for her and her boy... stayed with that company over eighteen years! It did my heart *good* to see my grandchillun do good for theyself.

Redskin's wife Bell was on for two months while she was off work after having they boy. She say she got forty-nine dollars a month... she say that wouldn't 'nuff to survive off of on when she had been making that in a week where worked at. She got on welfare when she had the baby, but when she and Redskin got married two months after the baby born, the gov'ment cut her off 'cuz they got married. Now neither one of 'em

was making a whole lot of money ...'bout a dollar and eighty-five cents a hour. Whether you married or single, if you gotta a baby, you need a lil' extra money coming in 'cuz the baby always needing somethin. How two young folks...weren't but eighteen when they married....gon' make too much money, no education ...lessen they doing somethin against the law? Welfare didn't help them none, but it show hurt some of my other grandchillun...

Missed Education: The Resounding Effects of Welfare

Most of my grandchillun didn't grow up sharecropping in the country like my chillun did. By some of 'em mamas and thangs getting welfare and food stamps and not working, they thought that was the "good life." It sho' was better than where we come from, but I don't thank it 'posed to been where we stopped. Some of 'em got this idea in they head that they would have 'em a baby or two, sot at home, and get a check like they mamas did. What they didn't see was that they mamas was *still struggling*. They just made it seem easy 'cuz the chillun didn't have to worry 'bout nothin. They were still doing without so they chillun would have nice thangs to wear and a roof over they head...They didn't see where we had come from – picking cotton in the hot sun 'til your back felt like it was gon' break in two! They didn't see that they mamas and thangs couldn't get no education 'cuz the schools weren't no count. They didn't see that they had to walk miles to school...when they could go 'cuz they didn't have no buses and thangs to come pick 'em up. I thank if they see'd that, they never woulda had all them chillun. If they had see'd how hard we had it when we was living the country, then they wouldn't settled for what they did. Some of my grand girls just started having babies for no reason. I know they love they chillun and thank God for 'em, but there was so much

mo' they could have don' with they lives first before having babies. They mama 'em didn't have much...chances to do thangs 'cuz the way thangs was back then...They didn't see far off. They thought having a baby and getting a check made 'em grown 'cuz they had a little money in they pockets could spent and felt like they could do what they wanted to do. They go off and leave them babies on they mamas. Difference was...when Halen had her chillun, she see'd to 'em, same thang with Carol Jean, and Phronnie Mae. Nettie Rue, Jenny, and Doreen got married, so they had hope with they chillun. But these gals didn't have none...these boys got 'em pregnant and run off...then they 'spect they mamas to see after they chillun. That weren't right!

When I was coming up, my grandma Lucy and Mister Jim use to tell me 'bout getting an education. I finish high school and I thank if Mister Jim had lived I know I woulda gon' got some more education. But after thangs happen the way they did, I lost focus on the thangs that was important. Then my own chillun didn't get to go to school liked I wanted 'em too 'cuz of the way thangs was... So I couldn't understand why my grand-girls quit school and had all them babies. Thangs were different from when I come up. In my old age, I see'd that my grandchillun and great-grandchillun was gon' need some schooling to do much better for theyself than we had don'. There was a lot mo' and better chances for my grandchillun to make somethin out they self. I 'member when she was a lil' girl. I ask Halen's gal Pearl what she was gon' be when growed up. She say she wanted to a...one of them ladies that serve the peoples on the airplanes 'cuz she wanted to travel *all over* the world...but she didn't do it... she had that first baby of hers, quit school, and then had more chillun...

Education: Still Separate & Unequal

I couldn't understand it... Why they was quitting school and having mo' chillun when education was there for them... when they had chances that my chillun and my older grandchillun didn't have. Now, don't you thank that education was perfect, but it was a whole lot better than from when I come along and when my chillun come along. The schools wouldn't perfect... they was still some problems and I know'd it. We had been living on Dunham a while... when the school board was trying to make sho' the schools was integrated – black chillun and white chillun going to school together. When we moved to Memphis, Halen's chillun two of Halen's chillun was still in school – Redskin went over there to Lesley High School and Sheryl was over at the elementary. When we moved down on Dunham, Redskin 'cided he didn't want to go to no school no more. He dropped out... I sho' wish his mama woulda made him stay in school. He was a bright fella and 'minded me so much of myself. His mama say I had 'em spoiled 'cuz when he was coming up... everybody had to work out in the fields 'cept him. I shoulda stayed on him more 'bout school, but I didn't... Anyhow, by the time Sheryl got to high school, we had been living on Dunham several years.... she went to school right down the street at the Memphis High. They had don'... integrated, but some of the teachers and thangs still had not 'cepted the new way of thangs. Sheryl was in the 12th grade and 'bout to have a baby. She was gon' be out of school a while so she went to a teacher to get her lesson together. She wanted to see what she could do 'bout getting her lesson while she was out having the baby. She say the white teacher told her she weren't gon' help 'cuz she shoulda not got pregnant in the first place! Even if it was, she was there to hope her and not be her down... but Sheryl showed her. She had that baby and finish her schooling

just the same. Then, Nettie Rue's oldest gal Dee...I heard her tell of it, she went to get some information 'bout the navy. She say the white man teacher laughed in her face and told her, "Why you tryin' to go to the navy? You ain't gonna make it." Well, she proved 'em wrong...got her diploma and went to the navy...

You know, some of the white teachers just didn't want to deal with our chillun – 'specially the boys! I 'member Nellie Rue had to go put her baby boy Mickey back in school for talking back to the teachers when he was 'bout seven or eight. I couldn't understand for the life of me why that teacher just didn't call her so she could whip his butt. They just put him out of school. Then they try to say he was a "slow learner" and try to put him in a class for slow chillun. Well, a blind man could see that weren't nothing wrong with that boy! Them teachers just didn't know how to handle them chillun. They tried to put Halen's youngest boy Lennie in a slow learners class too 'cuz he couldn't talk right – he stuttered a little bit...

