

# EASE ON DOWN THE ROAD: BLACK WOMEN'S SCHOOLING NARRATIVES

by

RACHELLE D. WASHINGTON

(Under the Direction of JoBeth Allen)

## ABSTRACT

Scholars writing about Black women's lives have advocated a need to extend the research on the schooling experiences and girlhood stories of Black girls and women. Informed by Black feminist thought and womanist theory, I examine, as a participant as well as a researcher, how eight Black women doctoral students discuss and deconstruct our schooling and lived experiences. This interview study focuses on ways stories aid in understanding the complexities of the sociocultural and sociopolitical context of Black women's schooling experiences. Similarly, participants' schooling narratives shed light on ways school, home, and community construct our identities. As such, the narratives provide a critical lens for illuminating the experiences that propel us women to pursue doctoral degrees. I conducted 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews and collected demographic profile information. The interviews lasted 60 – 90 minutes. I analyzed the participants' narratives using three lenses – narrative, cultural, and poetic. These three analytic lenses offer unique vantage points to viewing more wholly the participants' narratives. Through narrative, cultural, and poetic analysis, I identified five themes in the participants' schooling and lived experiences: 1) these Black women exhibited agency despite societal, familial, and institutional complexities; 2) sociohistorical events shaped each participant; 3) Black family and community contexts emphasized education and academic potential; 4) schools often reflected society in attempts to construct these Black women in narrow ways; and 5) some teachers encouraged academic potential through relationships with these Black women.

**INDEX WORDS:** schooling narratives, narrative analysis, black women doctoral students, qualitative research, racism, classism, sexism, colorism, poetic representation, cultural analysis, classroom hierarchies

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DEDICATION

*to*

steel magnolias jutting, sprouting blossoms and wings, *intertwined*

spirits of young Black girls and Black women

*all* finding their way along the Yellow Brick Road.

*Ache`*

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*Thank you*

*Miss Bibby for Crickett.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

## EASE ON DOWN THE ROAD: BLACK WOMEN'S SCHOOLING NARRATIVES

*The people who in all literature were always peripheral--little black girls who were props, background; those people were never center stage and those people were me.*

*-Toni Morrison, 1971*

## Prologue

Since 1937, there have been numerous renderings of *The Wizard of Oz*. From a cultural perspective, none resonates with me as much as the Broadway production, *The Wiz* (Brown, 1975). For me, it is important that it is a Black<sup>1</sup> production. The author, producer, music director and main characters were all Black. I remember the excitement of seeing a production filled with music, dance, and language couched in my cultural heritage. In high school, I was the only Black person in musical presentations such as *Godspell*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *Oliver*. There were few links to my cultural past and passion—except at the Baptist church I attended. With *The Wiz*, a key aspect seemed to be the way the writers and the characters dip and draw from ancestral wells producing delicious water, water to refresh and renew consciousness regarding themes of struggle, resistance, surrender, and speculation. Spirit-filled tunes purpose, pinion, and pluck observers' heartstrings. Various music genres including folk, blues, R & B, soul, and hip hop

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, the terms “Black” and “African American” will be used interchangeably to denote people of African descent. I embrace the definition offered by Peterson (1992), who wrote: I personally prefer the word “Black” as a reminder that color has been the issue in the practice of racial discrimination and injustice. Using the term “Black” serves as a reminder that we must still confront the issue of racism (p. 2).

encapsulate the energy of *The Wiz*. The choreography is much more than staged; it is lived out in the celebration of the characters' agency.

Baum (1937) wrote a story that would ultimately become a symbol of universal truths in the individual quest for wit, heart, courage and other armament needed to fight for agency and authentic existence. In the original version of *The Wizard of Oz*, Baum introduces Dorothy, Toto, Scarecrow, Tinman, and the Cowardly Lion. The protagonist Dorothy lives with Aunt Em and Uncle Henry on a farm in Kansas. There is an evil witch and a good witch. There are Munchkins, the infamous Yellow Brick Road, flying monkeys, and an enigmatic Wizard. Dorothy wears silver slippers with, "magical powers" that will presumably aid her in her quest for "home." Dorothy's quest is woven throughout the story; and this theme also dominates the afrocentric adaptation of Baum's book—a book and Broadway musical—*The Wiz* by William Brown (1975).

In the Brown version, a violent tornado transports Dorothy to an urban landscape where she is greeted by Munchkins dressed in a colorful mélange of funky, urban gear. The Munchkins are celebrating and praising Dorothy for her destruction of the Wicked Witch of the East, Evamene. Subsequently, Dorothy meets Addaperle, Good Witch of the North, sister to Glinda, Good Witch of the South. Addaperle, a sassy, spunky witch with verve, directs Dorothy toward the Emerald City, where the Wizard of Oz lives. The Emerald city's residents don green eyewear, which jades their views of themselves and others. Dorothy's journey, accompanied by the theme song "Ease on Down the Road" (1975), moves her along the Yellow Brick Road. On this urban Yellow Brick Road dancers dress in Black bellbottoms, sunshine-yellow tees, and oversized eight paneled apple hats with bills. Dorothy and her companions travel through a myriad of urbanesque scenes: Munchkins rendered as graffiti; a junkyard with a junk-stuffed

Scarecrow; and intoxicating Poppy Girls who wear burnt orange afros and black bodysuits. The poppy dancers entice the travelers with promises of escape from their perilous journey. Hair styles of the era—afros, small and bushy ones, twisted locks and cornrows with beaded ends—indicative of Africanist traditions, seemingly rhythmic.

*The Wiz* was what I waited for, this feeling surging from the epicenter of my being, as I sojourned along the Yellow Brick Road with Dorothy and the others. In my quest for truths, especially those we tend to avoid, *The Wiz* has been a useful motif for my work as a researcher. When I began studying the spectrum of research possibilities, it was a daunting process. What I knew for sure was that my work would focus somehow on Black girls and women. I solidified my research agenda and the notion of *The Wiz* as a figuration surfaced rather easily as I began to understand that I was in the midst of my own Yellow Brick Road and was accompanied by other sistah sojourners.

*Stony the road we trod... We have come over a way that with tears has been watered* (Johnson, 1900). When I think of journeying, I am drawn to this song that is filled with reminders of a people's journey through oppression. Yet, the song holds hope for a victorious future. Participants in this study are a microcosm of Black peoples' collective victories. We represent sistahs in the academy searching for the zenith, the PhD. Our journey to the academy has been one where we have persevered and embodied cultural legacies rooted in sacrifice, resistance, and liberation. Our rich history as survivors binds us. Through sisterhood, scholarship, spiritual resilience, and self-determination, we wept, wailed, agonized, crooned, exalted, and danced, ever mindful that we might encounter twisters and evil witches around the bend in the road. Our search, much like Dorothy and her companions' unfurls an exacting spirit laced with self efficacy and agency. We too have our Glindas, Addaperles, and our brave lions;

and they help us know that what we have inside of us—our hearts, brains, and courage—will carry us through.

### Introduction

Thank you, Elma Lewis. Roxbury. There I was, Suzy Snowflake, Head Snowflake, tutu adorned, chocolate-dipped ballerina, *cambré*, little chubby brown sugah leading the troupe. We were dancers—twirling whirling hues of deep sun-kist, mocha-laced, blueberry dotted, purple grained, high yellow shades of a soulful kaleidoscope. Each step was more determined than the first, *glissade*. I was the first deeeeep chocolate girl to lead. What a prideful moment it was for me—landing the role over at least ten other girls. My Daddy said I was the Blackest and beautifullest snowflake he had ever seen. Suzy Snowflake danced free.

At Elma Lewis School I participated in ballet and dramatic arts. I recall others whispering that I was too dark or too chubby when Miss Lewis selected me for the role of Suzy Snowflake. Nonetheless, I was cast in the role. Miss Lewis was mindful of how hard it was for chocolate girls. Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts was the first cultural center serving the Black community in Boston. My experiences at Miss Lewis's school are memorable because they led to loves, liberations, and embodiments reified today. The whisperings have not subsided inside me, even today when I am a Black woman troubling our world; I hear them inside my head. Yet it is this agency (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) embedded early on that pushed me out on the stage and led me to dance and twirl into a world where little chubby chocolate girls learned that we were gifted, talented and beautiful.

My research originates from years of balancing agency and imposed social constructions, weaving connections, dismissing less passionate notions, searching inside myself for the work that is meaningful, and presenting it with humaneness. My initial research questions evolved

from my need to illuminate silenced voices and pained faces of Black girls peering back and forward through mirrors refracting broken images.

I have often written about my journey as an early childhood educator and the young Black girls I encountered. I salute the little Black girls entering the classrooms with fresh ideas, fresh mouths, and fresh pressed heads or trendy natural tresses. These kindergarten and first grade girls arrived at school the first day embellished with bows, barrettes, and bravada. They navigated the classroom and hallways with a certainty that rivals adults maneuvering in a new setting. They took charge in classroom discussions. They took charge as helpers. They took charge on the playground. They were purpose-driven in physical education class even as their pressed back plaits gave way to unmanageable tresses. These little girls had purpose. The spirit of these young girls is in me; indeed, it leads me to my current project, learning about the experiences that propel girls like them to become doctoral students.

#### Black Female Experience: Naming, Narrating and Thought

Naming has roots in Africanist communities (hooks, 1992). Naming concretizes and/or dilutes. It is refreshing to move beyond binaries and seek multiple naming vehicles. Ellison (1952) spoke of the importance of bestowing recognition rather than invisibility upon others. Black women's lived experiences and naming those experiences produce considerable discussion. For example, in the evolution of Black feminist thought we see "naming" as an important part of Black women situating themselves within feminism in America (hooks, 2003, p. 76). King (1995) named the oppressive experiences of Black women "multiple jeopardies" because that specific naming transcends the binary of gender and race. Springer (2002) names a generation of Black feminists "Third Wave Black Feminists" in order to question a specific politic applicable to that generation.

According to Peshkin (1988), subjectivities “that live in me cannot be ignored; I need only name them to myself” (p. 18). Peshkin argued for examining one’s subjectivities as a critical component of educational research whereby the subjective locations of the researcher engage with those of the participants. When using subjectivity in research, who an individual is and what she represents or becomes is critical. Additionally, Markus’ and Nurius’ (1986) work regarding possible selves extends this dialogue and encourages ways to examine one’s constructions and experiences.

### Investigations into Black Women and Education

Issues I have investigated concerning Black women and education include Black teacher attrition (Fultz, 1995, Wilder, 2000), agency of Black females (Bailey, 2001; Bell-Scott, 1994; Lanehart, 2002; Lee, 1999), and Black women as researchers (Givens-Generett and Jeffries, 2003; McDonald, 1999). As a result of exploring these issues, questions regarding the educational stories of young Black girls surfaced.

My current inquiry is a response to hooks’ (1996) challenge that in order to “understand the complexity of Black girlhood we need more work that documents that reality in all its variations and diversity” (p. xiii). hooks also stressed that “there is no one story of Black girlhood,” and that even though she grew up in a family of five sisters, she was “amazed that [their] experiences were often incredibly different even though [they] were in the same household” (pp. xiii-xiv).

Black women scholars’ teaching, reaffirming, writing, and supporting the works of Black women who study and write about women like themselves encouraged me to use tools—theory relevant to the examination and celebration of Black women. Telling Black women’s stories connects “future generations of Black women and girls” (Bell-Scott, 1993, p. 25). Additionally, Henry (1998) made a plea for Black women scholars to devote some aspect of their work exploring schooling narratives of young Black girls. Henry (1998) acknowledged that, “their silence, or non-

speech, is a text in itself” (p. 236). hooks (1989) further affirmed coming to voice as a transformative and important occurrence. These voices with their complexities knowingly play into the unearthing and unmasking of Black girls/women. Black girls/women who are mindful of the admonishment not to be loud seemingly let their silence reign. Signithia Fordham noted that “silence for African Americans was not to be interpreted as acquiescence” (1993, p. 12). She offers silence as another tool of resistance and activism.

Further, while many Black women have written their own stories, the educational narratives of “loud Black girls” are often marginalized or excluded from the research literature (Etter-Lewis, 1998; Henry, 1998; hooks, 1984). For instance, Henry noted, “too often, whether in African/Black studies, women’s studies, or education, Black girls/women’s experiences are rendered invisible or subordinate” (p. 9). Bell-Scott (1998) echoes the sentiments of Henry (1998) and hooks (1984) as she reinscribed the relationships among women, specifically Black women. Bell-Scott stressed that Black women need to tell our stories. The consistency of her call to unmask and write has resulted in the pens of Black women becoming more fluid as we bring our worlds to the larger society and “salvage our history” (Turner, 1997, p.192). For example, Etter-Lewis shared those remembrances of her great grandmother that sparked a curiosity regarding her life and the lives of other Black women. Etter-Lewis saw her elders’ life as an integral part of stories of Black women waiting to be told.

Issues regarding the centrality of respect, silence, and visibility surface often in the lives of Black women; therefore it is not surprising that many Black female scholars and authors cite their “familial stories” and “orientation,” (hooks, 1996; Lanehart, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1988; Walker, 2001) as starting points to their investigation of Black girls/women’s experiences. Indeed, these passionate calls reverberate in Lanehart’s (2002) assertion that, “we need to study ourselves,

get a good look at ourselves, in order to unmask who we are within ourselves and in the context of our interactions with those who help to make us who we are” (p. 19).

*Giving voice to mother wit: Narrating lives and experiences.*

As I talk about those who arrived at their voices before I did—those women who wrote or shared, out of necessity their lives inside and outside of academia—I think of my Grandma.

*Beads of sugar drip from the phone each time we speak – Grandma’s voice is the sweetest that I know. She has used that sugary voice as a cheerleader for “book learning” as she calls it. Grandma, now 83, was forced to abandon school at an early age. She worked as a domestic for over 30 years, never losing hope that her dedication to education would produce a legacy of formally educated kin with a better station in life. The kernels of knowledge that seemed in her eyes accessible to white folks’ world charged her teachings of children. My grandmother relied on mother wit to direct her children who hold associate’s degrees and technical certificates. Her grandchildren actualized her dreams of advanced education. Five out of nine grandchildren have a trade or technical certificate or a college degree—I was the first. Even now when talking with my grandmother, who is plagued with Alzheimer’s, her message is, “Get that paper, girl!”*

Grandma was not schooled as much as she was educated. In the Black community education implies wisdom that one often does not get from schooling. With this idea in mind, I am defining education as both informal (mother wit, street smarts, communal/cultural inculcation) and formal (school, tutoring, academic clubs) experiences, both of which are ideas that African-American communities valorize. Black women’s narratives show that communal systems usually comprised of women were extolled for their unfaltering mother wit, uncompromising integrity,

uncommon courage, and fortitude (Fordham, 2002; hooks, 1999; Siddle-Walker, 1999). Described by Edelman (1999) as “lanterns” and referred to as “voices, hands, eyes, ears,” (Fordham, 1996) their voices dismantled stereotypes regarding the subordination of mother wit and the privileging of academic knowledge.

#### Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Thought/Womanist Thought

Although Black feminist thought serves as the primary foundation and theoretical framework for this study, questioning and exploring other articulated and tacit theories and ways in which Black women’s experiences stretch the traditional paradigms is ongoing.

Collins (2000) holds that central to Black feminism is the fact that racism and sexism were and are used to oppress Black women. Black feminism acknowledges that historically, feminism ascribed gender as the prominent issue, and Black women were encouraged to put aside racial concern and focus on gender issues in the fight against patriarchy. Thus, identifying as a feminist depended on suppressing racial, ethnic, class and color differences. Within this context, Black women battled with the importance of affirming their culture and the fact that Black women’s experiences are rooted in struggle and resistance framed by race, gender, class and color.

Black feminist thought encourages Black women to define themselves, validate their position in society and serve as vehicles for social change (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989; Smith, 1983). Black consciousness urged Black women to identify and resist oppressive and hegemonic confluences including patriarchy (hooks, 2003). Black women’s efforts to cull and gather perspectives concerning this matrix of oppression raised their consciousness, a consciousness sister scholars believe Black women inaugurated (Collins, 1990; Smith, 1983). Smith argued that a body of shared experiences exists that shapes Black women’s language, literary and critical practices, and Black feminism theorizes these experiences.

A tension exists between experience and consciousness of Black women. While some Black feminists agree on what Black feminist thought is, others argue it encompasses conflicting ideologies, divergent practices, and contradictory connotations. As Black female scholars have critiqued Black feminist theory, many have argued that viewing any experience of Black women as monolithic. Carby (1987) criticized Barbara Smith's (1977) essay on Black feminism for essentializing Black female experiences. Not limiting her criticisms to Black feminists, Carby (1997) challenged white women in the women's movement to use caution in defining and articulating experiences and voices of Black women. Carby's resistant discourse emphasizes that while Black women share a biological and historical experience, multiple oppressions elevated their experiences beyond the angles as just race or just gender (King, 1995; Smith, 1989; Springer, 1999).

In addition to emphasizing divergences in Black feminist thought, some Black scholars see Black women as the center (hooks, 1984; Davis & Houston, 2001), while others describe Black women as reluctant to self-identify as Black, woman, or feminist (Wallace, 1979). Like many so-called "third wave" Black women, Rebecca Walker (1995) asserted uncertainty regarding how or what a feminist should feel or think about herself. This is a powerful assertion of the need for Walker and other "third wave" Black women to construct their own framework for identity.

*Black feminism to womanism.* Black feminists are troubled by a history of marginalization and essentializing and welcome alternate modes of thought. Hence, Walker's (1983) rearticulation of the many facets of Black feminism is refreshing. Walker coined the term "womanism," demonstrating the differences between feminism and womanism. While the constructs of race, gender, and class paint Black feminist thought, Walker offers womanism as

an embracing identity of spiritual and cultural experiences of Black women. Walker further defined womanist as a Black feminist or feminist of color, an “outrageous, audacious courageous, and willful” woman, questioning and learning (p. xi). Though Walker’s approach encompasses Black and women of color, it contextualizes womanism within a sociohistorical and sociocultural location. Womanism adds a rich texture to the work of Black feminists; a texture designated by unique fabric intertwined with multiple threads of Black feminist and womanist thought (i.e. liberal, radical, revolutionary, etc.). Womanism also addresses the uniqueness of who we are, our goals as Black feminists who are *womanish* enough to ask bold questions. I agree with a fellow sistahmates, a self-coined word combination of *sisters* and *classmates*, that,

Walker's definition of this term applied to me much more fully than the sometimes ambiguous and politically charged "feminist." There is nothing wrong with the term "feminist" and I suppose that I am that also, but I am so much more than that. (Violet Jones, personal communication, spring 2003).

Chronicling Black women’s lives, theories, and research reduces the tendency to view them as one-dimensional or victims (James, 2000). Although I agree with Collins’ (2000) admonition against essentializing Black women, I think that Black feminism and womanism can provide a means through which Black women can work to have their lives and experiences included in the collective narratives of the larger culture and society. Along with the ideas of Collins, hooks, King, writers and extraordinary women like my grandmother, and Elma Lewis define more fluidly the contextual elements of Black feminist and womanist thought. As Black women become more robust academically, we dance and celebrate our history of resistance, our diligence in womanish ways, and the revealing our selves, if only to ourselves.

For example, my grandmother often theorized about the academic experiences she missed. By contrast, her subjectivities as mother, wife, sister, grandmother, church mother, domestic, and seer concretized her life. Her commitment to education remains unwavering despite societal challenges for a Black girl child born and reared in the Apartheid South (McLeod, 1998). Nonetheless, she attended school and community meetings for my aunts and uncles, but most poignant for me, she read and replied to every letter I ever wrote her. While Grandma cannot participate in higher education arenas, her life history can be ushered into academic discourses by her grandchild—Black woman researcher. Her life story, like the stories of other Black women of her generation, leads to the development of theories, methodologies and research (Collins, 1990; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997; Lorde, 1979). It is precisely women like Grandma and Great Grandma Betty whose subjective locations shift the locus of education to rearticulate what counts as research and/or theory.

#### Background of the problem

Black women's increased visibility in doctoral programs is producing an array of *sista doctas* (Jones, 1997). However, classism, racism, colorism, and sexism have been problematic in Black females' educational experiences. According to Walker (1982) colorism is prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color, (p. 290). Along with these problematic limitations Black women scholars remain under-researched, especially at the points where subject categories intersect or diverge. What is strikingly absent are educational narratives that contribute to the social, communicative, political, sexual, socioeconomic, philosophical and cultural discourses of Black women doctoral students in a traditionally white research academy. The educational community needs to know points of convergence as well as divergence in the stories of these Black women during their journey to and experiences within

doctoral programs. We must come to know the stories of young Black girls as they grow into Black women who struggle to recognize and resist socialization that devalues them.

#### Research Question and Significance

The study is guided by this question:

What do Black women doctoral students in a historically white southern research university identify as the life lessons and/or critical incidents within the home, school, and/or community that influenced their decisions, challenges, and successes before their pursuit of doctoral degrees?

#### Significance of the Study to participants and researcher

Black women in this study like Black women in America carry backpacks of multiple oppressions (King, 1995). Within the sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts of Black women's lives these multiple oppressions are confronted with a history of Black women who resisted race, class, and gender oppression. As a result, participants in this study share historical experiences illuminating or refracting their life experiences. These experiences reveal the tenuousness of subject positions for many Black women. As a result the oral, cultural, social and political discourses that frame the experiences and subjectivities of the participants and researcher should prove efficacious for recollection of memories, informed knowledge, reexamination of pedagogical practices, praxis and the pressing need for multiple stories of young Black girls and women.

#### Significance of the Study to Educational and Social Institutions

This study is significant in its focus on Black women doctoral students' educational narratives. This should inform teaching and teacher education programs by

- Increasing attention during teacher preparation to the experiences of young African American women
- Informing elementary teachers about the impact of early schooling experiences
- Developing pedagogies that support the aspirations of all children, inclusive of race and class

Oral narrative as a research methodology as well as poetic representation as an analysis tool stretches the boundaries of what has traditionally been accepted as knowledge and the way this knowledge is represented (Braidotti, 1993; Richardson, 1993). Black feminist research methodology and analysis, documentation of Black female doctoral students' educational experiences and findings for sojourns to the thresholds of historically white research universities may prompt further investigation into the educational stories of Black women. The study should assist future doctoral students who plan to attend institutions of this kind.

#### Preparing for the journey

Black women's lives are lived at the tumultuous intersection of race, class, gender, religion, age, sexuality, and various other subject groups. Qualitative inquiry is an appropriate outlet for understanding the self as it is (re)presented by cultural patterns of experience. Within qualitative inquiry, oral narratives are ideally suited to reveal the multilayered textures of the lives of Black women in general and Black women in academics in particular (Etter-Lewis, 1991). Oral narratives as a mode of inquiry are malleable, making them counterintuitive to traditional structures used for inquiry. Traditional structures often narrow the methodology of research; therefore, they leave little space for ways researchers' present Black women's narratives (Etter-Lewis, 1991; Givens-Generett & Jeffries, 2002).

In *The Wiz* (Brown, 1978), the Afrocentric version of the *Wizard of Oz*, (Baum, 1939) Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin-man, Lion, and Toto, wander down the Yellow Brick Road in a search of personal truths. In this study, I travel with seven sistahmates down their yellow brick roads, in search of their own truths. In their search, *The Wiz* travelers often veered from the most direct path. Similarly, this discussion will not follow a strictly linear, hierarchical, and chronological form. Instead, it resembles the Yellow Brick Road—a road mapped with rotaries, trajectories, and interrogatories.

Also in *The Wiz*, the sojourners often dance their way through the yellow maze—a dance that is intentional, not contrived. It is deliberate, natural, and introduces joy amidst trials. Like Dorothy and her fellow travelers, the Black women in this study dance with me and provide a glimpse of their dance with, and sometimes against, their academic experiences, their roadblocks as well as their triumphs in the search for heart, courage, wit, and other armament necessary to wander through this qualitative jungle (Kvale, 1996; Wolcott, 1990).

Like Dorothy, my dance is choreographed to take me “home.” In this home lie the faithful, insightful stories of my sisters and myself. We share this home, either through our own experiences or by extended solidarity. Now, I begin to “ease on down the road.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*I think the most frequently and long lived aspects of being colored, a woman and alive is that our presence is still a surprise, an anomaly. Our mere presence, mind you, turns heads. What an inhospitable arena to reconnoiter, negotiate, find faith that indeed the sun does rise, if our very existence is not believable.*

*—Ntozake Shange, 1997*

As stated in chapter 1, the purpose of this study is to explore the life lessons and/or critical incidents within the home, school, and/or community that influenced Black women's decisions, challenges, and successes before their pursuit of doctoral degrees in a historically white southern research university.

The review of the literature related to this study examines three areas of influence in Black women's education: home, school, and community. I examine the literature on Black girls and women by categorizing it in two ways: pieces that attempted to clarify their educational narrative and pieces dealing with related life lessons. The stories found in chapters four and five will illuminate the discussions brought forth in the womanist perspective (Chapter 1). This chapter begins with a discussion of schooling narratives and concludes with brief literature on the myriad ways Black women researchers and writers—tin women—*solder* lives and experiences through narratives.

#### Schooling Narratives: Intersectionality, Breadth and Depth

The influences of home, school, and community contribute to Black women's narratives. In this review regardless of the level—elementary through college—the breadth and depth of schooling experiences reveal issues specifically salient to Black women's education. Seldom does the reviewed

literature describe the intersectionality and its relevance to schooling and life narratives of Black women (Crenshaw, 1994). Thus, the nexus of race, gender, class and color provides a base for understanding Black women's educational sojourn. In this review of literature, scholars and writers emphasize the dynamics of Black girls and women's schooling experiences and attend to issues of: gender and race in schools (Etter-Lewis 1998; Grant, 1982; Hale, 2001; Irvine, 1986; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Kapoor, 2002); class (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994; Stevens, 2002) and color (Cannon, 1997; Carroll, 1997). There exists little evidence regarding sexual orientation as a salient issue in Black women's schooling experiences (Collins, 1990; Smith, 1983). Any discussion of Black women's education cannot ignore issues of representation—including language and culturally expressed representation (Bell-Scott, 1994; Delpit, 2003; Fordham, 1998; Henry, 1998; hooks, 1984; Lanehart, 2002; Morgan, 2002).

This review of literature highlights several works related to a relatively neglected topic: Black women's schooling narratives. The literature includes studies, essays, and critiques. Historically, literature related to education narratives of Black women has been associated with the ways they navigate their lives within the professions or the walls of institutions of higher education (Etter-Lewis, 1998; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Kapoor, 2002; Mabokela & Green, 2001; Peterson, 1992). While their contributions are significant, discussions regarding experiences and influences from early home and school experiences onward deepen the richness of the literature.

*There's No Place like Home.* There is uniqueness in the way Black community functions. Before the era of integration, home and community were more tightly interwoven; a voice from one sector had similar authority in another. Narratives regarding life in African American communities and homes made little delineation between the two.

To bring together the issues of home and Black girls' and women's education, I turn to Dorothy as a metaphor. Black girls and women seem undiminished or undaunted in their attempts to move. Their movements, much like Dorothy's, appear purpose-driven. Home and community shared in the overall wellness, development, and representation of the whole child, often encompassing ways to discern the intricate codes of the community: how she carried herself, wore her hair, dressed, and talked (Siddle-Walker, 1999; Fordham, 1996). Works written on or about Black women's schooling experiences found that many participants, including mine, were "firsts" in their disciplines, "firsts" in their families, and/or "firsts" in constructing their lives in preparation for journeys outside of their communities (Etter-Lewis, 1998; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Also, many of the participants' parents were "first" teachers (Carroll, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1988; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Parents taught a commitment to education and achievement by affirming their daughter's value as a family and community member. Families sacrificed and saved monies in order to educate these Black women. "We didn't clean them houses 'cause we wanted to," or "We didn't send you to college to learn to press pants," renders the sacrifices of parents and caregivers as a mandate for Black children to actualize their possibilities (Alexander, 1994; Peterson, 1992; Siddle-Walker, 1996).

The vitality of family support offers a particularly critical scaffold for Black girls' and women's academic pursuits (Carroll, 1997; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Stevens, 2002). According to Carter (2003), Etter-Lewis, (1998) and Omolade (1994), Black women were socialized differently than white women about working outside of the home. For many Black women, especially for those living in the apartheid south, decisions were made early about their destiny. It was not unusual to send a female away to college ahead of males in an effort to shield her from the harshness of being both Black and female. Or children were raised then as now in extended homes by grandmothers,

aunts, or a “play” cousin. Conversely, for many Black girls and women particularly in agrarian communities, few debates surrounded their academic pursuits (hooks, 1994; Siddle-Walker, 1996). In some cases children were “wasted,” a term used for allowing one child (usually a female) to obtain an education, because there were enough hands to work and provide for the family (Hale, 1994). While most Black girls who grew up during Jim Crow did not attend school beyond the eighth grade, others were chastised for dreams of schooling (hooks, 1996; Siddle-Walker, 1996). These communities were not desensitized when it came to valuing their children’s lives; however, during that time rural Black community currency was in the hands, not the head. Narratives surrounding the lives of young Black girls of that time reflected the conditions of the times; consequently, those living in abject poverty privileged working with the hands instead of the mind (hooks, 1996; Sapphire, 1996; Siddle-Walker, 1996), especially in rural families who relied upon the land as a source of income. Thus, in agrarian and intensive manual labor environments, the precedent of this type of work over book learning made formal education an ill-affordable luxury (hooks, 1996).

*Art of survival: Parent and proxy.* Black parents’ struggles for racial and educational equity affirm the value of their children as members of a family and larger community (Edelman, 1999; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Edelman noted that “Black parents prepared children to understand, survive in, and challenge the prevailing values of a legally segregated nation, with a history of slavery” (p. xiv). Narratives show that in many African American communities, home was a place where families discussed the art of survival, made sacrifices, and disrobed from the “isms” that drenched them daily (Beale, 1975; Bell-Scott, 2002; Carroll, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994). Lawrence-Lightfoot explained that:

It was here that we always brought our tales from school, sometimes tales of victory and sometimes miserable laments...it was around our own dining room table that we children first heard the dissonance of values and beliefs between our family and our school and we learned that education was not limited to the classrooms. (pp. 2-3)

As a researcher and storyteller, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) describes the role of families, both hers and those of her participants. In a research based study of lives and experiences, Lawrence-Lightfoot invited six Black professionals to share their life histories. Her “collaborators” as she calls her participants, include women and men in their middle years, between their early forties and mid-fifties (p. 10). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Siddle-Walker’s (1996) inclusion of men distinguishes these studies from most of those I reviewed.

At the time of her study, most of Lawrence-Lightfoot’s collaborators were middle- to upper middle class. Lawrence-Lightfoot conducted interviews covering the span of a year to document the histories and herstories (Carby, 1997) of her participants. All of the collaborators attributed the influence of family as an integral support system, a system that nurtured them while they were (and are) on their life journey. Cheryle Wills, a participant, identified her mother as her first teacher. Her mother demonstrated the purpose of grounding oneself in educational and experiential knowledge. Wills credited her with “embroidering learning experiences into the everyday textures of life” (p. 442). In addition to describing participants’ experiences, Lawrence-Lightfoot acknowledged family as a dynamic in her own educational journey. Lawrence-Lightfoot came of age politically, culturally, socially, and academically while seated at the family table. During those table discussions, especially during the 1960s, Lawrence-Lightfoot became aware of the victimization and oppression surrounding the lives of Blacks. The

communal bonding with parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family members, and friends initiated her into a world that would judge her based upon her race, gender, class, and color.

Lanehart's (2002) study is an example of Black women's narrative studies that focus primarily on women. Lanehart uses mixed methods including oral narratives, participant observation, ethnography, and sociolinguistic analysis. Through their life stories, Lanehart, along with her grandmother, mother, aunt, and sister, demonstrate the influence of family as part of an ongoing metanarrative. Her grandmother and mother shared a strong work orientation. Even though the family matriarch bemoans the fact that she only finished the third grade, Lanehart and her other participants were able to finish school. Lanehart juxtaposed her grandmother's desire for education to her own reality of generational privilege. Although her family simultaneously encouraged and teased her in her quest for higher academic pursuits; she became the first in her family to attain a PhD.

Similar to Lanehart (2002), Carroll's oral narratives characterize families as a source of support. In her visits with Black girls living in 12 cities, Carroll concludes that families "raised a black girlchild in America on sheer conviction and fierce motherlove" (p.10). These studies found active collaboration between researchers and Black girls and/or Black women to be more effective for examining the family constructions, social interactions related to family, school and peers. Black women were encouraged to become a student of life. Many parents who wanted a better situation for their children gave them life lessons. Lessons ranged from doing menial work at home and in the community (Thornton, 1997, as cited in Butler, 1997, p. 182) to learning that idleness was detrimental to educational attainment (Alexander, 1995; Etter-Lewis, 1994; Washington, 1997, as cited in Butler, 1997, p.189). These lessons reminded women that their actions would determine their lot in life. These *life lessons* taught Black women to be assertive

and tenacious (Benjamin, 1997; Higginbotham, 2001), and to think critically and positively (hooks, 1984; Lanehart, 2002). Black men particularly contributed to these life lessons in ways that contradicted and shaped Black women.

*Black menfolk: Crafting and dismantling spirits.* Interestingly, throughout many narratives, interactions with Black men contribute to the crafting and in some cases the dismantling of Black girls'/women's spirits. Contrary to the critiques society places on Black men, many Black girls and women in reviewed studies and literary works shared stories honoring the male influences in their lives (Alexander, 1994, Carroll, 1997; hooks, 1996; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Historically, the wider society has embraced negative images of Black men (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Yet, the literature resoundingly reifies the role of fathers and male figures and their influence in the education of Black girls and women. Langston Hughes told Margaret Walker's (1966) family to "get her out of the south so she [could] develop into a writer" (p. xii). Across generations Black girls and women shared that fathers and/or male figures' love of books, use of big words, sharing philosophies and life lessons, and commitment to education, family, and community gave them inspiration. Nadine, a fifteen year-old participant shared, "fortunately for me, my father, when he was alive, was interested in feeding the mind history and literature" (Carroll, 1997, p. 123).

Many times the Black woman narrator internalized popular culture's views about Black men. For instance, in *I've Known Rivers*, Katie Cannon recalled the "caution and alienation" she felt because her father was unable to read and write. In spite of her embarrassment, Cannon's father was proud of her and was "the first strong man [she had] ever loved" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994, p. 96). Even though her father encouraged her, Cannon explained that Black males exhibited hostility when she matriculated in a mostly white theology school.

Like Cannon, bell hooks endured resistance to the idea of her attaining an education, but in this case it was from her father. For instance, hooks tells how she “grew up resisting patriarchal thinking” (2002, p. 57). Her father discouraged her from book learning in favor of acculturating her to the agrarian culture of Kentucky. In spite of the fact that hooks’ father insisted that it was “a waste of time to buy books for a child,” she transcended her working-class background to become a beacon in the educational, feminist and political arenas (1996). In the case of both Cannon and hooks, the derision from men served as a catalyst to move them beyond the low expectations for Black women.

### *Formal Schooling*

Education is not monolithic, especially for Black girls and women. That children are educated in a variety of settings reinscribes the uniqueness of experiences for Black girls (Irvine, 2004; Persell, 1977). Hilliard (1995) defined schooling as “the common content, skills, attitudes and understandings required by the larger society” (p. 11). Schooling literature abounds with examples of the trials, tears, and triumphs of Black children, but when I narrow the subject of this review of literature to Black girls, I find Black girls’ educational stories relegated to the footnotes. Even in books written by Black women who discuss race and gender issues in schools, I find few mentions of Black girls in the indices.

In spite of the paucity of research, theory, and narratives specifically regarding the schooling of Black girls, some of the few selections that mention this subject portray school as a place of sustenance and discovery, a place where girls felt safe, supported and challenged to excel (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994; Siddle Walker, 1996). “School was my place of affirmation” said Katie Cannon (1997, p. 35). Johnson-Bailey (2002) wrote, “My most pleasant memories are of being a favored child in the school setting...In retrospect, it is obvious that part of my status

was conferred because of my light skin and long hair” (p. 91). Additionally, these studies show Black girls and women who used brains and bravada to navigate school settings. Before, during, and after desegregation, Black girls fortunate enough to go to school were educated to become teachers, while Black males were usually trained in a trade or worked the land (Siddle-Walker, 1996). Depending upon their family social status and economic situation, young Black girls and women were often destined either to lives as domestic workers in white households where neither their gender nor their race was valued, or they pursued a career as a teacher (Alexander, 1994; Siddle-Walker, 1994). Becoming a teacher was considered a privilege because teaching was a revered and respected profession. Teachers, like preachers, were called, and teachers “believed that it was a special Godly anointing or sacred calling” (Irvine, 2002, p.144). As desegregation and Jim Crow faded, the school dynamics for Black girls and women changed. Currently, characterizations of Black female students are stratified and often negative (Delpit, 2003; Grant, 1992; Henry, 1998). These descriptors include “conduits of information,” “social negotiator,” “being at risk in the classroom,” and “invisible” (Henry, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

*Elementary School.* Linda Grant (1992) conducted a major study often cited for its intentional look at Black girls’ schooling experiences. Grant’s ethnographic inquiry of first grade Black girls reveals they were often ignored and tracked to lower reading and math groups. Grant conducted her study in a Midwestern school district where she included six teachers, three Black and three white. With one exception, all of the teachers had taught for at least five years in their districts. Grant conducted observations in the six classrooms for 20-30 hours. Her research consistently showed that although young Black girls possessed the capacity to excel, the lack of encouragement and rewards for academic excellence impeded the social, emotional, and academic progress of many of the young Black girls she studied. Because the girls in this study

were often shunned by both Black and white teachers, the girls lacked agency prompting either stereotypical behaviors or the rendering of them as invisible. Grant also noted that on the occasions when Black girls were acknowledged by teachers, the incidents were “unrelated to academics” (p. 105).