Same thang happen to Redskin's oldest boy. He stuttered a little bit too, but weren't nothing slow bout that boy. The school he went to got 'em some lessons that hope him talk better. After that, you couldn't shut him up. You know, when they started busing the chillun out East to make sho' the schools stayed integrated 'cuz the white folks was leaving the city and going out to the county or putting they chillun in private school, they bused Redskin's boy to a school out East. The schools out there was better than they ones where we lived...they had new buildings, books, teachers, and everything to make sho' they was getting the best learning...

When they started busing the chillun out East, they closed a lot of the schools in the black neighborhoods...that's why Redskin and Bell's son got to go to that school out

East – they closed his school. They closed the school Sheryl and Dee and some of these other chillun went to, but they didn't bus them out East. They sent them over to another black school that was *worse* than the one they closed! Still, I'm glad the chillun got a chance to get mo' education that my chillun and some of my grandchillun....

The Stagnation Generation: 1990 – Present

Stagnate like water

Move forward? Why bother?

Ain't nothing gon' change

The man still got us on tight reign

Drugs in our community - we didn't put them there – There's no unity

Welfare Reform?

Means us much harm

No culturally relevant pedagogy?

Damn school, I'm out, G-

No Child Left Behind is a hoax!

The test, the law itself is rigged – it ain't no joke!

Kaleb Norris' family

What you gon' do

He's done his part; the rest is up to you...

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Robbery 101

I thank overall integration was a good thang, but I thank we as black folks lost some thangs with it. We lost how to be a community ‘cuz we was trying to follow the white folks. When we lived out in the country, we know’d everybody. We all see’d after each other chillun. If one of ‘em did somethin down the road and a grown person see’d em, they whipped they behinds and then come tell they mama and daddy...Then they got another whipping. And see...when we lived out in the country didn’t no body mind helping one ‘nother. If you needed somethin and I had it to give to you, then you got it. Once we integrated and was able to do a little bit better, we started actin’ like we couldn’t help nobody, we started tellin’ folks “Don’t touch my chile” when back when my chillun and some of my grandchillun was coming ‘long it took all of us to hope raise ‘em. If one of ‘em did somethin wrong and we didn’t know which one, all of ‘em got a whipping just to make sho’ we got the right one. I tell you the truth, Carol Jean didn’t mind whipping them chillun, but she see’d after too and took care of ev’rybody’s chillun like they was her own...didn’t nobody question when she whipped they but ‘cuz they know’d she loved ‘em. But you don’t see that no more. Mamas and daddies started upholding they chillun in they wrong, trying to give ‘em everything they thought they missed out on when they was growin’ up. And in doin that, they didn’t give ‘em the things they did have...

Black chillun started actin’ like they had gon’ crazy – ‘specially the boys! Four of my grand boys and great-grand boys didn’t go the school like they was ‘posed to and they snatched this woman’s bag – robbed her in open daylight. Halen’s oldest gal Kay – her boy Ty was one of ‘em...Kay woulda gave that boy the shirt off her back if he asked

for it! She worked two jobs to make sho' she was able to give him the stuff she didn't have growing up....bought them 'spensive tennis shoes – a hund'ed dollar a pair and anythang else he wanted. Didn't make no sense at'all for him to do that 'cuz he didn't have to...She was hurt by what he did, but thank the Lawd, he learned from that. He say he knowed it was wrong for them to rob that woman. He say the whole time they were doing it, all he could thank 'bout was his mama and what if it was her that somebody was robbing. He say... after that day he know'd robbing and stealing wouldn't for him. He wouldn't going to nobody's jail. He did. He growed up to be a *fine* young man...working and taking care of his wife and chillun.

Wish I could say the same 'bout some of my other grand-boys and great-grand-boys. Some been in jail for stupid stuff – selling drugs, beating on they girlfriends and thangs, stealing and other mess. Got two grand-boys in there now!!!...Brothers! One in there for stealing and robbing 'cuz he on drugs, while the other is in there for selling drugs to the police. Now, the one who sold drug to police, I 'spected better out of him. He quit school, but had since of 'nuff to go back, finish, and got his 'tificate to be a nurse's aide...but he wanted the good life...he wanted thangs too fast...What happen to 'em? He ended up in jail. Now...he see what Redskin and Joseph Earl was tryin' to tell 'em...If jail don't tell it, time will...

Crack-Cocaine High School

For a while, I thought black chillun had just gon' crazy! Shooting... robbing... killing....stealing...a lot of 'em 'cuz they was on that dope – that crack! One of my grandchillun almost died 'cuz of that crack! We lived on Dunham Street for ne 'bout eighteen years. The family moved together back over in the Hampton area. You know,

where we first live when we come to Memphis... They was du-plexes. Lurlene, Carol Jean and her three chillun and grandchillun moved in one. Jenny and her husband Ernie Lee and her chillun and grandchillun lived next door. Kay and her chillun moved in another one couple doors down, Doreen and her chillun and grandchillun moved across the street and one of Jenny's boys and his girlfriend and chillun lived down in the hole. Halen, Sheryl and her boy, Pearl and her chillun, and Lennie lived not too far over off Autumn Avenue.

Not long after moving, the family see'd what being on that crack could do! The boyfriend of one of Jenny's gals got high on that "stuff"- that crack; he come over to the house and shot her four times; then turned the gun on hisself. They say before that boy - thank his name was BeBe come over...he had been smoking crack all night long. He and Jenny's gal had been having problems in they relationship. I hear tell of it, that he say to somebody that, "If I can't have her, nobody will." Well, he shot her four times and hisself one. He died, but she live! He was a nice fella, but crack took him down. When he started smoking that stuff, he just changed...lost his mind. Worse thang 'bout was that four of his chillun was in the house when all this happen. Worse off then that...his seven chillun had to grow up without a daddy...

Curriculum Reconceptualization: Welfare Reform

The gov'ment took care of his chillun...they got his social security 'til they got grown, but I never know'd money to be able to replace a daddy...or anybody else for that fact. Just like they got his social security 'til they got grown, a lot of my grandchillun and great-grandchillun was living on welfare. Welfare started out a blessing for us...now it was a curse...cuz' they was dependent on it.