While Grant’s study offers a critical outsider’s view of Black girls’ experiences, it is limited because the researcher did not actually interview Black girls or address their representation. Grant did not ask questions like: was there engagement in a culturally relevant curriculum; were role models presented in the school setting; was the introduction of education practices congruent to Black children’s overall development considered; and, were teachers engaged in culturally relevant pedagogy. I question whether misbehaving or acts of resistance were a result of the lack of self-love (hooks, 2001), lack of and need for teachers of color who are working for change in their schools and communities (Michie, 2005), or lack of a clear message of their worth (Delpit, 1995).

In 1986, another scholar examined the ways Black children’s schooling is impacted by teacher attitudes and interactions (Irvine, 1986). Irvine cited the correlation between race and gender as a critical intersection for looking at teacher-student interactions. Her study, conducted in a large, metropolitan city used three observers: two females and one male, with one white female. The teachers in the study were white females. Irvine’s study was guided by research questions designed to gauge positive and negative feedback, frequency of response, and the quantity and quality of teacher feedback. Like Grant (1992), Irvine found Black females were consistently ignored or invisible in their public response opportunities as well as interactions throughout their elementary years, both upper and lower. Irvine determined that “the educational gains of Black

Americans are being eroded steadily at every level of schooling—from [cradle] elementary education to higher education” (p. xiv).

Unlike Grant, Irvine encapsulates the schooling experiences of Black children. Irvine used the term, “cultural synchronization” to describe a viable way for positive schooling experiences. Similarly Delpit (2002) and Ladson-Billings (1994) urged institutions to look at cultural capacity to supplant traditional modes of teaching Black children. Irvine broached teacher expectations, as well. Her findings indicated study participants based their expectation of a child’s performance on race and gender. Indeed Irvine’s call is needed. Though the study was conducted in 1986, many challenges are present today. Irvine tells us that by middle school, Black girls and white girls are socialized in classrooms for traditional “female behaviors.” Irvine explained that not only does this dismantle the agency of Black girls; it roots itself in a history of race and gender oppression.

Delpit (1995) addresses issues of culture and caring when she writes of the charge imbued upon teachers who teach other people’s children. Delpit, as well as Valenzuela, (1999) acknowledges the ethic of caring that must exist in order to help children of color become comfortable in their academic setting. Delpit explains how tenuous the capacity for attaining agency is in Black children enrolled in middle school settings. She maintains that the need to reach into a child’s cultural background is a vital component to unleashing the child’s capacities for navigating social and academic environments. The contributors to her edited volume *The Skin That We Speak* (2002) call to support Black children’s representation: language, identity, social location and skin color. Dowdy, a contributor shared that “I had the dignity of shaping my world as I saw it and the ability to name the world in the way that I experienced it” (p.11).

Similar to the children she studies, Delpit’s own daughter experienced doubts regarding her beauty and culture. When Delpit realized her daughter was having problems, she moved her

mid-year from a predominantly white private school where issues related to isolation and exclusion occurred, to a primarily Black charter school. Delpit noticed a difference in her daughter's ability to navigate life and a renewed capacity for achieving academically.

Educational researchers and theorists like Irvine, Grant, and Delpit hold a belief in the efficacy of education (Mullings, 1997). Their goals are laudable and insightful. Black girls at their earliest levels of schooling onward are on a journey that looks quite different from other girls, and from boys—both Black and white. Educators have decried the lack of culturally congruent curriculums, pedagogical styles, and lack of teacher expectation for the differences in teacher-student interactions. What we are also learning is the “social” as well as the “racial and cultural” issues increase as Black girls' transition to middle school years (Carroll, 1997, p. 143).

*Middle School and High School.* Collateral to the works mentioned above is a biographical research project conducted years after Grant's (1982) work—with different views and sensibilities. Carroll (1997) presents narratives crafted from the realities of young Black girls living in 12 cities across America. This project distinctly addresses the schooling and lived experiences of young Black girls, between the ages of 11 and 20. The girls have stratified class locations. Carroll's access and inquiry resulted in 15 stories out of 50 participants' interviews, as participants shared their experiences as young Black girls in relation to school and their communities/homes. Carroll's participants shared issues relative to doing double time as Black and female in the millennium. Bombarded with multimedia, patriarchy and elitism, the findings revealed, Black girls are speaking out. Nearly all of the girls interviewed expressed concern regarding either their attitudes towards school or the way that teachers and society perceived them as “not knowing the answers” or as “invisible.” The participants discussed widely their perceptions of teachers' attitudes; citing ways teachers decreased their opportunities for

participation, academically and socially. As well, the participants discussed implied and stated messages about being Black and female. These messages impacted the interactions between themselves and peers, teachers, and family.

Carroll (1997) extends Grant's (1982) discussion and interactions as she bonds with participants. Carroll, who is biracial, used bonding as segues to conversations. She assured the girls their words would be the words she wrote up, not her own. Carroll noted, "Our words talk miles of love and struggle" (p.15). Indeed the study cannot measure the angst Black girls have regarding both their positionality as Black and female, but does shed light on ways Black girls "see themselves in the world" (p. 67).

Another study, a mixed methods inquiry into the lives of adolescent Black girls in "disadvantaged" urban communities, shows the significance of peering into the lives of and collaborating with young Black girls. Stevens' (2002) biographic narratives were drawn from empirical studies using open-ended questionnaires as well as other data sources, especially interviews. Stevens used an ecological framework attending to ways persons, process and social context interplay in the lives of young Black girls.

Stevens reported data from participants from two studies, one with 17-19 year olds, both pregnant and non pregnant, the others 11-14 years old (middle school aged), lived in a major urban setting. The middle schoolers engaged in audiotaped group intervention sessions, which served as data. Stevens demonstrated disparaging and disproportionate reports of Black girls' brilliance and smarts' being suppressed because of ignorance on the part of the teaching and home community. Like Irvine (1986) and Carroll (1997), Stevens found schools devalued Black girls. Consequently, while girls were devalued by school, they were often intimidated in their neighborhoods. Stevens' work broadens the lens on Black girls in lower economic situations as

she looks at the intersections of class, gender and ethnicity. Her powerful data and lack of other work similar to hers, strengthens the call for more works related to the experiences of Black girls and women.

While this literature reinforces the impact of societal and educational institutions challenges on Black girls and women in urban settings across the country, some young Black girls' academic pursuits remain suppressed in light of getting "assistance" in order to contribute to households or because education is seen as something others do (Sapphire, 1996; Stevens, 2002). Sapphire, an activist and writer, introduces Clareece "Precious" Jones as a Black girl with complex issues. *Push* allows readers to consider societal norms for beauty, privilege, and higher education. Precious' self-perceptions work against a backdrop of society that mirrors her and deflects her world. Precious is illiterate, poor and overweight, literally and figuratively. Yet Precious fights the school system that gave her permission to fail by enrolling in a GED program. *Push* emphasizes the blurred line between girlhood and adult female agency. While Sapphire's work is fiction, her honest writing represents a call for stories chronicling lives of Black girls and women.

Siddle-Walker's (1996) historical ethnographic study documents ways home, school, and community influenced the educational attainment of Black girls before the days of desegregation. Her study was conducted in her rural hometown of Yanceyville, North Carolina and with students who formerly attended Caswell Training School. The students lived in the apartheid south. The rural community's push against the daily oppressive struggles nonetheless educated and nurtured its children. The young women of the community were pushed harder academically than males, knowing their actions would determine their lot in life. Black townspeople shared a stake in the highest potential of a child. As a result, their narratives demonstrate ways lives were socially constructed.

The Black girls in these works encounter and navigate challenging events related to schooling and social experiences. The works point to a fervent need to include the lived experiences of young black girls in our research agendas (Henry, 1998). Our quest for understanding the devaluation and disenfranchisement of Black girls is sporadic as indicated by the dotted dates of the listed studies. While Siddle-Walker clearly sees the social context of community as salient for the agency of Black girls, the historical significance of community should not be lost on the reader. However, if our Black girls are not safe from sexual harassment, violence and other environmental factors, more must be done to understand their unique location and propel them to greater academic and social successes (Stevens, 2002).

*Undergraduate and Graduate school.* The literature reveals school as a place of mistrust and misunderstanding for the Black student, especially Black girls as they were often viewed by society—the bottom of the societal rung. Yet there are Black girls and women thriving and surviving in classrooms across the country. In her study of the graduate life of her participants, Priya Kapoor (1999), an Indian feminist scholar, chose to present “an unlauded version of their history—in their own words. I refer to the women as narrators for this reason” (p. 55). Kapoor conducted a phenomenological study of three Black female graduates—co-researcher’s—in their twenties at a majority white institution on the west coast. She sought to understand how they experienced graduate life under the constructs of daily living and whether common themes existed for this population of participants. Phenomenology highlights its significance as an alternate to narrative as method while constructing unstructured interviews like Johnson-Bailey and Etter-Lewis.

Another study was conducted by Johnson-Bailey, a feminist researcher. Johnson-Bailey uses an ethnographic study for its use as a sociocultural analysis tool. As a feminist researcher she was in search of data related to the schooling experiences of Black reentry women, ages 34-54. Black

feminist thought is the theoretical framework guiding the extrapolation of narratives. Her interviews conducted with Black women from community colleges and universities in the southeast were over two and one-half hours in duration. Unique to her study is her own educational narrative—bringing to bear her commonalities and divergences with her participants. (see Lanehart, 2002; Washington, 2006). Johnson-Bailey accorded significance to issues regarding color and hair politics and experiencing simultaneity of oppression (see Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994; Springer, 1999, 2002). Likewise, she highlights Alexander's (1988) principal identifiers of saliency used to interpret the spoken word (hesitancy, primacy, omission, etc., (see Chapter 3). Johnson-Bailey explored themes in the educational narratives revealing Black women's educational narratives are testimony to their inner strength (Cannon, 1997, Peterson, 1992).

Johnson-Bailey particularly noted that regardless of the socioeconomic station of the participant, a desire to return to school was evidenced. Many of the participants had familial responsibilities which tended to delay their return to school. However, the study pointed out that 1) Black women were resourceful and resilient, 2) Black women were determined to get an advanced degree at whatever cost to them personally, 3) Black women withstood simultaneous oppressions in their quest for fulfillment of their goals and 4) Black women sought help through formal and informal mentoring systems. Johnson-Bailey's study is useful as it looks at why Black women reenter community colleges, four year institutions, and one graduate level participant. *Ease on Down the Road* will look at the early schooling and life experiences that shed light on the critical incidents and life lessons contributing to specific Black women's decisions for the pursuit of doctorates. Like Johnson-Bailey, I am concerned with representation of participants in terms of their cultural context. My concern resonates with Johnson-Bailey's regarding the power dynamics that surface from being a participant researcher.

In a study conducted by Etter-Lewis (1993), a sociolinguist, the oral accounts of schooling and life experiences of a group of older Black women were explored. In honor of the oral traditions in Africanist cultures and a framework relative to the culture, Etter-Lewis reproduces her participants' experiences through a narrative research study. She interviewed over 80 women in various professions. Interviews were conducted primarily in participants' homes. Participants' ages ranged from 61-101. The nine "most intriguing" narratives presented in her work are partially edited, 45-minute segments of whole narratives. Her study provides insight into construction and deconstruction of their shared stories, rendering them as autobiographies. Etter-Lewis noted, "It is important to identify the extratextual meaning of narrative strategies which frequently divulge more than the words on the page" (p. 160). Her participants shared stories that trouble the dynamics of stories involving Black women—race, class, color and gender. The participants' stories demonstrated a determination to withstand and endure, and "to break with tradition and make your own place in the world" (p. 112). Etter-Lewis compels us as we make sense of and "understand their reasons for attending college," considering the factors weighing against them: classism, racism, sexism (p.66). Eliciting narratives encouraged orality. The developments of relationships through dialogic and interpersonal interviews served as a dynamic segue to capture rich experiences (Carroll, 1997; Stevens, 2002). Black women learned early their expectations regarding racial uplift, educational excellence, and fighting oppression (Alexander, 1994; Etter-Lewis, 1994; Fordham, 2002; Siddle-Walker, 1999).

*Community Strongholds, Cornerstones, and Institutions*

Decidedly, the church is a stronghold in Black communities (Cannon, 1997, Grant, 1993; Mullings, 1997). Historically, Black churches were invisible during slavery (Cannon, 1997). Slaves were not allowed to worship, yet they found ways to fellowship. However secret, the Black church today filled with Africanist traditions (an honor to our forefather and mothers), allegoric references,

call and response, and music that kneads the soul, *so as a soul needs*, is here to stay—no longer secret. Some theologians and scholars paint the Black church as a place where we became rooted in our culture (Grant, 1993; Mullings, 1997). Many Black girls and women cite church as an integral part of their lived experiences. Participants in the various studies mentioned a father, a sibling, or relative in the capacity as minister, preacher or evangelist. They also noted church contributed simultaneously to their spiritual and overall development. It was in church and/or vacation bible school where many of us learned to: sing with a voice bigger than our bodies could contain, shout, and sway; talk and deliberate; speak extemporaneously, share Easter and Christmas scriptures; huddle in solemn resignation in the choir room before swaying down the aisle; and revere the importance of the spoken word, protocol and decorum—church is roots.

Church was where many Black women learned about community and the Black experience, but church was not without its messages for Black girls and women (Grant, 1993; Mullings, 1997). There were clear messages of women barred from the pulpit, while the pews overflowed with us. Mullings wrote, “In the African American churches, though women often constitute the bulk of the congregation, the ministry is the vehicle of social mobility for men” (p. 144). Church is a place where women’s visibility is questionable. Grant (1993) notes women are invisible because the “theological scholarship” is imbued with a patriarchal system (p. 323). The treatment of women varies from church to church; however, literature reveals “prejudices Black ministers have against women, and especially women in the ministry” (p.328). The struggle by womanist theologians and others to dismantle stereotypes and oppressive practices serves as a transformative model for Black girls and women.

The influence of church is readily seen in some study titles. These titles borrow from the rich, spiritual and communal capital of the respective author: Johnson-Bailey’s *Making a Way* (2002), Etter-Lewis’s, *My Soul is My Own* (1993), and *I’ve Known Rivers* (Lawrence-Lightfoot,

1994). Further, several participants in *My Soul is My Own* and *I've Known Rivers* are within the same generation, share tensions and challenges regarding cultural roots and assimilation, and are “firsts” in many regards. This critical observation opens doors to the analysis of *Ease on Down*. Will I find these same tensions and challenges for Black women of different generations? Will my participants’ data stories reveal ways we can understand Black girls/women’s schooling stories?

Probably one of the best known African American cornerstones is Jack and Jill of America (Graham, 1999). This organization exists in all regions of the United States. Founded in 1938 by mothers of Black children between the ages of two and nineteen, it has as its primary focus social interactions for Black children. Children straddling the worlds of white suburbia and/or private schools—and the need for culturally grounded activities—are supported through this effort. According to its by-laws of 1946 the object of Jack and Jill was “to create a medium of contact for children and to provide a constructive educational, recreational, and social program for children and their parents” ([http://www.jack-and-jill.org/home\\_history.htm](http://www.jack-and-jill.org/home_history.htm)). Although Jack and Jill remains a cornerstone in some Black communities, historically its preoccupation with color and class discouraged many darker or working class Black girls from participating. Interestingly, their current mission adds cultural, civic and service programs as thrusts while their website clearly demonstrates distinct change in hues at the helm. A few studies mention the influences of “formal groups like Jack and Jill or informal networks” (Higginbotham, 2001, p. 124; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

If Jack and Jill of America stands for some as a cornerstone, then certainly the Girls Scouts of the USA is an institution in African American communities. The Girl Scouts of the USA serves girls ages five to seventeen and operates from community and housing centers, churches and schools. Its purpose is to “inspire, challenge, and empower girls everywhere” ([http://www.girlscouts.org/who\\_we\\_are/facts/](http://www.girlscouts.org/who_we_are/facts/)). Its global outreach reduces the tensions of class and

color. According to the website, 50 million girls' involvement indicates many girls and women of color are in that number. I, too, was a Girl Scout—from Brownie onward.

Other community influences such as performing arts centers (Elma Lewis Performing Arts), Black sororities (Giddings, 1988), rites of passage, and mentoring programs increasingly meet the relevant social needs of Black girls. Schools are designed to develop children for participation in the general society; yet, the complexity of the schooling of Black girls/women affirms the need for these integral organizations.

*Cultural codes, constructs, and contexts*

Etter-Lewis (1993) argued that Black women's lives cannot be determined by a prescribed norm; instead multiple and differing images must be anchored to culturally relevant constructs (see also Tillman, 2002; Vaz, 1997). African American communities and families have multiple communal codes (Edelman, 1999; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Siddle –Walker, 1996). The interpretations of these codes leave many females angst ridden as they tried to look, sound, or act least like a loud, Black girl (Fordham, 1993). According to narrative accounts in the literature of Black women talking about their schooling experiences, parents and teachers urged Black females to stand up right and speak clearly (Fordham, 1996; hooks, 1996). A Black child's representation often meant negotiating the intricate codes of the community: how one carried oneself, wore their hair, dressed, and talked. There were teachers and community members that would not allow you to bring down the race (Sapphire, 1996) or misrepresent your race (hooks, 1996; Johnson-Bailey, 2002). As narratives employ and uncloak language practices, Black women's rich oral traditions are made more visible and honored (Delpit, 1994; Etter-Lewis, 1993; Lanehart, 2002). Couched in the currency of an individual and its community, language offers many constructions. Lanehart (2002) and Delpit (1994) posited that within individuals,

speakers adjust their speech in different contexts, depending on the social messages they want to convey about themselves.