When the gov'ment started talking 'bout "welfare reform," they got scared...didn't quite know what was coming or when it was coming. You know, most of 'em had never worked a day in they life. They had all them babies and got on welfare. Weren't trying to better theyself in no way...didn't go back to school or learn a trade or nothing like that. They tied they whole future up in somethin they thought was gon' last forever. They thought it was a sure thang...I ain't gon' lie, to be sitting at home all day doing nothing, they was getting some good money... One of Jenny's daughter was getting ne'bout nine hund'ed dollars a month in welfare and almost a thousand dollars a month in food stamps plus the social security she was getting from when four of her chillun's daddy – Bebe – died. She was getting a good lil' sum of money, but they ain't enough to raise chillun off of...

Welfare change and some of my grand-girls had to go to work! They couldn't just set at home no more. They had to find jobs! By this time, some of 'em was in they late twenties and early thirties and had never worked before! Now, can you 'magine getting a job and working for the first time in your life and you over thirty and most people start working at sixteen? Some had even gon' back to work before the government made all these changes. They still got some welfare and food stamps for a while..., but it wasn't as much as they had been getting. Then, they was 'posed to only get it for five years. Pearl's gal...she had three babies – an arm baby, a knee baby, and a lap baby – never had don' worked before... wouldn't used to working a full day and then have to go home and see to her chillun – making sho' they feed and baised. Now, she got four chillun and just turned twenty-five. She thought raising chillun was heard. Hmmp!

Try working all day, coming home, cooking for um, seeing after them too, putting in bed, and doing the same thang all over again the next day.

She had don' got so use to just being home doing nothing...cuz' of that she didn't make the best worker. She works a while then for some reason or 'other, she gets fired or quit. Then she get another one. Work that one for a while, get fired or quit... Now, these here ain't rinky dink jobs like at a hamburger place or somethin....these be decent jobs where she can work herself up...that's good for somebody who didn't finish school and ain't got no training. One thang I gotta say...is... she keeps on trying. Now, I don't know if its 'cuz she wont to or 'cuz she got too....thangs is different from when Halen and Carol Jean got on welfare....she only got five years and they 'pose to cut her off. Now, right now...she still gets a little welfare and food stamps...she living at home with her mama, grandma, auntie, uncle, brothers and sisters too...she ought to be able to make it. Right now, while she work and go the school 'cuz the gov'ment now say you just get on welfare and stay on welfare...you gots to go to school or somethin to show you 'proving yourself. I thank that's good...'cuz that some of my older grand-girls didn't do nothing 'cuz they wouldn't made to do nothing... The gov'ment even paying for her chillun to go to daycare...What concerns me...is what she gon' do if the gov'ment take away all of the help they giv'n her. All it's gon' take is getting the wrong somebody in office 'for it happen. Then what she gon' do? Just to make it, you got to have all sort of training and college...If you ain't got that, it's *hard*. She and my other grand-girls and great grand-girls best take advantage of this stuff while they can before its gon....

No Purpose Education

My chillun wasn't able to get an education 'cuz thangs were so different when they was coming up. The laws kept my chillun from going to school; then too – they had to help sharecrop so we could survive. Halen's oldest three chillun – Kay, Joseph Earl, and Redskin come along – they felt like they had to quit school to take care they self and the family. Kay quit high school...she only had six months to go... 'cuz she had to go to work to help take care the family. Joseph Earl married, had a family of his own, and moved out West. Halen was getting welfare and food stamps that only took care of they needs... most of the time. Kay wanted her brothers and sisters to have a chance to finish and go on and do better thangs. She sacrificed herself, so they could do it...it's a shame both her chillun quit school before they finish. They *owed* they mama a high school diploma. She had a reason to quit, but they didn't have no reason 'cuz she worked two jobs to giv'em what they needed...and everything they wanted.

Halen now tells her grand-chillun, "Get an education; make somethin out your life." She see just like I did late in life that these chillun need an education. Even though he didn't finish, Joseph Earl use to tell his chillun, his nieces, nephews, and thangs before he died, "Get an education." Redskin tells 'em too the same thang - "Get an education!" Sheryl tells 'em. But it like they ain't hearing 'em...like they don't listen.

Time and time again...after we moved to Memphis and thangs got to the point where the chillun could go to school and get they learning, I don' see'd my grand chillun and great-chillun getting right to the door...the eleventh grade...the twelfth grade...right there at the *end!!!!*...and quit school...and I don't know what for? Halen's baby boy Lennie actually finished the school, but he failed twelfth grade English. He shoulda gon'

to summer school to take that one class, but ‘stead of doing that, he never went back. High school paper right in hand and he didn’t get. I don’t understand it! Out of all her five grown chillun, not one of Pearl’s chillun don’ finish high school yet. Her eighteen year old boy in the eleventh grade don’ quit... talking ‘bout “teachers can’t tell him nothing.” He gon’ do what he wanna do. What he don’t know is that them teachers already got they learning and he don’t. But he just following in the footsteps on his older sisters and brothers. Pearl’s oldest gal did the same thing, her two oldest boys quit, her other gal quit in the eleventh grade, the boy under her quit....and now this boy! They get right there and quit!

In the last three-four years, we was suppose to have thirteen boys to finish high school. Out of them thirteen, only three of ‘em finish. Why them others quit? I think its ‘cuz they mama’s and daddy’s don’t make ‘em. See, today, the chillun tell the mamas and daddies what they gon’ do ‘stead of the mamas and daddies tellin’ the chillun what gon do’. The chillun ‘lloved to ‘cide for theyself too soon! Another thang is they mamas and daddies don’t take up ‘nuff time with ‘em. They thank just ‘cuz they work, buy ‘em clothes, and sunt ‘em to school, that’s ‘nuff...Naw! You gots to do more with these here chillun. You know, they don’t know what’s goin’ on with they chillun at school. They don’t tell ‘em how impo’tent they education is... Now, I fought myself for some of that...

On the count of what happened with Mister Riley, I didn’t tell Lurlene or my chillun I could read and write and I finish school. I didn’t make learning a big ‘nuff part of my chillun life. If I had had the courage to teach ‘em myself, then they woulda see how impo’tent learning is... Then too, I didn’t want to make Lurlene feel that she was

less than what she was on a count that I could read and write and finish school, and she didn't go to school at all...couldn't read and write...and that's the way it was with most of the folks 'round us....And some of 'em, if they know'd you could and had some schooling, they made you feel bad...And I didn't wanna go through all that 'cuz I had gon' through it most of my life...so I kept my mouth closed on a count that I didn't make learning a big part of my chillun life, they didn't make it a big part of they chillun's life, and so on...So our family...don't see how impo'tant learning is to they life! I blame myself for that...

You can't just blame the schools and teachers no more...that dog won't hunt....schools and teachers ain't perfect...you got's to look yourself and see what you don' did wrong! How you come to be where you is...'cuz if you don't get to that point...then you ain't gon' never go nowhere in this life! I believe if the mamas and daddies get up off they lazy do-nothings and do somethin, then the chillun will do. It ain't 'nuff just to tell your chillun to do somethin or not to do somethin, you got to show 'cuz the change starts with *you!* No matter how old or young, you got to get up and do somethin! If thangs don't change, we gon' have more of the same thangs we don' had in this family...more chillun have babies 'fo they ready – no husband, no wife, quitting school – no education, living up on they mama and 'em 'pecting them to take care of 'em...

NCLB: Negro Children Left Behind

This world don't owe you nothing...Hear me when I say this...I know that schools still ain't fair! The white folks ain't never tended for us to go to school. You can go all the way back to slavery days and look at how they tried to keep us from learning to

read and write... Look at when I come long... If the Negro public schools didn't have a certain number of chillun to go most of the time, then they come and close the down... but they didn't do that to the white schools... giv' em buses and everything so they could get there. Then, when blacks and whites could go to school together, the best schools was out East where all the white folks moved and schools in our neighborhoods went down. Schooling ain't fair... but you got to find a way to make it work for you or you gon' be left behind. I know they got these test'es and thangs now to say how much you know, and it ain't right 'cause most of these test'es made not to show what you know, but what you don't know so they can use it to keep you right where you is... We don' always had to work harder than anybody else just prove yourself. That ain't changed none. It is just way they go 'bout doing it now. They wants to still label you so they can keep you down... that's what all these different testes and thangs they got now for... so they can try to keep you down....

Then the way they teaching our chillun ain't right. One thang I can say 'bout when I was in school was all my teachers was Negroes, coloreds. It was good for me to see a teacher that looked like me and know'd what it was like to be like me. Then we just didn't learn thangs as the white folks see'd it... we learned 'bout our people and we did too as well as the white folks. Made us feel good. That's what these chillun today need... they need to know more 'bout theyself and the rest of it, so they can feel good 'bout what they learning. I never hear tell of it so much before that chillun go to school and say school is boring. I never hear tell of it, but that what a lot of my grand chillun and my great-grand chillun say... they say that the reason they quit was 'cuz it was boring to 'em... If it's boring to 'em, we got to do somethin to make 'em like it more... I even

head my great-great grand-girl – she ain't nothing but three or four – say she didn't like school 'cuz it was boring. What she know 'bout boring? Whether or not it's boring, these chillun got to get a education 'cuz the way thangs is now...with all these machines and thangs running thangs and you got to know how to work'em, you got to have a education. You know why? 'Cuz if you don't we just one step away from being back in the cotton fields!

The Past, Present, and Future of Kaleb Norris' Family

The more things change, the more they stay the same. 'Spite of all the changes in the world since I was born up to now, they are still thangs in place to hold us back, and I 'spect there will always be somethin to try and hold us back. But we, as a family, can't let that stop us from moving forward. I wasn't much of a church-going man, but I know'd the Lawd and I know'd His word. I never missed a night praying to 'em no matter what I had don'...no matter how drunk I was...I never missed a night getting on my knees and thanking him for life, health, and strength...Jesus say, the po' you gon' have with you always, but what I want my chillun, my grandchillun, my great-grandchillun, my great-great grand chillun and who ever else to come to know is.... Just 'cuz Jesus say the po' you gon' have with you always, don't mean ya'll got to be one of 'em. We some strong people...able to do anything we set our mind to... I reckon that's been the problem. We ain't put our minds to it like we shoulda. It started with me...I give up too easy after my grandma and Mister Jim died. I give up too easy after that run-in with Mister Riley. I let the way thangs was stop when I shoulda fightin'. I give up too easy, but learn from what I didn't...try not to make the same mistakes! We quit and give up too easy and try to take the easy way out. I did and I see'd my chillun, grandchillun, great-grand chillun

doing it too. Looking back, I wish I woulda don' somethangs different, but it's too late for me now 'cuz is my head is cold and in the grave, but it ain't too late for you...long as you got breath in your body...it ain't too late! In spite of thangs being the way they is, you have a better chance to make it in this world and make somethang out yourself. Don't let nothing or nobody stop you....

I know I left a lot of questions I didn't answer. I didn't tell thangs I shoulda told 'cuz I was too shame. I thought it didn't matter, but it did. I shoulda told you more 'bout my mama Phronnie, my grandma Lucy, Mister Jim, and all the stuff I found out when Mister Matthew come after Mister Jim died, but I held on to it 'cuz I was shame. I took it to my grave with me. Now I see that I shoulda told ya'll the truth 'bout everything 'cuz you need to know where you come from. See, part of the problem with us is that we don't know our past and 'cuz we don't know our past, we go through it over and over and over and over again just like the chillun of Israel in the wilderness. I see now that to know where you goin' you got to know where you been...We got to talk to one 'nother more...can't be shame of what we did...we don' it...its over...maybe the chillun here and ones to come can learn from it and grow...