A common thread of women in the professions is that their home, school, and community experiences are punctuated by racism, classism, sexism and colorism. In more than one narrative, a participant's family social status or color contributed to variations of treatment in the classroom. Some were ignored and taunted by classmates, while others dealt with subtle racism and exclusion. Socioeconomic locations did not preclude race, color and status prejudice as factors in the lives of many participants in studies or works reviewed. As a matter of fact, across the literature and studies reviewed stories related to the schooling and/or life experiences of Black girls and women are peppered with issues relative to race, class, gender, and color. In Cannon's life story in Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), she recalled, "Despite the fact that she was the smartest, she could never be valedictorian or salutatorian because she was dark-skinned" (p. 30). Color issues, skin color politics, colorism all point to the same rejection of self-love. The hierarchies of color were everywhere: in reading and math, in grading patterns and in assumptions about intellectual abilities and achievement potential (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 53).

"Our stories are not unique, but I think isolation can make us think they are" (Lanehart, 2002). However, inside of the classroom, stories of isolation and exclusion were commonplace. Carroll (1997) recalled the isolation from her teenage years in school. She wrote, "the only thing about me that they readily accepted was that I was not as dark as most of the girls who hung out at the local speakeasy [or school] in Portsmouth, New Hampshire." More often than not, Black girls were excluded from activities, shunned in social settings and depending upon class and color issues, further isolated. According to Grant's (1992) exploration of schooling experiences

during the 80s with elementary school-aged girls, Carter's (2003) examination of findings related to elementary and adolescent Black girls' schooling, and Fordham (1998) narration of Black high schoolers—most of these girls were often left to their own learning. These scholars offer that the stories are scarce, scattered, and squashed between the revelations that Black girls/women are usually invisible in classrooms; therefore their silence is deafening and only when they become loud, Black girls resisting the order of the instruction are their voices heard. Fordham recalled, "I remember the pervasive, scarcely verbalized message of difference and exclusion—the 'erasure' of my cultural, racial and gendered 'self' from what I read, studied, considered important" (p. 14). While still others cite the — academic not social —aspect of schooling that left Black girls and women on the periphery, their invisibility was in stark contrast to the visibility of white students. Like Delpit's daughter's isolation, Carroll's personal story is rife with isolation experiences. She describes being "perpetually without a date, a good friend to many, a girlfriend to none" (p. 15). From narrator's words to authors' vignettes or full-blown studies, literature on Black girls'/women's schooling experiences captures the stark realities surrounding our schooling and life experiences.

Carroll (1997), Lanehart (2002) and Johnson-Bailey (2002) offer useful lenses for sharing. Many of their findings locate isolation, identity, and inquiry as themes of critical discussion. Why then should Black girls'/women's schooling experiences and/or messages be important? The significance is as the lives of young Black girls are weighted against a norm, they are told: they are not good enough, smart enough, or bright enough or sometimes pretty enough to succeed. Prone to prejudice, paradoxes, and parodies many were and are given "permission to fail" (Ladson-Billings, 1994). That permission could potentially land them

outside of their highest potential. In *Rising Song of Black Women*, Barbara Omolade (1998) remarked,

Black female scholars acknowledge that inside the academy and beyond its walls, that their presence in the academy is unrecognized witness to the blindness of traditional scholarship as well as testimony to their perseverance against racist/sexist schooling. (p.17)

Throughout each narrative or study read in preparation for this research, Omolade's iteration strikes my consciousness. Her words serve as a vibratory stamp on the narratives of many Black women. I could not find the eloquence to say what she shared, for the emotional unearthing of this vision of the academy was greater than my words. However, sitting in the doctoral defenses of two Black women, the "firsts" graduating from my department, I understood where the words rested—deep inside of me, awaiting this moment as testimony. Attending a historically white university in the southeast offered its own challenges inside and outside the classrooms. Yet, these women's remarkable journey beckons other Black women to persevere. Omolade touched the spirit of an inside knowingness that regardless of what others perceives us to be: we are here, despite and in spite of oppressive conditions and tactics that could otherwise render us immobile and invisible.

#### Relationship of Previous Literature to the Current Study

By broaching issues and topics few wanted to address, Black women, returning to or matriculating and teaching in schools/community programs not only broaden their perspectives but transcend the boundaries of their community (Bell-Scott, 1982; hooks, 2002; Siddle Walker, 1998). The studies reported education as *key* for Black women, as participants sought an education regardless of perceived deterrent forces (Cannon, 1997; Etter-Lewis, 1993; Siddle Walker, 1996;

Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Lightfoot-Lawrence, 1994, 1997; Siddle Walker, 1996). There is agreement across the literature regarding Black girls and Black women's schooling and life experiences. To uplift the race by excelling academically and socially; to promote bonds between parents and teachers; to situate language as a barometer of education, class, and cultural identity; to acknowledge educators' multiple mantles; to recognize mother wit as an unspoken and heralded credential; and to understand early their expectations—according to the literature—are the essential dispositions of the schooling and life experiences of Black girls and women (hooks, 1996; Johnson-Bailey, 2002). What is strikingly absent are early schooling narratives that contribute to the sociocultural and sociohistorical discourses of Black women doctoral students in a traditionally white research academy. This study can assist future Black girls and women on sojourns to the thresholds of historically white research universities and lead to further investigation into the educational stories of Black women

Johnson-Bailey, Etter-Lewis, and other scholars highlighted Black women's schooling experiences; yet, there are specific gaps that this interview study sought to fill. The literature on Black women's schooling experiences, specifically their early schooling experience, existed sparingly. The existing literature does not tell us enough of the ways young Black girls negotiated and navigated under the institutions that constructed and constricted their possible selves. This study demonstrates ways we Black women accomplished these acts. From the review of literature I learned that Black girls and women often seemed invisible; yet, in this narrative study we saw examples of participants' acts of agency as early as the second grade.

This study highlighted ways older Black women return to school to pursue a PhD. *Ease on Down the Road* participants did not fit neatly into the "reentry" woman definition. A reentry woman, according to Johnson-Bailey (2002), "generally means a woman who has returned to

college in her thirties. She is often an undergraduate student but could be in graduate school also” (p. 17.) By other definitions reentry women are usually married and have children (p. 39). *Ease on Down the Road* study participants range in age from 26-51—all in pursuit of a doctoral degree. The women in this study are full-time students. All of them have been employed by the university system at some point in their doctoral journey. Although three are married and one has a young child, overall, participants reported that challenges of child care and family commitments were rare during their PhD experience. Mostly the older women expressed the economic exigencies related to their journey. Participants each owned homes in other parts of the state, and for at least a year or more we all lived in graduate housing. Our other financial responsibilities heightened the commitment to our journey; we often finished our programs within four years. Our stories, multilayered and insightful, can inform those considering the pursuit of doctorate degrees.

Work needs to continue in this area, especially in the early grades through high school, as young Black girls become Black women. *Ease on Down the Road* can impress upon schools and teacher education programs ways to discourage pejorative practices. Through professional development, training and conferences, and community outreach, we shared our stories. This added to the literature base in that, from my youngest participants’ data to the eldest, issues of color and class unfold—contentious dialogue in African American communities since slavery.

Another gap that *Ease on Down the Road* filled regarded Black menfolk’s role in shaping our lives. Study participants offered story after story of the courageous ways our menfolk encouraged and supported us. I can continue to ask Black women and girls: In what ways can menfolk contribute meaningfully to the education of young Black girls and women?

This study also highlights the absence of discussion of Black women doing research on one another. With the growing interest in qualitative methods and increasing number of Black women scholars, this narrative-based study can offer insight into ways we conduct and use alternative modes of inquiry.

In addition, this study offers an explication of history that situates our schooling experience across a broad timeline—1960s to 2000s. Interestingly, the impact of historical events and actions on participants regardless of age is potentially useful in demonstrating ways events shaped and informed our lives—academically, socially, culturally and politically. *Ease on Down the Road* provides variations of the impact of events based on participants' geographic, sociocultural and sociopolitical backgrounds.

The issue of considering or attending a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) resulted in provocative data. This study could explicitly engage discussion on the decisions and challenges participants faced as they considered their college goals. This discussion can provide insight to those considering college or those interested in selection of specific type schools.

### Summary

As a participant-researcher, I will continue to write about my experiences and encourage other Black women to share their girlhood stories. We need further investigation into the Black girl and women selfhood. The literature begs the questions: How can my early schooling experience add to the experiences of young Black girls today? In what ways can we, educators, continue to look at the challenging aspects of our racial-gendered-class experiences, which in turn avoids romanticizing? What can be done differently to inform her growth, academically and socially? Are culturally relevant curriculum needed? Are education practices congruent to Black

children's overall development considered? Are teachers engaged in culturally relevant pedagogy?

#### Tin women, in Oz?: Black women researchers

This review of the literature suggests Black women writers use narrative research to understand the lived and educational experiences of Black girls and women (Carroll, 1997; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Lanehart, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994). Carroll's initial introduction to a group of young girls speaks volumes to ways we as black women doing the research can gain access to participants. She met them where they were. She dressed casually and spoke frankly, while stripped of the arcane and staid academic jargon. We have access, though the insider and outsider location is omnipresent. Carroll's discussions assisted in exploring the multiple dimensions and complexities of life for qualitative researchers contemplating who the "other" is. Johnson-Bailey (2002) wrote, "overall, in the academic arena, disenfranchised groups, which include women, women of color, and poor people, are 'othered' in the telling of their stories" (p. 325). Some qualitative methodologists and theorists laud narratives as a "translucent window," (Patton, 2002, p.116), while others saw this same window as filtered (Denzin, 1989). Still others saw narratives as a viable outlet for exchange and reflection (Cole, 1990; Coles, 1986). Black women's narratives extend the dialogue on authoring oneself and emerging as "loud Black girls," no longer silenced or admonished by society. In fact, Black women must tell their stories and move beyond the paradox that may limit their telling.

Tin's metaphorical relational use to *The Wiz* motif signifies the search for the heart of stories. As the tin man searched for heart, tin women, Black women writers and researchers search for the heart of stories. Tin is a "malleable, silvery metallic element used to coat other metals to prevent corrosion" (<http://dictionary.reference.com/>). Tin is not only malleable, but it

preserves. Tin's properties reveal it as one of few metals used to solder other metals together that might not otherwise occur. Tin is to other metals what Black women are to narratives. Tin women present stories requiring special handling, precious and rare; yet, often hardened (coated) or battered from daily social and educational institutional challenges. The role of tin women—soldering research to stories, lives and subjectivities – keeps me hopeful that we can reproduce rich, chronicled stories that illuminate the experiences of Black girls and Black women. The need to present our stories requires a cache of understanding for preserving richness (Etter-Lewis, 1998), insulation from essentializing (James, 2000), weathering the course of publishing houses (hooks, 2004), and dismantling stereotypes (Bell-Scott, 1998; Boyd, 2002). In this research study, as researcher-participant, I provide a level of understanding, a cohesive bond—signaling what occurs when Black women talk to one another. Perhaps if societal and educational institutions understand some of the supporting elements in home, community, and school for these eight women, the tapestry contours comprising educational narratives can provide those supportive experiences and bring more Sistahmates to the Yellow Brick Road.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

*I believe one of the principal ways in which we acquire, hold, and digest information is via narratives.*

*—Toni Morrison, 1993*

If we believe as Dorothy that we can go home, to the heart of the story, to the heart of our experiences, we can become more understanding of the divergent and/or calculated pathways any of our lives take. In this chapter I describe my research design and my role as researcher-participant, the primary setting, participant selection, data sources and collection, and data analysis. I conclude this chapter with discussions regarding the quality dimensions of qualitative research.

This research is guided by the question:

What do Black women doctoral students in a historically white southern research university identify as the life lessons and/or critical incidents within the home, school, and/or community that influenced their decisions, challenges, and successes before their pursuit of doctoral degrees?

#### Design of the Study

Narratives are a road to the lived experience of individuals. Narrative research is a form of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). Narrative inquiry is about how stories are used to create meaning in the lives of the participants, thematically for example, as well as chronologically. Narrative research has been used in education more than in other disciplines (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999). Its use in education is progressive and needed. People

can inform their experiences through telling stories. As narrative inquiry gains prominence, the use of narratives has moved across disciplines and practices and has been positioned alongside other traditional qualitative methodologies. Through narratives, researchers and writers use multiple lenses to access richly textured human experiences (Coles, 1989; Morrison, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1989). These experiences include field notes, journal writing, cultural artifacts or historical memoirs, and other types of texts. Expressing our experiences leads us to produce a narrative that is open to interpretation (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981). A narrative researcher accommodates the story, the teller, the context, and the listener by melding data into a collective narrative (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002).

For many narrative scholars, “experiences happen narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2002; Hankins, 2003). As a result, narratives are the stories that are lived, secreted, stored, storied, told, collected, written, researched, and validated. According to Clandinin and Connelly, narrative is “the best way of representing and understanding experience” (p.18). To illustrate, authors are approaching narratives with perspectives that include: arts-based (Eisner, 1997; Hill, 2005); Black feminist thought (Bell-Scott, 1998); feminist theory (Fine, 1992; Gluck & Patai, 1991); fiction (Wolf, 1992); memoir (hooks, 1996); oral history (Etter-Lewis, 1989; Gluck, 1991), biography (Denzin, 1989); and research into teacher reflexivity (Hankins, 2003). Some Black women writers use narratives primarily for research on Black women/girls and education (Carroll, 1997; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Vaz, 1997). Many Black women authors use narratives that are not for research at all, just to tell a story (Morrison, 2003). Others write narratives having nothing to do with education (Cooper, 2004). In this narrative study, the research focused on multiple narrative interviews and examined what we learn about Black women and education through stories.

### A circle of narratives: Selecting data sources

David Morgan (2005) described selecting data sources as “an intentional [and hopefully purposeful] nature of what we do [qualitative researchers].” In this section I shed light on the selection of participants as I provide an in-depth chronology using narrative and a table format.

*A circle of sisters.* In the fall of 2003 I found my way to the smallest building (or so it seemed) on campus—Women’s Studies. One by one we filed into a room dotted by wooden chairs positioned around an oblong table. As I waited in those quiet moments, umber-colored kaleidoscope faces revealed themselves as narratives. I wondered where we had been until then. Their faces seemingly etched in disbelief or relief seemed to say, “I can’t believe this, a class filled with women of color, mostly.” For our next class we moved to another building to accommodate our size and sat in a circle—until the semester was over. What is poignant is the circle revealed us to ourselves in many ways. As a participant put it, “From the perfume we wore to something as trivial as how we were coiffed, everything is out there, you can’t mask the way you feel. That’s the way we conducted our relationship with each other. Even if it was confrontational. It’s real. We were a circular community.” Sitting with these women (and others since) who I call, “Sistahmates,” a combination of classmates and sistahs, we were and are evolving as a community of women bound.

### *Brown Girl in the Ring: Africanist traditions*

In the Africanist tradition circles and rings have multitextured meanings. Circles and rings deal with a wide range, i.e., drum circles, quilting circles, giving circles, healing circles, prayer circles, sister circles, reading circles and the like. Perhaps best known are the circle dances and ring dances. The period of slavery (forward) saw dance as communicative, spiritual, and sacred. References to circles and rings are found in songs and literary works, *Circles of*

*Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Grewal, 1999); *Within the Circle* (Mitchell, 1994); and *Let the Circle be Unbroken* (Taylor, 1981), to name a few.

*Circle songs.* Songs such as “Little Sally Walker” (Mattox, 1986) and “Little Johnny Brown” (Jenkins, 1971) use body motion and call and response to inspire the ring dancers. In order to understand the critical incidents and life lessons of Black girls and women, I will share one of these types of circle activities. There is a Caribbean childhood ditty, a circle song drawn from an olfactory well, called “Brown Girl in the Ring” (Mattox, 1986). “*There’s a brown girl in the ring, tra-la-la-la-la, brown girl in the ring, tra-la-la-la-and she looks like the sugar in the plum....*” Brown Girl, for me, conjures reminiscences of playgrounds (and classrooms) where girls, particularly Black girls, show solidarity. The girls encircle another girl and she gets to *do* her dance, signal a motion or whatever is in her to do. Nearly every day during my teaching years and in my graduate school daze, the ditty and motions rang in my ears. The song represented my participants and me as we are encircled in a ring, surrounded by the myriad of experiences, lessons, and subjectivities revealing our richness, much like the sugar in the plum with textures as smooth or pocked as the skin of the plum. *Brown Girl*. Two simple words, yet they evoke a number of constructions. Whether “Brown Girl in the Ring” is sung on the playground at recess or reinscribed in a classroom of Black women—Sistahmates—its resonance expresses solidarity as children, as girls, brown girls, and Black women. This study is a major result of that experience—“Brown Girl in the Ring.”

*Chronology of the selection process*

During the 2002-2003 school year I began thinking more about Black women's schooling and life histories. I searched for Black women doctoral students who were enrolled in a specific historically white southern research university. The following e-mails, vignettes, and narratives are added to this section to offer a clearer picture of not only the chronology of the selection process, but its nuances. Over the next couple of months, I e-mailed the sistahmates regarding the research plan. The e-mails were generated from sistahmates after discussing my interest in conducting research on Black female doctoral students.

The following is a chronology of the selection process, during the spring 2003 semester. I sent an e-mail to sistahmates to remind them of the research and my intended direction.

The research [referring to a Black woman professor's] also offers a strong segue to a discussion that I would like to have with you all regarding my shift in research focus...In an effort to tackle how young Black girls' early schooling experiences (sociolinguistic & sociocultural dimensions of that experiences) I found a focus that I cannot let go. I want to study Black graduate females (PhD) at \_\_\_ here and now. I am particularly interested in those in \_\_\_\_\_ class as participants; though I know I will engage more at various junctures. I would like your feedback on whether you would want to participate in my study. This will be my dissertation and I want you to join me in another phase of our journey. This study has so many places to go and can inform at many levels. I am working on the consent agreement now. Pls. respond to me privately with your thoughts or comments.

Date: Tues, 14 Aug 2003

As summer breezes by I wondered who would like to jump start the semester by getting together either for lunch Tues. or dinner Tues eve? So, I'm putting it out there, let me hear from you...Also, many of you shared that you would participate in a pilot study for my work with black, female doctoral students, I need to know where you are with that now as I move forward as well...

At the time of the August dinner gathering we agreed collectively to create time and protected space for a continuance of conversations from our classroom experiences. We also agreed that we would consciously develop connections and provide avenues for meeting with more Black doctoral women. Many wrote me over the course of the week expressing and affirming their interest and support of the sistahmates gathering and research project. The evening before our next gathering in September 2003, our listserv received an inquiry from a sistahmate asking whether she could bring another a new sistah along. No one responded to the e-mail; the silence was—heavy. Based on what we agreed to do during our August gathering, I responded:

Date: Tue, 30 Sep 2003 15:00:35 -0400

On short notice and with no feedback/discussion of inviting others tonight, I hesitate to speak for the whole group. I know that we have talked about planning a gathering to invite sistahs outside of Sistahmates, since our intent is to build relationships with other black female graduate students, pls. let your friend know that we look forward to meeting her at that time.