'Spite of everything we is and everything we ain't, I am proud of ya'll – my family. We don' come a mighty long ways! Some grandchillun and great-grand chillun don' finish school – a couple in college and several graduated from college. Redskin's oldest boy was the first one in the family to graduate from college. Then right behind him was Joseph Earl's lil' girl Covette. Now Sheryl's boy is in college now. He had a good job making good money! Got a wife and a little boy, but 'cided he wanted to do somethin better for hisself...tried applying for other jobs, but nobody would hire him

'cuz he didn't have a college education....had the experience, but no education. So he quit that job and got one that lets him go to school and still work to support his family. I am proud of that boy! Redskin's baby boy doing good too. He away in college.... trying to make somethin out of hisself. I was worried 'bout him for a while, but I knowed that Redskin and Bell, especially Bell, was gon' keep him on the right track. That boy don't have no choice but to be somebody. And Kay's oldest boy turned hisself around. He's a driver – a family man – able to provide for his family and to make sho' they do better than him. Then...some of 'em even though they didn't finish school, they working...tired to do right by theyself and by they chillun.

Like I say, I wish I had don' more when I was living to steer the family down the right path, but when it came to certain thangs, we did the best we could...coulda don' better, but we tried to do our best! It's time we learn from the past and move forward and instead of history repeating itself over and over again. It's too late for me, Lurlene, and some others 'cuz we gon' on, but it too late for ya'll that's still there. You still got time and a chance, but it's up to you to choose. Now what ya'll gon' do...

The cycle of poverty still goes 'round

Like the hands on a clock never slowing down

The educational policies

The political one's too

The public reforms pushed you on through

Another generation being born

Will number seven be the one to put poverty to scorn?!?!

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CHAPTER 5

REFLECTING ON THE INQUIRY:

UNDERSTANDING KALEB NORRIS' GENERATIONS

Cycle

*A sequence of changing states that, upon completion,
produces a final state identical to the original*

(www.dictionary.com)

My inquiry examined the cross-generational affects of educational, political, and public policies on my family. I discovered each generation of my family is linked by common generational threads that make up the tapestry of who are – threads produced by various educational, political, and public policies. These threads are (1) educational disenchantment and disengagement, (2) generational nihilism, (3) policy-induced economic suppression, and (4) cultural and community containment.

I used oral history methodology to collect the stories of six generations of my family. Using the voice of my great-grandfather, I told the generational narratives of my great-grandfather, my grandmother, my father and his siblings, and my cousins. I relied upon the memories of my grandmother and her children to account for the absence of the first two generations – my great-great-grandparents and my great-grandparents – since they are no longer living. Using oral history as my methodology allowed me to focus on each family member whose stories I collected in an effort to make meaning of their experience and to identify cross-generational behaviors, values, and attitudes (Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Stake, 2003; Stein & Preuss, 2006).

I used critical race theory (Matusda, 1993; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Augulego, Thornton, Bakenhus, Benn, and Holmes, 2004) to examine how various educational, political, and public policies have cross-generationally affected my family. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American society and embedded in the stories of the silenced and marginalized. Viewing my family's story through a critical race theory perspective has helped me to interpret their experiences in a profound new way affecting how I relate to my family, especially my grandmother (for whom I have a newfound respect) and my father (whom I understand better). Using critical race theory as my theoretical lens, I looked beyond the individual circumstances and examined the root of the problems and issues I have perceived for many years. I also identified hidden meaning behind educational, political and public policies (established power structure and traditions) and the identified adverse affects these policies have had on my family, which allowed me to operate prophetically – predicting the future by understanding the past. (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). It is through the lens of critical race theory that I present my findings...

Growing up in church, I remember hearing the pastor say, “Out of the mouths of babes, let everything be established” (Psalms 8:2). If I could add an addendum to this paraphrased scripture it would be, “Out of the mouths of babes, let everything be established as truth.” Unknowingly, it was out of the mouth of a “babe” that I began discovering generational threads prevalent in my family as a result of educational, political, and public policies. When I began my inquiry at my grandmother's home in Memphis, I collected the stories of my youngest storytellers first who were anxious to go play instead of talking with me. During the course of collecting her stories, my four-year

old cousin “Jays” told me that “school was boring!” I looked at this four-year old as if she was crazy while asking myself, “What does a four-year old know about school being *boring*?” Upon further probing, she told me that she was not learning anything – all they did was play and take naps. I thought to myself, “Isn’t that what four-year olds are supposed to do at school?” Apparently not! At first, I dismissed what she said; then I realized that at the age of four, where education was concerned, perhaps, she was disenchanted and disengaged (**generational thread 1**). I questioned how this could be at such a young age, but after talking with her mother “Shuntay” and her grandmother “Pearl,” I realized that this could be a very real possibility. Neither of them completed a high school education. During her storytelling session, Shuntay revealed that even though she liked going to school, she really did not see a need to achieve academically. Her mother Pearl expressed similar sentiments concerning school; she stated that she wanted to be a stewardess, but could not connect her dream of flying all over the world with a clear-cut path to making that dream a reality. Upon examining historical precedence, I realized that none of Pearl’s adult children (three boys and two girls) completed high school. Since my inquiry, one of my storytellers – Pearl’s son “Andre” quit school in his senior year. I remember when collecting his story, he told me all of the “textbook” answers as to how to be successful in life, but he could not connect that dream of success with any real world applications of making that dream a reality. There was no one or nothing to relate to – no example that he could draw upon.

I found the same to be true in the stories I collected from my father and his oldest sister “Kay.” My father has a strong aptitude for math and his sister has a love of math and science, but they could not connect this love of these two subjects to clear-cut paths

that included not only more education, but lucrative careers. My father left school in the tenth grade to work; during his story telling session, he admitted that he regrets that decision and wished that he had not been allowed to do. My father followed in the footsteps of his eldest sister Kay, who left high school just six months shy of graduation to work; she told me that since “Joseph Earl” was no longer living at home, she had to take responsibility for the family. Learning that my aunt was only six months shy of finishing was very troubling, but this was also the case with two sons “Ty” and “Quincy.” During their storytelling session, I learned that my uncle “Lennie” completed high school but did not pass second semester English, which meant he had to return that summer to make up a half credit; he never returned. I asked myself, “Where education is concerned, why is my family disenchanting and disengaged?”