My e-mail response, coupled with discussions on a September evening, seemingly altered our community building. During the gathering, there were seven of us; and we talked

about issues of inclusion and exclusion. One likened the exclusion of others to a sorority or secret society. Another spoke of our distinct class differences and whether we could really talk as we said we could. The reluctance of some was apparent. Others said nothing of the original agreement. Only two reminded us that we wanted the safe space. I was anxious that anyone would feel that we would exclude rather than include other sisters. I felt as if I landed in an abyss and perhaps missed something. I was at once naïve and vulnerable. The next day I received one lone e-mail—generally an uncommon occurrence after a gathering.

Since many responded favorably to the *official* invitation (see Appendix A), their silence spoke volumes. I continued sending e-mail seeking participation solely for the research project (see Appendix B); while simultaneously inviting dialogue on issues of exclusion and inclusion. Ultimately the silence of original consenters and others seeking respite from sharing life experiences spoke. While these dynamics significantly changed, an interest in the study beyond the sistahmates grew. These women were directed to me either from colleagues or personal interactions usually in class or a university related project.

The delicate balance between conducting research *and* building a community of sisters remains tenuous. In Chapter 1, I shared a comment regarding community, yet, those sentiments were not shared by all. One current participant commented that community is “A shared idea, bought into by folks committed to its survival; we are not a community [Sistahmates].” However, the impetus for building community where few faces resembled ours is non-negotiable. There are some initial Sistahmates who ceased to participate in future gatherings; their reasons are unknown. Ultimately, Sistahmates has developed into an informal support network that meets socially at least twice a semester. Sistahmates, has grown to over 50 Black

women doctoral students at the same university. Sistahs participate on its listserv and attend social gatherings.

### Participants

The participants in this study represent a particular group of Black women. They are enrolled full-time, have completed their comprehensive examinations or prospectus (except one), pursuing a doctorate, and represent various disciplines and departments within the university. From the women I have contacted and interviewed, seven are actively participating. One participant dropped out after the pilot although her pilot data remain an integral part of the study. The decision to remain at seven was guided by the level of interest in study topic, rapport between researcher and participant, and time commitment.

The participants represent stratified geographic, socioeconomic, marital, disciplinary, and religious locations (see chart, Chapter 4). They hail from Beantown to the bayou to the burgeoning Midwest and below the Mason Dixon line. From the “*gown*” side of town and gown communities to “making ends meet” the socioeconomic status varies during their early schooling years. Most participants grew up in a two-parent household. All eight women attended (or currently attend) Black churches. Three attended all-Black Catholic schools and another attended a Seventh-day Adventist school in middle school. Four are either married or live with partners. Six participants are in the College of Education, and two are in other disciplines. Of the eight, three are over 40; two under 30 and the rest are in their thirties. I designed the pilot study for a small sample. Including the researcher, only three pilot study participants, original Sistahmates, were selected based upon their initial interest in the study. Based on referrals from colleagues or personal interactions five participants joined the study since its pilot. The participants

interviewed range in age from 26 to 51. Participants' demographic information and summarized narratives appear in Chapter 4.

*Self study-researcher-participant*

This study design included the researcher as a self-study participant and as the primary instrument of analysis (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). I acknowledge the multiple dynamics of this role. It is an unsettling role at times. I often felt caught between the longing to build community and the need to do solid research. As a participant-researcher I remind myself of the work to do on the direction of not only the study, but myself, as well. Each subjective location reveals both divergent and convergent positions. For instance, I self-define as Black, woman, educator, learner, homegirl, godmother, and *Suzy Snowflake*. Within these descriptors, *Suzy Snowflake* and homegirl show divergence in my subjectivity. I also have adopted Alice Walker's (1983) descriptions of womanists, women who are "outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful" (p. xi). In addition my subjectivity reflects places and spaces where I live and work because I am a Black woman living among many worlds. Consequently, my subjective location as homegirl transcends familial bonds and encompasses my academic, professional, and personal spheres.

I consulted both a dictionary and Smith's (1983) fertile work, *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, for a definition of homegirl. The dictionary's definition of homegirls as "a fellow female member of a youth gang" ([www. dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)) reflects how Black women are culturally and socially cast in a negative way. On the other hand, Barbara Smith's description of homegirls as, "The girls from the neighborhood and from the block, the girls we grew up with" (Smith, 1983, p. xxiv) resonates with me. Homegirl further signifies a space of my life where my Black women peers and I share commonalities in terms of beliefs, experiences, history, and tradition (Cai, 2002). Finally,

homegirl represents the honoring and respecting of the *mélange* of Black people—from the sister on the street to the Sister in the church.

Understanding locations and truths regarding subjectivities is equally critical (Peshkin, 1988). That we can find and examine ourselves in our work is useful as a barometer for shaping our lives, peering at our journeys, and capturing our transitions. I cannot look at the lives of other Black females without decreasing the distance between my work and myself (Violet Jones, personal communication, June 15, 2004). I cannot afford the distance, because the decision to write about our lives is a tough one that demands critical consideration. Consequently, my positionality as a doctoral student positions me closely with participants in this study and offers me the chance to explore the life lessons and influences contributing to my decision and the decisions of my Black women peers to pursue a doctoral program in a historically white southern research university.

Walker's (2000) *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* resonates with me as I desire to go forward in search of schooling and life stories related to my participants—Black women doctoral students. Framing the work within the constructs of Africanist cultural roots and traditions while simultaneously exposing issues relative to resistance, social justice, equity and humanity is the artful crafting of a womanist. As a womanist researcher, using qualitative methods, I used a more conversational style. I participated by responding to direct questions asked of me. At various junctures there were pauses, hesitations, gesturing and language driving the ebb and flow of the interviews. Oftentimes, our sister moments resulted from shared casings, casings holding the wells of tears, broken hearts, hurtful memories, spiritual pining—and even resplendent laughter. I tapped gingerly into these wells.

I wrestled often with the loud, Black girl wanting to resist the decorum of the study by tossing the tools of the academy. I thought often of Audre Lorde's master metaphor, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (1979). That the metaphor implicitly troubles assumptions about power indeed forced me to search for ways to conduct research on Black women that informs readers outside of our zone of familiarity, namely those in power as oppressors. Furthermore, a conscious effort to present voice and context without oppressing participants challenged me as a Black woman doing research on Black women. I want this work to expressly enact change; change in oppressors' perception, as well as change in ways readers contextualize the issues for these specific Black women's lives. The master metaphor does not lend itself necessarily to change. As a womanist researcher I chronicle interactions and changes of specific Black women on a journey in ways that honor their experiences, perceptions and locations as lifelong learners. I asked participants questions related to their schooling and lived experiences, including challenges, successes, and decisions before the pursuit of a doctoral degree. A womanist perspective assisted me in recognizing the "lack of uniformity of experience among African American women," (Collins, p. 67).

### Data Collection Methods

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

I conducted in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews, collected demographic profile information, solicited written responses regarding member checks and additional participant information, and generated field notes. Fourteen interviews lasted from 60 – 90 minutes using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. All participants selected or created their pseudonyms during the first interview.

*The interview guide.* Using an open-ended interview guide (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), I explored questions related to general life questions and moved toward more specific explorations of participants' schooling journeys (see Appendix F). I limited my notetaking during interviews. The dialogic and collaborative format prevented me from doing much more than jottings. I was cautiously aware of the power dynamics and wanted to "decrease the distance" between us. Accordingly, I was validating participants' narrative tradition and communal and cultural structure (Collins, 1990).

*The setting.*

*College Town Milieu.* The "verbal snapshots" (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 1997, p. 100) are as significant as the narratives rendered by study participants. Verbal snapshots give the reader a descriptive rendering related to the setting. Space is rendered as text—text that never fully captures the essence of a given space. Each space is telling. In these spaces, inside a small, southeastern college town and in spaces that border this town, I conducted interviews with my participants. The locations varied widely with no setting privileged over another. These spaces are commingled, yet stratified, with pockets of poverty as well as poshness that speak to the irony that is at once southern pride and a renaissance of non-traditional and often suppressed ethnicities, epistemologies, and sexualities. It is paradoxically bohemian and genteel.

*The Undergraduate Study Center.* Detailed with architectural finesse, the Undergraduate Study Center is the newest edifice on campus. The center is teeming with Georgian and Neoclassic architecture; the influence of Greek and Roman designs abounds. Ornate keystones adorn the windows and are complemented by landscaping that has been awarded recognition on the national level. One enters a massive foyer that extends into the rest of the building and to the other floors by marble stairs. The foyer contains no seating area, not even a ledge. The sterile,

granite, massive space forbade congeniality, conversation, and convening. Similarly, it discouraged frolicking or loitering. Occasionally, the ebb and flow of students would slink and slither like snakes heading appointed destinations. The study/meeting rooms are small and simply decorated with bright sunlight pouring through the lone 12-paned window. Wooden tables and chairs dot the room, and along with the olive-drab green garbage receptacle near the door, give the room an “old-school” ambience.

*Ellington Center.* Across campus in an unassuming building there is a small conference room shaped like an ice scraper, handle and all. This room shuts out everyday office activities with a wooden door embedded with fifteen glass panes. On the walls opposite the door, a huge state map and a white eraser board remind visitors of the function of the room. A small oblong wooden conference table with a cherry finish is flanked by four chairs, upholstered in fine damask of gold, ecru, and ebony. Coasters sit on the table. After I entered, I placed my water bottle on one of the coasters.

*The Graduate Assistant’s Office.* “Big Brother” can easily overlook a graduate assistant office. It is easy to monitor aberrant graduate activities because the square footage is only adequate for a storage room or broom closet, it is that small. One graduate assistant’s office is windowless with a wooden door adorned with a homemade nameplate and sunflower borders. Below the nameplate a picture depicts a small Black girl peering around a corner at menfolk playing cards. She is holding a sunflower sticker. Once inside a wobbly wooden armchair gives any visitor an uninviting place to perch or sends the visitor on a quest for sturdier seating. Two heavy wooden desks that probably were in vogue for a “real” professor years ago and have now been relegated to the “wannabes” abut a wall occupied by a green chalkboard that testifies to older days in this space. A computer sits atop one desk. A figurine of a Black girl child with

schoolbooks in tow, a twine-like apple with a checkered ribbon of red, black and green, along with many books, keeps the computer company. Leftovers from a previous resident--an unused envelope, a conference name tag, and a pencil--occupy the second desk. The space attempts to invite with low lights, scented oils, and greenery; however, yellowing concrete walls, battered wooden shelving, and a tan metal file cabinet belie the permanence of this space for its occupants.

*Athletic center.* I approached the building from the back right side, along a sidewalk between the building and a curving campus street. On this side of the building I glimpsed into windows nestled inside of tall, maroon finished metal doors with no exposed handles. For a while the sidewalk followed horizontal indentations conjuring childhood reminiscences of “step on a crack and break your mama’s back” and seemed to fade into a widening walkway in the front of the building. Low, precision-sheared hedges stretch across and flank the entrance. Flower beds of brilliant purples, yellows, and reds border the walkway. The entrance boasts benches, bike racks, and bustling bodies. The building, a state of the art facility, is crafted with metal doors, bright new brick, and sleek chrome and metal Modern architectural design. The air-conditioned lobby of the center is dotted by café style chairs and tables. Elongated ceiling to floor windows allow one to peer into or out of the main workout room. The lobby is commandeered by no less than four university students ushering others through turnstiles where members of the fitness center slide their ID cards through the slot, as if they were entering a top secret part of the Pentagon or a laboratory at the Centers for Disease Control. In the equipment shop located just inside the ID checkpoint, members may rent or buy anything from towels to toothbrushes, from canoes to kayaks. Members may also purchase equipment such as racquetball gloves and shuttlecocks or convenience items such as soaps. To the right of their service desk is

a hallway. There is a supply room where one may check out any number of athletic items. The hallway unveils the Athletic Center offices and private workout rooms for those with the resources to hire a personal trainer.

Classrooms are located on a lower floor. The classrooms mirror each other in size, while the function of each room varies. In this particular room there are four rows of seating and a conference-like table in the front. The room is lit by a sliver of sunlight from one window; contrasting with the darkness of the room. A blackboard with stick figures seemingly engaged in a play rest at eye-level at the front of the room. An indoor track above the basketball court allows a peek at tight and loose bodies. Opposite the main circuit training room, members can ride stationary bicycles, walk on treadmills, or mount the electric stairclimber while facing the Olympic and diving pools through a wall of glass that gives visual access to the two lower floors where the pools are located. Here, one can observe master swimmers and university varsity swim team members practicing their dives and strokes early in the day. Then there is the wide pool for casual swimmers; but early in the day competitive swimmers with their space-aged eye protection and their Speedos occupy both pools.

This facility also houses a rock climbing wall on one of the lower floors where if members pass this area at the right time, they see young and old men and women with their mountain gear climbing this wall as if it were Mount Everest. On another lower level are huge locker rooms for both women and men, as well as rooms for aerobics, yoga, and Tai Chi classes. There are also classrooms and offices for professors and graduate assistants who teach in the building.

*Off campus*

*A Participant's Home.* Meetings off campus invariably included food. In a participant's home, magnolias—silk, glass, and ceramic—explode and occupy spaces in the apartment. African artifacts and textiles beg the visitor to observe and caress them. On a low coffee table bulky books, thin books, and odd shaped books encourage leafing through. In a niche with a bow window her makeshift office holds books, a computer, and notebooks sized and categorized by function. Her apartment's inviting appeal heightens with breakfast aromas greeting my nose, a nose chilled by a crisp February morning. We shared a meal of grits, turkey bacon, biscuits and homemade fig preserves. On a small round dining table we ate and chatted while the recorder rested between the salt and pepper shakers.

*The Eatery.* For another, we met at an eatery located within the university town; we sat outdoors at a "quiet" table. However, the eatery known for its delicatessen foods sits on a busy corner where we watched cars and listened to each other amid the lull of an adjacent water feature. Across the intersection an elementary school undergoes demolition while the newer, larger school on an adjoining lot receives finishing touches to its modern building. The adjacent corner boasts boutiques and shops catering to customers seeking cuisine, cutlery, or couture.

*The Farm.* One participant led me literally down the long and winding road in efforts to meet with her. In anachronistic form common to newly middle-classed Black people who have claimed the land their ancestors slaved on, she occupied a space on a five acre minimum subdivision called "River Plantation." I had a hard time finding this participant's "plantation" because it is obscured in the way that many subdivisions whose occupants do not want to attract attention garnish the entrances to their high-end homesteads. The house, a red brick ranch house sits on seven-acres of property amid Oak trees older than my grandmother's generation,

American Elms with their weeping branches, and Sycamores with exfoliating bark. When I finally arrive at the home, I am tricked by another home that abuts the street, in the typical fashion of current subdivisions. I turn into a mysterious path—like Dorothy’s Yellow Brick Road, a gravel driveway easily half the length of a football field. I trust that I will meet my friend who is more interested in showing me how she propagated fennel from a grocery store bulb and how she learned to grow hyssop like they did in older days than she is in giving me an interview. I leave with as much lemongrass, rosemary seedlings, and wild amaryllis as I do with information about my participant’s life in the wild where she and her spouse live what I call an “alterlife”—far far away from the marble edifices and fast-paced life of the university.

### *Field Notes*

My field notes document textual and physical characteristics and actions. I allocated space on my fieldnotes recording sheet for information: additional nuances such as personal reflections, biases and assumptions. I chronicled and deconstructed the research process. I recorded ways I felt about the length of interviews, cancelled interviews, driving to and from interviews, preparing for interviews, and much more. Hankins (2003) shared the ways she recorded information while working on her dissertation: napkins, menus, matchbooks, and even church programs. I, too, use available media to capture my most personal reflections.

I created summarized narratives of: each woman’s journey and salient issues relative to their early schooling experiences; the reason each woman decided to pursue a doctorate; and life lessons/incidents contributing to the challenges and decisions to attend a historically white research institution in the southeast (Chapter 4). All participants were sent via e-mail this composite narrative and were asked to comment on issues of representation and accuracy of information. They responded via e-mail or by phone.

*Chronology of the data collection*

*Participant time restraints resulted in summer 2005 as an ending timeline for first, second and follow up questions.*

Fall 2002	Met Black women doctoral students in classes and other university related projects.
Spr 2003	An initial e-mail sent to encourage participation
Sum 2003	I sent a letter of intent (see Appendices).
Fall 2003	I gave a complete plan of time requirements and study intent, university human subjects' information, consent form, participant demographic sheet, and a journal was given at the first interview (see Appendices).
Fall 2003	The participants selected pseudonyms during the first interview.
Fall 2003	Pilot interviews, were conducted between. I used an interview guide (see Appendices). The session was audiotaped. Pilot questions initiated new questions.
Spr 2004–	
Sum 2005	Interviews typically were 45-60 minutes in duration. The sessions were audiotaped. General data related to demographics and early schooling were collected. Interview guide was used, though sporadically.
Fall 2004	Members were sent request for cultural artifacts.

Fall 2004–

Sum 2005      Second interviews were conducted using an open-ended dialogic format. The second interviews captured specific data related to the decision to pursue a doctorate and influences of home, school and/or community. Members were asked for additional comments related to study.

Spr 2005      Follow-up interviews were conducted via e-mail, telephone or informal conversation.

Spr-

Sum 2005      Based upon their interviews, members asked specific follow-up questions related to home, school and or church and community related influences. These responses were sent and collected via e-mail.

Sum 2005      The timeline for completing and transcribing all remaining interviews was August, 30, 2005.

Early Fall 2005      Data analysis completed.

All data collected from the interviews, journal and other sources are confidential and if used will not disclose the identity of the participants. In terms of e-mail, there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. All audio tapes were transcribed, copied, and stored in the researcher's home office.

#### Data Analysis: Strategies & Tools—A Tale of Three Companions

Using three layers of analysis – narrative analysis, cultural analysis, and poetic analysis – I analyzed the participants' narratives. Like Dorothy, I needed three companions to complete the

journey, each with a unique perspective. I used cultural analysis and poetic analysis as tools in the service of narrative analysis. The three analytic lenses offer unique vantage points to viewing more wholly the narratives of these Black women. Importantly, the use of these kinds of analysis reveal deeper embedded textures of our life worlds. Glesne (1999) wrote, “Researchers hope for a description and analysis of its complexity that identify concepts not previously seen or fully appreciated” (p. 153). This hope remains fertile as I look at Black girls and women’s lives.

*Narrative Analysis.* Narrative analysis as a “flexible and responsive methodology” allows the voices of the participants to shine as they, “read, react, and approve the constructed narrative” (Johnson-Bailey, 2002, p. 235). Narrative analysis uses many identifiers to draw attention to details in stories and to answer questions (Alexander, 1988; Etter-Lewis, 1993). When conducting the narrative analysis, I read the transcript and highlighted salient areas using Alexander’s (1988) indicators of salience: frequency, omission, uniqueness, primacy, hesitation, negation, error, incompleteness, and isolation (Appendix G). For instance, in a study designed to explore schooling narratives, issues related to college goals may appear with *frequency*, retelling the same story. I highlighted the text, searching for common links, and marked the text with the word *frequency* in the margins. I then read other transcripts and compared for similar issues of salience. This allowed me to identify patterns of experiences, identification of themes, and categories (Altheide, 1996; Patton, 2002).

*Cultural analysis.* Narratives told by Black women offer cultural foci. “Black female folks in general—amazingly diverse despite similarities that bind us together...share a collective history” (Bell-Scott, 1991, xiii). When researchers consider the cultural capital of their participants, methodologies and analyses develop that are needed to accommodate these spheres (Hill, 2005; Tillman, 2002; Willis, 1999). Tillman discusses how culturally relevant research is a

“framework for capturing the experiences of African Americans.” As a researcher of specific Black women, I considered gradations of language, spoken and nonverbal; cultural connections to heritage and history; and an acknowledgement of familiarity surfacing through socioeconomic, sociocultural or sociopolitical disparities. The use of cultural analysis to provide a level of understanding about what happens when Black women talk to one another as researcher/participant demonstrated its usefulness in discerning cultural nuances. When I read interview transcripts or listened to the tapes, I discerned the language, movement, and unspoken textures. I then read for the place where culture is closely linked or synchronized with an action or an event. Finally, I read other transcripts for similar or divergent contexts of culture, for example, were there instances where we as Black women used words, phrases, or actions that were specific to these women. For example the word “girl,” has a social and historical context for Black women. Historically, the word signified degradation and disrespect for elderly Black women, especially when spoken by young whites—male or female. Today, the word indicates familiarity, a cadre of knowing regardless of what age the receiver is. In a eulogy delivered by Maya Angelou for Coretta Scott King, she used the word, “girl” and described it as a “Black women thing.”

(<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mayaangeloueulogyforcorettaking.htm>)

Through the process, I color-coded and extracted words or phrases related to culture and its myriad representations.

*Poetic analysis.* When I think of representing data in ways that speak to the richness of Black cultural landscape, I am drawn to links between art and research. According to Cahnmann (in press), Hill (2005), and Richardson (1997), poetic representation blends art and the world of qualitative research. Employing poetic representation is as much an art as it is research,

especially for a researcher balancing cultural constructs with academic currency (Hill, 2005). I use poetic representation (Cahnmann, in press; Hill, 2005) in Chapter 5 to represent the agency of the participants. During analysis, I read and listened to data transcripts and audiotapes. I listened to the tapes for context and emphasis of words and/or phrases; whatever was powerful or striking, I then extracted. Context and voice serve as “essential features of [poetic] portraiture” (Hill, p. 96). From the first set, I then extracted words or phrases based upon issues of salience or by a theme. I placed the work in progress in a separate document and continue to analyze. The renderings extracted from all data sources vary in length and emphasis. The notion of speaking and writing freely is a complicated one. Writers such as Giovanni (2004), Anzaldua (1983) and Richardson (1997) masterfully weave poetry into tales. I am interested in Black women’s lives and writing about their lives. I have an obligation to problematize Black women’s narratives beyond the celebratory. There is ambiguity and much subjective turmoil in our stories, in the same way that there is much that documents transcendence and arrival. It is expressly for this reason that this study uses an alternative method to represent the stories of the study participants.

#### Quality Dimensions of Analysis

Protecting lives, cherishing bonds, and nurturing collaboration occur repeatedly in qualitative studies (Denzin, 1980; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Johnson-Bailey, 2002). The proliferation of qualitative studies has increased the need for quality dimensions of data analysis. Qualitative scholars such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) called for appropriate and alternative criteria for conducting and evaluating quality qualitative studies. This remains critical as qualitative research as a viable outlet for research moves forward. Researchers need to confront candidly issues of quality in research, and particularly to thwart challenges associated with qualitative designs (Patton, 2002).

### *Credibility*

In *The Wiz*, we discover the wizard is a fraud. While we certainly do not condone his actions, we realize perhaps some investigations of his credentials, background, etc. could have avoided this fake's foray into the Land of Oz. His credibility was null. As one of a growing number of Tin Women, Black women researchers, and a participant in my study, I have asked myself what techniques I can employ to confirm my credibility and the data.

### *Triangulation*

Triangulation of data sources, such as interview transcripts, e-mail correspondence, field notes, personal conversation, and written stories when cross-validated increase the accuracy of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1997). Triangulation strengthens the credibility of the data. As I intermingle and thresh the data, triangulation occurs. The use of multiple data sources coupled with peer debriefing increases credibility in qualitative research (Denzin, 2000; Patton, 2002). I found triangulation particularly useful as a researcher-participant. In consideration of my purposeful sample, Black women doctoral students, I made a deliberate effort to triangulate my data. I also asked peers for comments on tentative interpretations, themes and categories. I specifically asked those with an awareness of research in this area or an interest in the area to participate.

*Member checks.* This study took a dialogic format, with more sharing and less interrogation. I continuously involved participants in the data collection and analysis phase(s) to ensure "adequate representations" (Reissman, 1993) across time. I invited each member via e-mail to comment on her summarized narrative (Chapter 4) and preliminary findings. Participants reflected on the accuracy of the depiction and noted patterns in their narratives that were salient for them, like issues of color and class or familial stories. Some have shed light specifically on

my interpretations and asked that an item be included, deleted, or amended for clarity. I honored these requests; in fact, the additional communications helped us to clarify statements, to assure participants of the value of their words, and to provide participants with a voice in their representation, especially as they “wanted the reader to know.” Member checks proved helpful in writing up the data; with one participant, a flurry of e-mail and phone conversations helped amend her statements, especially after she mentioned, “I think you should really talk about member check. The differences between what I actually said and what I thought I said are rich data. My reaction to hearing my words is revealing.” The participation of participants in this process represents a critical aspect of the total work.

### *Dependability*

I responded to issues of dependability when considering the stability of data over time (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Because change is constant I have questioned the design recently. I have four participants who received doctorates since their involvement in the study. Changes impacting the study, design, or methodology are indicative of its dependability. I practiced the art of collaboration, by melding my narrative with theirs. I sent e-mails to inform participants of study updates. Other researchers have found that from self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 1995, 2001), study at the margins to center (hooks, 1989), study of the marginalized (Johnson-Bailey, 2002, 2003), and study honoring the marginalized (Etter-Lewis, 1998), documenting the lives of Black women had been an opportunity for a transformative and celebratory experience. Reissman (1993) argued that narrative researchers must attend to what is said, the relationship between speakers, and how points are connected as key points in recognizing *story* as the object of investigation. I negotiated access to participants with an awareness of the imbalance in relationship dynamics (Etter-Lewis, 1998; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Patton, 2002). Pointedly, I

straddled many locations, particularly that of researcher-participant. This imbalance prompted me to consider my thoughts, actions, and reflections about self and the data. Capturing the information in my research journal was a useful practice to help ensure dependability.

### *Trustworthiness and Authenticity*

In this study I am interested in understanding how Black girls' and women's schooling and lived experiences occur. Addressing my subjectivities was an essential element to this work (Patton, 2002). Using reflection notes and fieldnotes, I captured biases and reflected upon them. Spending the time with my participants during interviews, classes, and outside gatherings provided multiple opportunities for "sufficient time" in the site, "persistent observations," and rapport building (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While I have at least two interviews with nearly all of the participants, I have seen some more than others due to the nature of shared classes or projects and gatherings. I am aware of my special relationship with at least one participant—we are sorority sisters. We have never addressed that issue during interviews. Both trustworthiness and authenticity strengthen the credibility of the study. A major goal in this study was to keep the doors open wide enough to listen to the stories of these women. In doing so I could listen and invite them to contribute in multiple ways. I considered my positionality at every juncture and included my story and musings as a part of the goal of achieving trustworthiness and authenticity.

*Ethics.* Ethical discussion regarding the researcher's relationship to participants is building in the scholarly literature as more qualitative studies are conducted using a participatory or feminist framework (Merriam, 2002). The criticisms of using a specific paradigm stem from whether particular types of research contribute to ethical dilemmas. Because I am using both participatory and feminist/womanist research, I take caution to respect the participant and her

disclosures. Throughout the study I also consider my biases and assumptions. I journaled regarding class, color, and race discussions, i.e. I checked my judgments when discussions turned to color privilege. I also troubled the absence of gender specific discussions.

I attended a writing retreat designed for graduate students writing up their research. One of my major concerns had less to do with being in the woods for seven days and more to do with the fact that three of my study participants would be there. Part of my angst was associated with the retreat set-up. Each day we were supposed to gather and discuss our writing progress. We were to select a writing partner for one-on-one writing support. I addressed this issue with the retreat coordinator, my advisor. We agreed that my week would not include sharing participant stories, preliminary findings or information connecting them to the work. That week was yet another turning point for me as a researcher-participant.

*Confirmability.* This quality, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is synonymous with objectivity. I relished this criterion critically when considering the delicate nature of my participants' being Black women in the field (Generett Givens & Jeffries, 2002; Gregory, 1999; Mabokela & Green, 2001). The tendency to valorize or extol the virtues of Black women causes me to examine closely ways that I not essentialize, denigrate, or color their experiences. I shared initial findings and themes with others. Black women researchers' decisions to research each other results in small samples, but samples that can contribute to the literature.

### Summary

Each study, like a fingerprint or snowflake, contains unique elements. In this study I explore what schooling experiences are, not for Black people in general, not for all Black women, but for one participant-researcher and seven Black women doctoral students enrolled at a historically white southern research university. In the next chapter, the summarized narratives offer richly textured descriptions of participants and their responses to questions regarding demographic information, participant selection, participation and specific schooling and lived experiences. I am reminded of lyrics to a song, "Well Oz never did give nothin' to the tin man that he didn't, didn't already have..." (Bunnell, 1993).

## CHAPTER FOUR

## JWELED MOSAICS: REPRESENTATION OF EMERALD CITY SOJOURNERS

*The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared with us. And in return, this sharing will allow us to write life documents that speak to the human dignity, the suffering, the hopes, the lives gained and the lives lost by the people that we study.*

*-Norman Denzin, 1993*

In this chapter I profile the seven Black women who are completing or have recently completed doctoral programs at a historically white research university in the southeast. I was a participant-researcher. My narrative was gathered by Clovia another participant in the study. The following chart provides a demographic sketch of the seven participants, including the author.

**Chart 1: Demographic Profile and School Background of Participants**

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>School History</b>	<b>Geographic Origination</b>	<b>Class origin</b>
Angelina	30	HBCU undergrad/grad	Southeast	Working class
Anne	45+	Segregated k-8 White undergrad/grad	Midwest	Rural; working
Clovia	45+	Segregated k-8 White undergrad/grad	Southeast	Rural; working
Elena	30	Segregated k-5 White undergrad/grad	Southeast	Upper middle
Mack	26	White undergrad/grad	Midwest	Upper middle
Makesha	31	White undergrad/grad	Northeast	Middle class
Nina	28	White undergrad/grad	Southeast	Upper middle
Rachelle	44	HBCU undergrad/grad	Northeast	Middle class

## Rachelle

As the author of this research report, I introduce my narrative as an invitational lens through which I view my life and the lives of my participants. I locate my narrative first in this sequence to signal acknowledgement of my subjectivity and to unveil the ways I approached the participants' interviews. Indeed, my recognition of my own subjectivity answers hooks (1992) concern that in order to "bear the burden of memory one must willingly journey to places long uninhabited, searching the debris of history for traces of the unforgettable, all knowledge of which has been suppressed" (p. 172).

I am a serious-minded woman with a dry wit, a big teeth smile, and a voice "like smoked glass." I have fierce eyes and a determination to match. My dark black mane with silver sprinkles entwines natural twists, braids and even an occasional pressed "do." With a full-figured form I seek balance between my physical, mental, and spiritual selves. My skin melds colors—allspice and Brazil nutshell.

My mother hailed from a small southern town. It was in Washington, D.C. where she met and married my father. She earned an associate's degree. My father was an ex-Marine and a draftsman by trade. In my quest for the doctoral degree, I dreamt often of the day when I would march across the stage to actualize our dreams, his and mine, in May 2006, he will stand with the angels when that crossing occurs—he passed during the summer 2005. I was raised in Boston and am the middle child of an older sister and younger brother. My sister has a GED and my brother has a college degree.

Boston's forced busing ushered in a period of social upheaval transforming Boston Public Schools into a racially imbalanced system for years. During my early schooling kindergarten, first and second grades life seemed simpler, less complicated living and attending school in my

community. In the third grade I was bussed to an all-white school within the same school district and stayed there until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. During seventh grade, I attended a mixed-level all-Black Seventh Day Adventist school in the heart of Roxbury, a Black community in Boston. The teachers and community there held the vestiges of Black schools.

In the midst of Boston's busing bustle my family moved from the city to the suburbs into a primarily Jewish town that offered a striking contrast to our zone of familiarity. From mid-ninth grade until high school graduation I attended a primarily white high school. I did not have any classes filled with majority Black students or teachers. I felt the need for culturally relevant exposure and decided to attend an HBCU in Atlanta where I earned a Bachelors degree. I returned years later to the same institution and completed an MA.

I wanted a doctorate—one day. I watched and listened to the Black professors at my HBCU and knew that becoming a teacher of teachers loomed large on my horizon. I also was relegated to this pathway by a chance meeting with my current mentor, my major professor. As I approached my forties and my life seemingly was ordered, I started actualizing the desire to “get the papers” in the fall of 2000. I will graduate in May 2006, 25 years after receiving my Bachelor's degree.

### **Angelina**

Angelina, a petite pecan-brown woman maintains her size through a regular regime of workouts. Angelina's coordinated outfits of deep rich burgundy, brown, gold, red and magenta or red, black and white are accented by scarves, belts and shoes. She confesses to a love for well-shod feet. She wears trendy pointed toe, high heeled leather boots, funky flats and slides—some even have an ornamental piece. Her hairstyles during the course of interviews ranged from natural twists to a sleek, bone-straight bob hitting her shoulders. On one occasion Angelina

sported twisted locks and a colorful silk headdress, while another time she wore a burgundy-colored kufi atop sleek, bone-straight black hair. With a smile that crawls across her face, one tooth at a time, it is easy sharing her company. Her manner is unpretentious even laughing at herself as she pulls me in. Her speaking rate ran the gamut from long pauses to fiery, rapid tangents, sometimes soft-spoken, mostly amplified and unabashedly familiar. Angelina's easy spirit and passion for sharing experiences, both the enlightened and difficult ones told a story that adds dimensions to this woman whose favorite flower is as she—a magnolia.

“I am writing my dissertation. That statement alone is a testament to a long journey from living in many places during my childhood, separation from immediate family, and caring at an early age for my younger sisters. My mother and grandmother had vibrant, lively dreams of higher academic endeavors for me and my sisters. Particularly, my mother's insistence that we had to engage in extracurricular activities in order to avoid pregnancy was such that our focus was more directed. At nearly every turn, either my mother or grandmother pushed and pulled us—we were involved in so many things, athletic and academic.

My earlier schooling and college was spent in primarily Black schools settings; these were my favorite schooling experiences. I felt lifted up and that Black teachers particularly made a difference in my desire to excel in school. In later elementary school years through middle school my family moved a lot. I was saddened, hurt, and angry when we left the comfort of a Black community for another state where we were not in the majority. For the first time I received deficient and failing grades. The stratified socioeconomic lines within our new, largely Hispanic populated community placed us on the periphery of being poor or at least labeled as such. My mother purchased unpopular, no name or economical brands clothing for me and my sister's. What a gap and how different from when we all wore uniforms in earlier years—no

difference was made then. In high school I ran track and possibilities for more social inclusion came with that distinction.

I absolutely arrived at the threshold of the academy by happenstance. I generally considered myself an average student with a tendency for procrastination so thoughts of a PhD until then were nonexistent. I was in a “trade” track and graduated with a general diploma. I then attended a vocational institution and eventually pursued a bachelor’s and master’s degree. Prior to moving to the city, I attended graduate school at a historically Black university in the southeast. A Black woman professor encouraged me to consider a doctorate. I pursued application to doctoral programs. I came to graduate school after spending years teaching in a large metropolitan southeast city.

The trek has had its turns and twist, but with the support of family and financial assistance it was more doable and attainable. My sisters and I are the first (mother’s side) to get college degrees and work outside the service industry. When we [family] are just hanging around each other, I finally get comfortable, and I feel we all do as well. Since my sisters and I are usually out trying to survive in our professional careers and seemingly always wearing that professional mask, being with family allows us the time to take the masks off and talk freely. We talk openly about sensitive issues and just be, with out having to explain. If someone’s feelings are hurt by the conversation we can apologize and it is all over, no pouting and no guilt trips. I love hanging out with my sisters.

When we have gatherings with the larger family, of course you have the usual large meals with all the fixins’ – seafood, fried chicken, potatoes, dressing, and etc. We play cards, talk about old times and laugh. I feel my family has got to be the funniest in America. I have family members that would be described as devote Holy Rollers to the street corner drug dealers.

As I round the bend of the PhD journey, I hope this contribution, my story, paves the way for more Black women to pursue higher degrees, specifically a doctorate.”

Angelina has been a willing participant since first approached. Our discussions have often gone over the time limit; we both enjoyed the conversational nature of the interviews. Each interview had a relaxed pace. There was so much to talk about, so often we captured information in our journals to remember to talk about or to recall or simply to ponder. Angelina used her journal for reflection and recollections to revisit.

### **Anne**

A chilly day or muggy and sticky summertime day will find Anne dressed in warm ups for both comfort and wellness. Anne’s robust stature is equaled by her personality. When she smiles, her dark chocolate face fills with an essence from ear to ear. Anne is soft spoken, yet her story speaks volumes. As she smoothes back her raspberry-colored streaks racing through her black hair, fifty-one year old Anne reared in a rural Black community in the Midwest, has something to say about community, family, and school.

“I grew up in this Black community little tight knit community. It was like there were families and then their families would live there. So there probably were about 35 or 40 families and then their extended families, their cousins, their uncles or so and so forth. So it was a real thing going in the community. The school I went to was all black and the majority of the teachers were all black.