Through the stories of my grandmother “Halen,” my father “Redskin,” and my great-aunt “Doreen,” I traced the source of the disenchantment and disengagement to my great-grandfather “Kaleb Norris,” who, although educated, was unable to use his education to his full advantage due the enforcement of separate but equal policies. Separate but equal policies prohibited my great-grandfather from receiving equal treatment in the workplace and almost cost him his life after he revealed the unethical business practices of a white man. These policies also prevented my great-grandfather’s education from having liberating consequences (Lynn, 2006) resulting in the missed-education of his descendants, the de-emphasis of education in the family, and the denial of his own educational achievement for more than fifty years. Separate but equal policies perhaps kept my great-grandfather from being the example of educational success that his family *needed* to see in order to facilitate educational success in their own lives.

Learning that my great-grandfather kept his education a secret for more than fifty years was mind-blowing. Immediately, I began to think about what affect did not knowing about his educational success have on us generationally? As if the first revelation was not shocking enough, I was even more astounded when my father told me about my great-grandfather's response when confronted about his level of education. My great-grandfather simply said that his education was "unimportant." Considering the fact that not very many black men had the chance to go to school, my great-grandfather's educational success was far from being "unimportant." As his great-grandson living in the 21st century, who understands the importance of education in this day and age, his educational attainment was monumental! My great-grandfather was an *educated black man!* Unfortunately, educational, political, and public policies blurred his vision and kept him from seeing what his educational success could have meant to his family.

As I reflected on the revelation of my great-grandfather's "unimportant" education, I realized that perhaps he was disenchanted with education because he was unable to use it for socioeconomic mobility – it did not have liberating consequences for him financially or otherwise (Lynn, 2006). I remember driving in my car still reflecting on the revelation and trying to construct meaning from it when the word "nihilism" popped into my head. Prophetic thinker and philosopher Cornel West defines nihilism as coping "with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness" (West, 1993, p. 14) that is prevalent in the African-American community as a result of 400 years of oppression by the dominant culture. I then thought about the storytelling session when my grandmother, reflecting on life sharecropping in Mississippi; I remembered seeing the visible stress and glossy-eyed, glazed look that came over her face as she vividly

described how she (and other family members) worked in the fields from dawn to dusk, planting cotton, picking cotton, and how her body would ache. She recalled being pregnant to the point of delivery with each one of her children and still picking and planting cotton and many other things she told me. I remembered as she was talking how I looked down at her monstrous sized hands – swollen from arthritis and gout – and heard her say, “We had a *hard* life. All we could do was make it from day to day!” I remember wondering, “Why haven’t I heard this before?” It was not until later that I answered my own question. I realized that although linked genetically, my family was not linked generationally. We were suffering from “generational nihilism” (**generational thread 2**). I define generational nihilism as the lack of communication resulting from being consumed with day-to-day survival imposed by educational, political, and public policies, which results in a lack of communication and sharing of personal experiences and family history between generations. I knew I was *ignorant* of my family’s history, but I did not realize the depth of what that meant and that it was a generational thread – a direct result of the affects of educational, political, and public policies. As I collected more stories from various storytellers, family members – those who were and those who were not participating in the inquiry - gathered around and listened; they were intrigued by the stories – stories that were as new to them as they were to me. My family members transformed before my eyes becoming glimmers of light. My grandmother, however, was a fountain of knowledge whose water I had never tasted in all my years of living – all because we simply did not have a meaningful conversation or an ongoing dialogue. Neo-soul artist India Arie sings about the need for conversation between the generations in her song “Better People.”

I wish there was a video game to teach you your ancestors' name.

I wish there was a phone number like 1-800-Save-Your-Brother

I'm thankful for the radio station

Not afraid to put the truth in rotation

There are skirts of information

That you can only get in conversation when...

Young People, who talk to

Old People, it would make us

Better People, all around...

(Yes it would)

And if Old People would talk to

Young People, it would make us

Better People, all around....

(Arie, 2006).

Nihilism and generational nihilism speak to the fact that we (African-Americans) were culturally raped – stripped of our identity, our language, our heritage, and our history only then to be sodomized by the educational, political, and public policies of American society, which deemed us as “unimportant.” As a result, we deemphasize the past – neglecting to share our triumphs, trials, tribulations, and shameful mistakes with the generations of our family because educational, political, and public policies have declared us “insignificant.” The “insignificant” branding of our experiences by various policies have caused important generational stories – like my great-grandfather’s heritage and acquisition of education, my family’s sharecropping struggle, the transition from

rural to city life, the onset of welfare, etc, – to be lost forever. Until this inquiry, I did not know the name of the high school my father attended. Here is a man with whom I lived in the same house until seven years ago, and I had no clue about his life prior to my birth. I did not know that my aunt “Pearl” wanted to be stewardess, nor did I know that as a student she loved English. Ironically, I am an English teacher. I did not know that my aunt “Sheryl” had the audacity to hand write a resume which led to her first corporate job. I did not know that my aunt “Kay” returned to work only two weeks after having her first child because she could not survive off welfare. I have learned that “there are skirts of information that you can only get in conversation” (Arie, 2006).

Generational nihilism has kept my family from connecting generationally in meaningful ways with one another, but I discovered that policy-induced economic suppression (**generational thread 3**) has kept us socioeconomically disconnected and oppressed. I have seen policy-induced economic suppression in the form of welfare since I can remember; however, what I found most fascinating was learning about welfare’s predecessor – sharecropping. I immediately realized through the stories my grandmother, my father, and my great-aunts “Doreen” and “Carol” that sharecropping held my family in “economic” bondage for over 30 years. Reminiscing about their lives as sharecroppers in Mississippi, they explained how they almost always had enough to eat, but how they could never seemingly get ahead financially, how they worked from dawn to dusk planting and picking cotton. I remember thinking within myself, “My God! You all were slaves in the 20th century!” It was disheartening to realize that in *modern times* – less than 50 years ago – members of my family were economic slaves. After 30 years of back-breaking work, the landowner simply discharged them. **Thirty years** of hard work

and my family *retired* from sharecropping without the benefit of stocks, bonds, or a 401K – not even owning a small portion of the land they had worked on for 30 years. This was an injustice! However, I recognized that they did what they had to do to survive because the educational, political, and public policies left them with no choice.

I always thought that my family had choices; however, the choices they were presented only maintained the status quo in American society, thus perpetuating the cycle of generational poverty in my family. Where sharecropping left off, welfare continued. Before this inquiry, I simply thought that my family *took advantage* of the welfare system, but through my grandmother's story, I became conscious of her generation's point of view concerning welfare; they were the first welfare recipients in the family. To her and those in her generation that experienced the hardships of sharecropping, welfare was *justifiable* compensation for all their years of sharecropping in Mississippi without the benefit of adequate wages, healthcare, or a retirement pension. Welfare was a "saving grace" that provided *relief* from their day-to-day marginalized struggle. As my grandmother told me about her welfare experience, I remember thinking, "Wow, this woman sitting before me definitely does not fit the media stereotype of the 'welfare queen.'" Here is a woman who worked her entire life for *mere* pennies and lived *way* below the poverty line because of policy-induced economic suppression.

According to my grandmother, welfare was a "saving grace," but it became "the daily bread" for subsequent generations, which my grandmother's generation *never* intended. Welfare lulled many of my family members (immediate and extended) into a false sense of security creating a mirage – an oasis of a care-free lifestyle while relegating them to inner city plantations – neighborhoods infested with gang violence, crime, and

poor schools - that were conducive to their *limited* income and socioeconomic mobility. Instead of being policies that fostered economic independence in my family, welfare, just as sharecropping, limited my family's socioeconomic mobility, thus maintaining the status quo and perpetuating the cycle of generational poverty.

Growing up, I could not understand why my family was *choosing* to live in squalor; I desired for them to live better than they were living. That desire has not changed. Unfortunately, neither has their living condition since they left Mississippi. For the most part, multiple family members are still living together in substandard housing. In my grandmother's house alone, there are seventeen people living in a four bedroom home (a home that until recent renovations was almost uninhabitable). At least one member for each generation is represented in that household. Even as I collected my stories, there were people in and out of the house constantly. The background noise became unbearable at times (Payne, 1995). I have always wondered why all these people are still living in the same house. I thought that if they moved away from each other, they would be able to do better financially and otherwise. What I have come to understand is that their living condition is a direct result of cultural and community containment (**generational thread 4**) generated by educational, political, and public policy of sharecropping. Walled in by rows and rows of cotton, the Hill Plantation was where my great-grandparents met and married, where they raised their family, where they socialized with friends and other family members (my great-grandmother's parents and siblings lived on the same plantation), and where they worked. The plantation was their world to which they were socioeconomically contained.

In the almost 40 years since leaving Mississippi, my family's location has changed several times, but their containment has not. Due to their limited socioeconomic mobility, my family has been forced to live in the poorest zip codes in Memphis, rarely venturing outside of their neighborhoods and almost never venturing outside of Memphis. Just like her mother dreamt of flying all over the world, my cousin Shuntay desires to move away from Memphis; however, she understands that living on welfare with four children limits, if not totally obliterates, her options.

In addition to the four generational threads generated by the affects of educational, political, and public policies, I have also discovered that these threads have four core values. These values are (1) live and/or work only for day-to-day survival because socioeconomic mobility is unobtainable; (2) fail to properly transmit the value of education to offspring because education is an abstract idea obtainable and useful only to the dominant culture; and (3) fate is determined by "the white man's" educational, political, and public policies— not by education or socioeconomic mobility. These values help to maintain the status quo and perpetuate the cycle of generational poverty.

In order to address issues of poverty in our society, these values at the core of each of these generational threads must be addressed by the education system. Nationally, schools must redesign their curriculum with an emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 1995, 2006) that re-enchants and reengages disenchanted and disengaged students. This curriculum must focus on immediate life application of skills so that students can see the *immediate* relevance of their education and how education benefits them now and will benefit them in the future as well. Perhaps if members of my family (i.e. my father, my aunts, my cousin Shuntay, her brother Andre,

and others) had had engaging curriculum that made education life applicable immediately, then perhaps they may have continued their education. Schools must inspire students to achieve academically through the implementation of life plans with specific goals to achieve within a specific timeline and specific steps to take whereby the students will see the fruits (monetary and otherwise) of their labor that will take abstract idea of education and make the benefits of education a concrete reality.

Furthermore, schools must redesign their curriculum to emphasize culturally relevant pedagogy that requires students to connect with their family and cultural history, teaching the importance of the past in preparation for the future. African-American students need to reconnect to their family and cultural history in a meaningful way. I am not suggesting the mere recitation of historical facts and figures, but students need to be taught how to critique history by examining the various institutions, policies, and social constructs that “...enforce[s] policies and operating procedures that favor the dominant race over other races or when organizational cultures, symbols, or habits creating a biasing effect”

(Augulego, Thornton, Bakenhus, Benn, and Holmes, 2004, p. 1). Perhaps knowing our forefather’s educational background would have inspired those in my family to persevere and achieve in spite of educational, political, and public policies designed to hinder their socioeconomic mobility. Perhaps knowing the reasons and rationale behind the decisions of my father, his sister Kay, his brother Joseph Earl, his sister Pearl, and his brother Lennie would inspire the current generation and those to come to travel “the road not taken” or the one taken by my aunt Sheryl whose handwritten resume led to her first job; in her mid 40’s, she is working two jobs while aspiring to become a realtor.

Unfortunately, we will never know...

Learning about their family's history, generational struggles, and cultural history will provide students with a sense of self-worth and teach them to be socially conscious (Kozol, 1991, 2005) – awakening them first to the plights of their own race, culture, and community. “Practices that promote racial pride may be associated with better cognitive and socioemotional outcomes to the extent that they foster positive self-esteem in the child” (Caughy, O’Campo, Nettles, & Lohrfink, 2006, p. 1221). Schools have a responsibility to *deliberately* teach the unadulterated truth about what *really* happened in American history and not present some “white-washed” version that portrays the American government in a favorable light.