I come from a large family, counting my parents there were fourteen of us. I am the youngest of the girls. With a few exceptions, all siblings finished high school or a trade school. Three attended HBCU’s or other type colleges. What I remember most was ingrained in me as a child from my father, a preacher, and my mother, a homemaker, that education was a “gift” and

life-long learning a goal. My parents and some teachers knew the value; I had to figure out the rest.

Prior to integration I attended a nearby community school, but afterward I was bused outside of my community. My early schooling experiences were impacted by the integration of schools. With a fifteen year difference between me and the eldest, I integrated schools with others in the community, but not with my brothers or sisters. My education was marked by two things, bussing and a personal quest for reaching my highest potential. There were challenges for sure. I had teachers who questioned my capacity for learning. But I had others who pushed me to excel. From junior high until now I have attended mostly white schools.

While we were “poor but not po’ ” our needs were provided for and met. Most people had pretty large homes and they weren’t too close together, not really farm land but gardens, not like huge gardens but I think we had about four different plots. It [the plots] wasn’t really to live off of as a full resource of anything, we just had a leisure source of income—versus I remember pretty much when I was down picking green beans and whatever else there was to pick. We grew enough for us to eat off of but then also for people to buy if they wanted to. Most people who wanted to buy stuff would go pick it themselves. Socioeconomic status was not a determinant for achieving one’s goals. My Christian upbringing and mother’s motivation contributed daily to educational pursuits. Everywhere I turn on visits home the fact that I am a daughter, granddaughter, and sister of preachers, ministers, and an evangelist—encourage my academic pursuits. I am humbled by the familial and communal support from my small closely-knit town.

I was teaching undergraduates and graduates at another institution when I learned I could not go much farther without specific advanced credentials. I decided to pursue a PhD. I enrolled

in fall 2000 and held one assistantship while pursuing the degree. Participating in this study has been a way of sharing and hopefully, we can let others know our story, the full story of ways our schooling experiences affects our physical, mental and spiritual selves. I am preparing for my dissertation defense and graduation as the first doctor in the family.”

Anne and I shared a couple of graduate classes and mutual acquaintances. I needed and wanted research information from Black women in the 45+ category. She expressed an interest in the study during our classes and I invited her to participate in the study. While we had to work hard to coordinate our schedule for interviewing, she has been eager to discuss her educational sojourn.

Anne is now an assistant professor in a Midwestern university.

### **Clovia**

At 48, Clovia is outspoken and lively and not easily rendered invisible. Her hairdo of dark natural twists roams her head and frames a face, carved by genes and time. She is the color of sorghum<sup>2</sup> ready to be harvested. It is not uncommon to see her on campus wrapped in a profusion of color from head to toe or simply adorned in clothing of comfort, loosely draped. Even on her “farm” Clovia is as bright—in attire and personality—as the flowers blossoming on the land. From the hawks and doves and owls and deer to the tiniest crickets and lightning bugs that live in the space, Clovia too, is “teeming with life,” with a story to tell. Clovia wove a narrative of survival amidst battles of oppression.

“My grandmother and grandfather (maternal) homesteaded on the outskirts of Hurston from their family home in Royalton, Brooke County, during the 1940’s. The house they moved to was in the forests of North Miera the time and few people other than them and a small black

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uea.ac.uk/cap/sorghum/>

community inhabited that area. Later affluent white families discovered this beautiful hilly area and built large marble, brick, and limestone home around the black neighborhood that was and still is called Granville. We lived outside Granville proper on a street called "Archway Road."

My early schooling experiences are closely related to my home experiences because I come from a segregated environment and my family was poor. My parents had little formal education. My father barely finished grade school. My mother did not graduate from high school. We were made to go to school. My father was rough and hard on my mother and us kids so he often moved us to inner city areas of Hurston to get away from my mother's family who occupied the Archway Road homestead. To this day my grandmother still lives in that house. We belonged to a smaller community nestled within this city. I was raised as one of five children in a midsized city in the southeast.

Most of us from the Dudley area were very good students and did not miss school. Once in the first or second grade I contracted a very bad form of pneumonia that caused me to become delirious and my Momma had to put me in an ice bath to lower my temperature. I missed a few days of school then. I do not understand how we did so well, especially in reading; but perhaps because we had few books at home, we relished the encyclopedia with the cellophane overlays of the human body, the dictionary, and the bible. So we learned in spite of our lack of material possessions and luxuries like indoor plumbing. When I was in the ninth grade, my pajamas caught fire one cold February morning as I tried to warm myself over the gas space heater in our bedroom. I think I was out of school for about two months; but when I returned I was academically on level with everyone else.

We did not engage in extracurricular activities because they were expensive and we had duties at home while my mother worked at the cotton mill during odd hours. I attended

segregated schools through fifth grade. When I went to Geneva Junior High (now Geneva Middle School) I tried out and was selected for cheerleading, but my mother could not afford the uniforms and I had to quit the team. At Allendale all of the white kids went to tennis lessons, dance lessons, music lessons, riding lessons, cotillion (etiquette training), gymnastics, and God knows what else.

From high school on, I would later attend predominantly white universities and colleges. I received my bachelor's degree at the age of 36. I entered a Master of Education program after teaching public school for three years. My decision to pursue a doctoral degree was due partly to a woman I met in San Antonio who was Black, a nurse, and a professor. She was a RN with a PhD in the field of nursing. She attended my church and her daughter and mine were the only Black students in a small private school. So they played basketball and were cheerleaders, and I got to know Diane through parenting ventures. This is important, because what made me think about getting a PhD was seeing another Black woman with a PhD for the first time in my life. And at that time I was in my late 30s. I never had any black professors or colleagues when I worked in San Antonio. But the few friends and church members I knew (aside from Diane, the nurse with the PhD) thought I was crazy for giving up my lucrative career in the Air Force to go to college full time. I never told most of them about my pondering getting a PhD. I also did not tell my white friends because they probably wouldn't have been encouraging as well. I received scholarships for my doctoral studies to the amazement of fellow colleagues who had a sense of entitlement to attend this school. I, too, felt a sense of entitlement as I thought of the university as the *big house* and thought surely a piece of me belonged in that school.”

We shared a few graduate courses and although she did not participate in the pilot project, she has remained a willing participant. She often offered ways of supporting me in this

effort to illuminate our voices. Much of her data is drawn from various informal conversations, questionnaires, demographic profile, e-mail and memorable visits to her “farm.” She has had her dissertation defense and is the first doctor in her family. She is now an assistant professor at a majority Latino university in the U.S. Southwest.

### **Elena**

Elena’s skin tone reminded me of café au-latte. She is a slender woman of average height. With randomly sprinkled gold highlights in her brown hair, she was fashionably attired and coiffed on every occasion that we met. Elena dons a monochromatic outfit of gold, taupe and olive blends; a pewter colored twin figurine brooch adorns her olive boucle` sweater. She wore silver jewelry and a silver western style belt. Her metallic gold pumps reminded me of the sparkle in Dorothy’s slippers. During the next interview she is smartly dressed in a black sateen wrap top and ochre linen skirt with similarly hued shoes. Elena’s articulation of her life experiences matched her clothing style. Elena seemingly remained aware of her image when speaking—she carefully enunciates each word and maintains a verbal flow consistent with her smooth appearance.

“My grandmother [maternal] was born in a south Georgia city and my grandfather was born in a small country town in Georgia. My grandmother had as much as probably a 4<sup>th</sup> grade education and my grandfather probably a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education. He went on to finish his GED, but he was old time, I’m talking old school Baptist minister. He’s such a gentle spirit. My grandfather is what we call, let’s see, what’s the blacker of the black, is that the blue black...you maroon, that was my grandfather, whereas, my grandmother was very fair skinned.

My mother, a native Georgian, is a little browner than I am. Although there was a 15 year age difference between her and my father who was born in Mobile; she tells me people weren’t

concerned about the age difference. They were concerned that she was not light enough because they knew James Kerlain liked light skin women. I never saw people in terms of complexion. Only maybe when I'm around Dad and I'm conscious. I would ask myself, 'Would she be considered dark skin?' ...I would wonder myself, I wouldn't dare ask him 'cause I got tired hearing that, I tired of that. But, with that, I was conscious of it. Like wondering, 'Where do I fit?' and 'Do other people think like that?'

My Daddy's' family were blue collar, but owned their own business. So that made them as my Dad would say, *somebody*. I am an only child, a Daddy's girl, raised in a "town and gown" community in Alabama. My parents were college professors, although they did not hold PhDs, they were tenured. My community remains a very splintered community between the 'haves and the have nots.' My father, friends, and the mayor—a product of Banksville, preached 'What kind of car you drive versus what you got going on *for* you.' The *haves* have plenty. Banksville is a very impoverished area for it to have such an historical university there. It was very impoverished outside of the university, there's such a dearth of resources. There is no industry there, there's nothing to bring industry there. I remember a friend saying, 'There's nothing to do in Banksville, when school isn't there, when school is out, there's nothing that's going on in Banksville but drinking and fucking.'

I attended an all-Black catholic school in the southeast during my early schooling years, and lived in a primarily racially mixed neighborhood. I later attended racially mixed public schools and my privilege socially and economically was a constant reminder throughout my schooling. My mother would remind me that I was 'fortunate, but you are not [rich] and don't tell anybody that.' In her eyes fortunate meant 'privileged by some because you're an only child.' Throughout my schooling but especially after returning from college to this small town,

people would tell me I talk like a white girl. They used to tell me that before and it would bother me, but then I came to understand, I don't talk like a white girl, I talk like an educated person. They however equate education with white people.

I never wanted to attend an HBCU because I lived so close to that experience from my early to high school years. So, I attended and received my undergraduate and master's degrees from white colleges and universities. Interestingly, I didn't want to go into academia, even with parents as professors. But it was after a dynamite defense of my master's thesis; when a professor applauded my language skills and convinced me to pursue a doctorate. I wonder now whether his insistence was based upon my academic strength or on my capacity in his words to 'articulate well' [for a Black woman]."

I initially met Elena in a class and asked her to participate in the pilot study. While there was a substantial time period between the first and last interview, Elena's eagerness to share her stories is refreshing. Elena is married and has no children. She is currently preparing for her comprehensive exams. She will be the first doctor in her family.

### **Mack**

Mack's massive Rasta locs sometimes twisted upwards and other times dangled about her shoulders where they were adorned by a single cowrie shell. Mack's honey-colored face was framed by gold-rimmed glasses that softened the mane. Mack is tall, not willowy, but graceful. She is a Generation Xer who dresses in 70's and 80's retro style. It is not unusual to find her in anything from a Jimi Hendrix tie-dyed T-shirt (which she wore the day of the interview) along with faded black jeans (the in style) and a pair of worn white sneakers—to an outfit of an Indian Sari and silk scarf accompanied by chunky boots that elevate her height easily to over 6 feet.

Mack's soft-spoken manner and louder body language unfolded her world, like a map—section by section.

“I haven't been around my family as much, just being in school, schedule and baby, and work and all of that but you know when I do go home, I'm excited. Actually the times that I've seen my Grandma in particular I try to talk to her. I'm real interested in her life. She's got four sisters and they have the just crazy, the most incredible life, craziest life that you ever want to hear about. So I try to talk to her about her experiences, growing up and during segregation and her life with my granddad. I try to make those kinda connections.

[I] Go home and try to look through old pictures or we'll go to a store that we'd go to when I was younger, or we'll take the bus around town. Connection is important to me and Kent; he's my partner, talks about that all the time. Where is, especially in terms of getting the doctorate, where is this going to take us? And how is this gonna, 'cause we've seen where black kids are going through school. Then here's this separation from our families almost and it's not that we want it. A lot of time our families goes, 'Oh well they're all gone and whatever'. I don't want that. I don't want my family to think that I think I'm better. Or think I don't have time for them. Or that I don't wanna share. Or that I don't wanna keep those connections, you know if it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here.

My parents, including my stepfather who raised me were formally educated beyond high school. I was born and reared in a Midwestern city until the middle of my third grade. We then moved to Georgia. I am the eldest of two siblings, one brother and one sister. In Ohio my community was divided by *skin tones*; all the light-skinned people live over here, the medium brown live here and the darker skins live here. The whole color thing was really big in my family and in the community and totally shaped not only my schooling experience but my life

period. I attended an all-Black Catholic school in kindergarten and first grade at my grandfather's insistence and in his neighborhood. From that time forward I battled with issues related to color and status.

I attended mostly white schools from elementary through college. I had an interest in attending an HBCU, but continued the journey with all-white schools. Whether I attended all-white schools in the Midwest or in Georgia; I didn't see school as a safe place. Before leaving for Georgia, my classroom, a combined third and fourth grade, was where I became, unwillingly, the teacher's pet. Every day I struggled with people thinking I looked and sounded like a white girl, and treating me different, that's been ongoing, even now. My retreat was the library. It was there that I consoled my fears and broadened my world through books, fostering a love of reading and dreams of college, even at age seven. I cannot tell my story without somehow looking at how those experiences are a part of me today. ”

Mack and I met during class and would go on to sit through two more together. Mack began her doctoral program directly from a masters program. It was not until she entered the doctoral program that I approached her about being a pilot participant.

### **Makesha**

Makesha, a thirty something, copper-toned woman with reddish brown dyed dreadlocks prides herself on staying fit and eating right. She wears designer named clothing and gear in an unpretentious manner. She is dressed casually in a pair of dungaree overalls, olive-toned top and pinkish hued accessories. Makesha considers herself creative and artsy. Her stylish manner, casual chic, represents that flair and an equaled ease for sharing lived experiences. Makesha's story is filled with humorous vignettes related to schooling and social experiences.

“I think getting my PhD was putting off growing up in a lot of ways and living the life that you’re expected to live at some point in time. Being married or having kids or whatever because I’d always said that I’m not going to do any of that stuff. I never planned doing that stuff anyway but this was a good reason to explain to my father why I’m not getting married and having kids and I know now that I’m graduating both of my parents are saying, ‘Well now you can get married and have kids.’

I was raised primarily by my mother, a recent college graduate. My father’s academic and island culture influenced me as well. I went to kindergarten in the islands, but I don’t remember school. From the earliest schooling experience through college, my mother influenced where I would attend school, no public school for certain. She was a kindergarten/day care type of teacher in one of these schools and she decided long before I ever got there that she was never going to let me go to those schools. I am from a large northeastern city. I lived in a mixed neighborhood where the public high school and elementary school that I would have been assigned to, my mother never liked.

I moved between white schooling communities and Black or diverse neighborhood communities. I grew up in a predominately black neighborhood, it was mixed though. There were some white people, black people, a lot of white people actually. Mainly black kids I played with. There were white adults and I don’t think they had kids. All my friends on my block and I didn’t venture off from my block because I wasn’t allowed to number one and outside the block scared me because I didn’t know the kids on the other side. It wasn’t that they were bad kids; it was just that you get used to your little block and you don’t go much further. I lived in a middle class neighborhood; it was on the decline by the time we left. Meaning that there was just a lot . . . houses are being run down and all that stuff.

I always pretty much have gone to predominately white schools. I went to a private school from first grade to sixth grade and it was all white, predominately Jewish. After this experience and mother's concern over the lack cultural influences, I went to a predominately Black school for two years for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade and that was a totally different experience. I went to college prep school in another rich white area but a more liberal high school. Maybe when I say liberal it's because we were older by then. Kids were older so there were other things to worry about then making fun of somebody because they were black or they weren't white or they had braids, or their mother wrapped them up in some fabrics and sent them to school. On dress day you could wrap that thing and tuck it in. When I was little she used to do that, a couple of times she put some straps on it. It was hard but it was fun I would not grow up any other way. Because I got to learn how to incorporate my African life from home . . . my mother was very Afrocentric.

After high school I wondered how I can convince my mom that I don't need to go to school right away. How can I get her to give me a year to travel around Europe which was what a lot of my white friends were doing and she said *no* to that, that wasn't a possibility. I went to college and after college I just naturally went to my Masters and then I went for my PhD because I knew I wanted to get more. But it started out as something I had to do and now it's something I want to do. It's been a realization process but you know education is not the worse thing to happen to a person which is what I thought at some point in time. But, I've known that I've had to finish a PhD and now that I'm right there, it's really kind of scary because now after this step I have nothing else to do. I haven't set many goals in my life. This was the only one, now I'm just about to do that. What's the next step? I guess that's that journey.

I am a lifelong vegetarian. This is an important aspect of my story as I consider my mother's influence in both my cultural and schooling experiences. We both just eat fish. But, I grew up no fish at all. I grew up with no nothing. All health foods and no sugar, no candy, no cookies, only ice cream on occasion and that was monitored, I can only sweeten my tea with honey and just a little bit, I couldn't have salt, I couldn't have this I couldn't that. I swear that woman knew everything because I would go out to people's birthday parties and get those bags of candy and try and hide them. I am the eldest of two; my younger sister attends college in the southeast."

Makesha and I met while working on a university based project and we later shared a class. Since these events I invited Makesha to participate in the study, which she did readily. Makesha was willing to talk on a number of subjects and offered, "What else do you want to know, I could just keep going." During the course of our data collection period Makesha was in the throes of writing her final dissertation chapters. She will take the first doctorate in her family since her grandfathers and his brothers.

### **Nina**

Nina's face is chestnut-like in color and shape. Her almond shaped eyes are both intense and inviting. Her hair worn in a traditional bob rested at her collar. Nina dresses conservatively albeit with a punch of panache. Nina presented herself in a short sleeve leopard print blouse, black skirt and sweater. She wore two gold bracelets and a pair of small gold hoops. Her voice is melodic and soft; her words, punctuated by thoughtful consideration.

"My father served in the military, 20 years and then retired 10 years ago. As a member of a military family, my educational experiences vary. I attended elementary school in Asia and in Middle Georgia where the schooling and neighborhood communities were starkly contrasted. In

Asia children of all socioeconomic and race locations attended schools alongside of each other. My family returned to the States after we traveled to several countries. I was able to experience living in Japan, the Philippines, and Korea while I was in elementary school. We relocated to yet another military town in the southeast. From that point I spent my middle school, high school, and college career in Georgia. When we first got here, initially we stayed the first couple of months on the military base. We then moved into a predominantly Black community with a small white presence. From there we moved to another neighborhood about four, five years later, where my parents currently reside; it's more diverse, more mixed. I am a middle child sandwiched between an older brother and younger sister. My brother has a college degree.