In addition to teaching the truth about American history, schools must design their curriculum to emphasize culturally relevant pedagogy to teach economic principles to students that allow them to critique the economic system and policies in their community, city, state, nationally, and internationally. Taking a one-semester course in economics in the eleventh grade is no longer acceptable! Students need to be introduced to economics as early as the third grade and taught about economic systems and theories throughout high school. Students who come from generational poverty need to be taught about the economic theories (Iceland, 2003) that explain how educational, political, and public policies influence economics that perpetuated generational poverty. Perhaps an awareness of economics would have prevented my great-grandfather from becoming entangled in generational sharecropping and his descendents entrapped in welfare. Students need to be aware of the various types of economic models designed to continue the status quo in America and told that are designed to advance their socioeconomic mobility.

Finally, schools must do more in the way of exposing current students in my family and other African-Americans in generational poverty to life outside of their local community. I am not referring to traveling to other parts of the country or world, but I am referring to traveling to other parts of the city in which they live. Many students in poverty (including members of my family) do not know anything outside of their community. Educators must show them that an entire world exists beyond the street on which they live. They *must* be exposed to other various cultures and communities. Exposure will open the door to new worlds and encourage the current generation of students in my family and other African-American students in generational poverty to “...reach unparalleled levels of success...despite tremendous odds.” (Nieto, 1996, p. 33) Also, exposure to things outside their community will teach students to be more socially conscious – encouraging literary skills and social interaction to be successful (Kozol, 1991, 2005).

Addressing these generational threads through culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching strategies will bridge the achievement gap that exists among African-American students. Classroom based solutions, as advocated by No Child Left Behind, must be exorcised from the curricula, and culturally relevant pedagogy must be implemented. Culturally relevant pedagogy-based curricula will scrutinize the affects of educational, political, and public policies on African-Americans and call to light the unfairness, cultural-bias, and discrimination prevalent in NCLB that promotes the existing inequalities in American societies and penalizes African-American students in generational poverty for circumstances that are beyond their control.

After Thoughts: Unanswered Questions

Critical race theory (Matsuda, 1993; Augulego, Thornton, Bakenhus, Benn, and Holmes, 2004; was used to examine the cross-generational affects of various educational, political, and public policies on my family. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American society and embedded in the stories of the silenced and marginalized. Through this inquiry, I told the stories of six generations of my family silence through marginalization. As they told *their* side of the story, I began to see that their circumstances are not individual – they are generational issues caused by educational, political, and public policies. As a researcher, I became aware of the importance of equity and social justice (He & Phillion, 2008, p. 16). Critical race theory allowed me to uncover which educational, political, and public policies (separate but equal, sharecropping, welfare, and Brown vs. Board of Education) have been more detrimental allowing me to prophesy – predict the future by understanding the past – into the lives of my family (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003).

In addition to giving my family a voice to speak, I found my voice and my place. I realized that I never was supposed to fit – that I am the one called out to be a prophetic voice – the one crying out in the wilderness. I realize that in not fitting in – I actually fit, and I understand and feel closer to my family than ever! While this inquiry has answered questions for me personally, it does not speak to my newly formalized conclusions and questions. I learned through this inquiry that generational poverty is a *truly* generational. While I wholeheartedly believe that educational, political, and public policies are responsibility for the perpetuation of generational poverty in my family, I am left wondering will these policies *ever* change due to the fact that America is a capitalistic

society that needs an underclass – a poor – to thrive. Is generational poverty a problem that we can truly “educate” away? If we teach the children in generational poverty about educational, political, and public policies designed to kill their potential, will they be able to fight against these policies that are so entrenched in American history and society. There are no certainties. What the findings of my inquiry offer is another new perspective to explore. I do not *necessarily* expect the exploration of these generational threads generated by educational, political, and public policies to break the cycle of generational poverty; I can only hope...

However, I do hope that constructing meaning of the cross-generational affects of educational, political, and public policies on my family will generate conversations, which will lead to research, and eventually the development and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching strategies that examine generational threads and policies adversely affecting all students, particularly African-American students engaged in generational poverty. It is my hope that educating the total student – healing the wounds of the past and addressing present personal issues and issues of poverty and education in the African-American community – will inspire students to achieve academically in school, subsequently in life, and to be socially conscious and work to eradicate the inequalities in our society.

As a result of this inquiry, I know about my family’s history; which has given me a new sense of self-worth and connectedness to the past, present, and future. I feel as if I am coming full cycle as a person. This inquiry has inspired me to continue to seek answers to generational questions in not only my father’s maternal family, but his paternal family as well.

I never met my father's father. He died when I was 14 years old. My mother discovered his obituary in the paper one Saturday morning, which happened to be the day of his funeral. We did not attend because my father had not seen him since he was 15 years old and did not feel any reason to attend. I always had questions about the grandfather I never knew, and recently had the opportunity to have some of those questions answered at a family gathering, which I attended with my father and my uncle – who is only nine months older than me. I met many of my relatives for the very first time including my great-aunt – my grandfather's sister who is 90 years old and the picture of health! I also saw a picture of my grandfather only to discover my father looks exactly like him – he just has fairer skin; I had never seen any picture of my grandfather. More importantly, my father met relatives that he has never met before – including his half-brother, who is only four and half months younger than my father. Attending the Tennial Family Gathering inadvertently started a new inquiry into who I am through my paternal grandfather and perhaps what policies influenced that side of my family!

As mentioned, I am now even more committed to seeking answers concerning my maternal great-grandfather. Even though I uncovered a wealth of information about him, there are still many unanswered questions about his life and his heritage that he took to his grave for reasons unbeknownst to us. One question that was raised through this inquiry is the question of my great-grandfather's race. My great-aunt and I have reason to believe that perhaps my great-grandfather was biracial and that his father may have been his white benefactor or another relative, which may explain my great-grandfather's very fair complexion and multi-colored eyes (his eye color seemingly changed with the seasons) and why my great-grandfather was well educated. It is commonly known in

southern culture that back in the day well-to-do white men who had children by black mistresses either (1) made sure their children were well educated and/or (2) bought and deeded them with land in order to provide them with a stable financial future. After the death of his white benefactor, maybe my great-grandfather inherited his land. Perhaps! We simply do not know. We are not sure what the case was concerning my great-grandfather, but it may also be the reason in part why he kept his literacy a secret for more than 50 years and why he took so much knowledge about his life and his family to the grave.

The quest for answers continues...

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