In this Georgia town I came to know a little of what it felt like to be a young girl of color. I had to work harder. There was a race and status divide between Blacks and whites, but mostly among Blacks. The return stateside boosted my desire to further excel academically and resist labels placed on Black students. I worked hard and was and am a conscientious student. I received honors and awards marking my achievements. Young Black girls may lack the confidence to perform in areas traditionally occupied by men, i.e., the hard sciences. I just don't remember having a consistent healthy dose of encouragement from folks other than my parents telling me that I can do well in those areas. I know that this is changing but it is still an issue for us. I earned three undergraduate degrees and a master's degree from primarily white colleges and universities.

I selected and attended a small private religiously-affiliated school located in North Georgia—2 % Black student population and 98% white with only one Black female professor at the time) because it was small, I didn't know anyone, and not too far from home. After my first visit to the college I knew that I'd do well there. I felt comfortable. Even though it was mostly

white I didn't feel that I would have a problem with racism. In fact, I felt strangely comfortable. The thought of attending an all Black school made me feel a bit uncomfortable. This is largely due to how I was raised. For most of my youth and even prior to returning to the states from overseas I never really lived in a community where (Blacks were in the majority). I think in many ways by my not interacting with more Black folks even into my high school years, coupled with my schooling which did very little to teach me about "my" history I had difficulty adjusting and feeling comfortable with my "Blackness." I almost became too comfortable with being the "only" in my classes and even where I traveled...so being the only Black person didn't still does not bother me to this day.

I am married and cherish the duality of my maiden and married names. As I prepare for my dissertation defense, I am marking the occasion with the second doctorate, but the first woman PhD in my family."

Nina was referred to me by a colleague familiar with the study. An entire year passed and while there had been appointments scheduled, none resulted in another interview. We communicated primarily through e-mail during the latter phases of data collection. Nina expressly was interested in this study to contribute to the differences in world views and experiences of Black women.

### Summary

Visiting Clovia's farm reminded me of the delicate yet powerful nature of Black women inviting one another into private spaces. With my visit to Clovia's an awareness of communal connections surfaced as we talked candidly and explored the terrain—physically and contextually. With each plunge into the earth, uprooting lemongrass and Mexican oregano, we dug deeper into conversation. With rare exception, participants asked me questions or drew me

into other levels of interactions as we signified, chanted, and for some, we were simply loud, Black girls, of our volition. With many, laughter was deep and hearty. Still others wore Dunbar's mask in the retelling of significant events or occurrences. Overall the experience reinforced the peer relationship we shared. All participants acknowledged ways their words can provide insight and significance in the larger society. In the end we were all dancers to a rhythm of our own, but bound by our journey inside of this moment in time.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD: FINDING OURSELVES, DISCOVERING OUR FINDINGS

*A woman in harmony with her spirit is like a river flowing. She goes where she will without pretense and arrives at her destination, prepared to be herself and only herself.*

*-Maya Angelou, 2001*

Through narrative, cultural, and poetic analysis, I identified five themes in the participants' schooling and lived experiences: 1) these Black women exhibited agency despite societal, familial, and institutional complexities; 2) sociohistorical events shaped each participant; 3) Black family and community contexts emphasized education and academic potential; 4) schools often reflected society in attempts to construct these Black women in narrow ways; and 5) some teachers encouraged academic potential through relationships with these Black women.

**Nina: Counselor's office**

what other than God,  
other than my parents,  
drives me to push myself  
do things that people think  
are  
amazing.

*that experience*  
him, white, telling me I wasn't good  
pamphlets, catalogs, brochures  
no mountains  
no ivy leagues

that has done something to me

*that experience*  
I really want to do this  
explore that experience from a yesteryear  
in terms of my future.  
inspire others to soar-

*that experience*

### Agency, the Me that I am.

The emphasis placed on agency is primary when discussing Black women's lives. Collins (1990) insisted that Black feminist thought "encompasses general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment" (p.31). The Black women in this study exhibited agency despite societal, familial, and institutional complexities. The participants discussed accepting and admonishing loud, Black girls and developing, resisting, and maintaining race, class and color consciousness—transformative and important occurrences. Other topics specifically salient to agency are woven throughout the major and subthemes; participants' words are represented through data poems. These poems characterize the influences of others, aspects of participants' agency and calls attention to these acts.

*Accepting and Admonishing loud, Black girls.* Contrary to early admonitions by our mothers and teachers, we are proud to be loud Black girls," telling our stories in, out of, and about school. Indeed those of us who claimed and used our voices within social and educational institutions called attention to ourselves. The acts of agency revealed that some participants remained mindful of the admonishment by mothers, grandmothers and others not to be loud but seemingly they let their silence reign. Mack, a fairer skinned participants' need for respite from other children and some teachers led her to the library, where she developed a love for books. Her voice was ultimately heard through poetry and prose. Mack shared,

Even though I still dealt with getting my hair pulled and being called white girl, talk white, look white, white, white, white! So I found this library and said ok, here is a place for me with all these books, just for me, so that kinda took my attention away from the kids. So that's when I really started reading and I would read a different

book every night. I just started then, (LOL) that was the beginning of this love affair that I had with books. Even now because of those experiences, I love to read.

Fordham noted that “Silence for African Americans was not to be interpreted as acquiescence” (1993, p. 12). These participants demonstrated that silence can be another tool of resistance and activism (Collins, 1990; Fordham, 1993). The phrase loud, black girls seemingly had multiple connotations for participants. When we first interviewed, Nina, whose earliest schooling years were spent in Asia, then later in middle Georgia attested that she could not “find the right words to describe my [her] feelings about loud Black girls.” I asked her to explain more about this statement, and she wrote:

I think I perceived the loud Black girls in my school as not carrying themselves in a lady-like manner and were an embarrassment for Black girls like me who were trying to carry ourselves with respect. Most if not all of the girls I would label “loud Black girls” were the ones who had terrible reputations and just really didn’t care what people thought of them. I had a serious problem with that and I did my best to not fall into that same mindset.

Nina bought into the admonition, then. She now sees that while her agency allowed her to admonish those things not congruent with her overall social development, she became a loud, Black girl when she began to speak out later in high school and as a graduate student when race not loudness determined how she would be socially cast.

Elena, reared in an all-Black college town, paled as she remembered, “We would judge people in the way that if people were loud and rowdy then that wasn’t our crew, we actually turned our noses up. And, and I regret that to this day.” Elena’s and Nina’s interpretations of how mothers and others viewed loud, Black girls rang familiar. Even in my home, where we were encouraged to speak up and out, my mother did not want me to be loud in the literal sense,

yet, they gave me the armament to use voice which was often misinterpreted for a loud, Black, girl (Fordham, 1999). I recalled in my interview that as early as the third grade, when I was bused out of my community, I became a loud, Black girl. My voice got louder and changed. “U’s” in conduct were commonplace. I was a loud, Black girl (Fordham, 1993). I either daydreamed or acted out (hooks, 1984; Mullings, 1997); either action correlated with my perceived socialization in this newer setting. I raised my hand daily and kept it waving even as it turned into a symbol of resistance and defiance.

The schooling narratives of these loud, Black girls – loud either in spirit or literal voice—showed instances of breaking silences imposed upon them by society. Participants identified this resistance to silencing and agency to make our voices heard as a significant aspect of our journey to higher education. At varying points in our journey we all rejected the admonition.

Another aspect of agency is developing, resisting, and maintaining race, class and color consciousness. In the following data poem, Makesha, raised in the northeast, experiences two kinds of social pressure—from classmates and from her mother—that led to a conscious decision to shape her identity.

**Makesha: No flips**

It was really sad.  
All I wanted was to flip my hair

African attire,  
Sandaled, copper toned  
and comfy—me.

Before the wondering *was...*

*The first day of school*  
standing at the door  
someone aghast  
“Oh my God, she’s Black!”  
*the first day of school*

just didn't know what to do

I wonder,

*"Why can't I be white?"*

*"Why am I not white?"*

*"Why can't I have straight hair?"*

Voices. Schoolmates'.

*My gardener's Black*

*My driver's Black*

*My housekeeper is Black*

I wonder what was,

until the day Katia came to school

Sixth grade.

the Blackest Black girl I have ever seen.

Culturally Black.

Physically Black.

A big old butt.

everything that I had never seen before

and

I loved her.

She, we, best friends

For one year

about the time my mother

pulled me out of school.

I think it's because Katia and I

were just having such a great time

In between these things,

Bearing Blackness.

Teasing. Jealousy.

Afrocentric mother.

Black History Month.

Hair, natural. *No* flips.

All these things kept me on the outside.

I couldn't be like them

or Katia

therefore

I became totally unlike them.

Makesha's data poem demonstrates a critical incident in her schooling when society, as represented by the children (and the silent teachers) and even her mother, tried to shape who she was

as a Black girl. It also gives us a glimpse of what she *did*, her agency. According to Collins (1990), Black women “construct individual and collective voices” (p. 102). Makesha’s color and class consciousness had many influences. Yet, in the end she determined her level of resistance. She determined that she would resist and what she would develop.

Elena’s consciousness involved battling the messages from home—a Black college town—regarding hierarchal complexities of class and color. The complexities ranged from attempts to resist her father’s conscious exclusion of others based upon class and color to her active participation within those structures, despite her insistence that, “I never *thought* of myself as being well off.” Elena admitted that the illusions of others regarding her upper-middle class status and fairer skin did not elude her. Since high school, Elena claimed she works harder at developing her class and color consciousness on her terms.

Clovia, who grew up in rural Georgia, pointed out that as a child, darker and poorer than most others, she did not resist, develop or maintain a specific race consciousness. In fact, it was not until adulthood that Clovia developed a consciousness related to race:

As I became older and more mature, I realized that the only way I would feel beautiful was to be as naturally black as I could. I think I love me more today than I ever had in spite of the fact that I am seriously overweight...Hair seems like such a small thing to determine one's esteem--but we were programmed to think of beauty in terms of skin color and hair texture.

These specific discussions regarding agency should alert the reader to ways these Black women grew and bound in their life pursuits.

### Sociohistorical events

In this next theme sociohistorical events shaped each woman in different ways, but each pointed to such events as a foundation for their experiences. Political and social activism coming out of social movements of our youth during the periods from civil rights and Generation X, the time frame for my participants' schooling, many lived and developed in different communities. Participants experiences, those ages—early forties to early fifties—encompass sociocultural influential events and movements across periods. The experiences were shaped by Jim Crow laws, desegregation and busing, Civil Rights, the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and the Black Power movement—*fighting alongside a King: Aspirations and Afros*. The younger study participants' were not yet born during these events and movements.

In Boston, I originally attended school within my mixed neighborhood through grade 2. I was then bused to a primarily white school within the same school district. There were no Black teachers, no presence of Black adults, except for the bus monitor. I never could understand why I had to leave the comfort of my neighborhood to attend a school I didn't want to attend or where I was not wanted, but mostly I recalled the daily reminders where my presence as a Black girl would be challenged. I recalled an incident regarding the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. I remember my sadness over this fallen leader, but mostly I remember my hurt from a white classmate who laughed and said she was glad he was dead. That single moment is frozen in my memory.

*From Kings to Nubian queens: Refracting and Illuminating crowns.* At the zenith of these experiences stood culturally influential events and occurrences that would ultimately change the literary and artistic, sociopolitical and sociocultural discourses of Blacks. The Black Power movement significantly changed the social, political, and economic power of Blacks in

America. Black Power concretized and brought forth a wellspring of racial pride and self-love. Many leaders encouraged the recognition of the natural beauty of Blacks. “Black is Beautiful” became the slogan of the era, and the insistence on Black Pride in many cases rid Blacks—some of the shame, doubt, and indignation fostered from slavery forward. The influence of history certainly had its stronghold. Although significant strides were made, they occurred through sacrifice and commitment from Black families, communities, churches, and yes, even children. Older participants were aware of dynamics that would challenge us to grow and bound as Anne declared,

When our school was closed then we were bused to the white school... so I was one of them that said, ‘you’re going to be in a white school, I want to be the best of the best, I want to be that.’

Clovia recalled many hurts associated with living in the apartheid south. The hurts from walking to school when a bus would not serve her area, to dismissal by white peers who daily harassed her and her siblings, to the insult of assembling in the school’s auditorium to receive “extra lessons” remain fresh in her mind. She recanted her diverse early schooling years,

I attended several schools, all in middle Georgia. First I attended a segregated primary school until about second grade. Then I attended Hingham Elementary and Pottsville Elementary, both segregated during third and fourth grade. At the beginning of fifth grade they integrated the schools and I was finally able to attend a school less than 10 miles from my home, Allendale Elementary, where I graduated in seventh grade.

With desegregation came the tenuous position of how people viewed Black children entering and performing in their schools. Clovia shared,

When I was doing [doctoral] research my brother reminded me of the daily trips to the bottom of the auditorium that all of the Black kids at Allendale made every afternoon. Supposedly, the administrators at the school felt we needed "special treatment" to help us catch up with the white kids. We were special in an unspecial way. We studied in that dark, dusty area and I think we began to believe what they believed about us.

*Literary and Media influences.* Equally important to sociohistorical events/experiences would be the impact of literary and media influences and its presentation and portrayal of Blacks. A heightened sense of literary writing by Black writers was so endemic, these contributions affected events and occurrences over many decades. The participants' narratives cited myriad critical incidents as crucial to worldviews of education and society. Mostly we viewed the events as a sacrifice toward the goal of better opportunities. My curiosity for knowledge about social injustices intensified as I craved answers to hate-filled white faces seen outside of school and on television at night. I craved answers to rage-etched Black faces seen in my own home and on television at night. Who hated a child that much? Who would threaten my right to learn? It was simply not acceptable. During that time, I visited a couple of community centers often where issues such as social justice and equity were discussed regularly by community activists. At the age of 13, I read *Death at an Early Age*, (Kozol, 1967). That book charted and changed my life.

The media, namely television, offered us a wider vision into the history and representation of Blacks. Often the images led participants to specific awareness or consciousness. Clovia distinctly remembers the impact of *Roots* (1976) and *The Color Purple* (1985). She read *Roots* in college and praised it for its "solid history, a pro Africanist agenda." Regarding *The Color Purple* she declared it was a breakthrough for Black women in that the

women characters exhibited agency. I recalled *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1973) and *Roots* as “consciousness raising” events. For others the reality of possibilities was equally as strong. Anne recalled,

I think that maybe [her siblings] didn’t see opportunities that I saw when I was growing up. Because when I was growing up I would see things on TV about people being nurses and doctors and people of color and so perhaps I saw opportunities.

Two younger participants in their early to mid thirties, Mack and Makesha, cited a specific television show depicting Black college life as a critical link to their educational interests. For them, the show set on campus of a fictitious HBCU in the southeast demonstrated a way of life they yearned to embrace. Mack was already envisioning her route to college and became transfixed with the hit 80’s show. She noted,

I do my work and do what I’m supposed to do, then I was sold, I mean and then when “A Different World” came out, (gesture of praise, hands upwards), Kennard and I talk about this, when that show, I said, I’m going to college. (matter of factly)... But then with “A Different World” that just kinda solidified it for me, that took it, made me take it to the next level. It was understood, knew, just knew, I suffered through elementary school and middle school and high school, who cares, it’s all about college.

For Makesha the impact of “A Different World” was similar. As a high school senior she toured HBCU’s. The tour occurred around the airing of “A Different World”, a sitcom which aired from 1987-1993. The setting was the campus of an HBCU. Makesha happened to visit the HBCU where the show was filmed, recalling the buildings and campus scenery, “About that time was when Lisa Bonet’s show came on and I knew that that was Spelman’s

campus.” For Makesha, the show, demonstrated her desire for immersion into an all-Black environment, she reminisced,

We got to Spelman and Morehouse and I just really liked the fact that there was a girl school and a boy school and they had so much pride in their school. I was like you know there’s this girl school and this boy school and it just seemed so perfect, it was ideal and right about that time was when Lisa Bonet’s show [“A Different World”] aired.

Although Angelina recalled the “Cosby Show” and its support of Black colleges she did not cite the show as an integral part of her schooling narrative. What participants cited overwhelmingly was the role of family, which is discussed in the next theme. The theme: Black family and community contexts emphasized education and academic potential—provide a fuller picture of the encouragement and emphasis on education.

#### Family Encouragement and Emphasis on Education

In *The Wiz*, Aunt Em’s opening song; “The Feeling We Once Had” characterizes Aunt Em’s hopes for Dorothy. She sings with depth and stirring rhythm and emphasizes, “I just want you to be everything I see in my dreams.” Like Aunt Em most family members continued to encourage these women as they grew, bounded forward, and sought conversations outside their spheres of familiarity.

This encouragement to go forward, for some participants’ families, emphasized the high value of education. Getting an education was non-negotiable. These Black women’s narratives are testimony to the strength and vitality of the family and community support of their educational trek. Nina shared,

The message even today, to this day, is do not let someone detour me from seeking or pursuing what I want, whatever my goals....I can achieve it, even to this day that's what they [parents] say , 'Go for it and don't let anyone stop you from doing what you want to do.'

These findings support those of Siddle Walker's (1996) historical ethnographic study that, "There was little variety in the type of students they were expected to become. Rather, it was consistently reinforced that they were to be honest, to value education, and to have good character" (p. 213), which documented ways home, school, and community influenced the educational attainment for Black girls before the days of desegregation. Her community's push against the daily oppressive struggles educated and nurtured its children. Black townspeople shared a stake in the highest potential of a child. As a result their narratives demonstrated ways lives were socially constructed.

These Black women pushed onward. While some parents understood the codes and had "more accoutrements of the culture of power in place-cultural capital" (Delpit, 1986, p. 28), others, like Clovia, said her parents, "did not possess the knowledge about how to access and use the many resources the public library offered." Within many communities, parents' engagement in their Black girls'/women's education was in spite of their lack of education and socioeconomic status. In Angelina's narrative, she recalled, "My grandmother only went to sixth grade and did not read very much English." Yet, her grandmother paid for her to attend a private school "to get a better educational experience than what [Angelina] would have received in public school." Since family members recognized that education, especially in systems of racial apartheid, was a route to economic and social mobility, more often than not,

most of them intentionally and emphatically helped their daughters, stepdaughters, granddaughters, sisters, and nieces “*ease on down*” that road.

The participants’ schooling stories reverberate with the variation of how parents emphasized the importance of education. For example, when I entered elementary school armed with pleas from my mother to “behave like a nice girl,” and my father’s military orders to “speak up and out”—I did both. Their message was clear: “learn, learn, learn.” In a recent conversation with my mother related to schooling and messages she told me,

I have no regrets about the choices I made; I wanted kids and wanted to be there for them. So, I stayed home with you kids until your brother was old enough for nursery school. We went to the library a lot. It was free. We spent time with books and games...during the summers we went to grandmothers’...you all were involved in all kinds of things. I thought it was important that I be there for you. (personal communication, (October, 2005).

Other variations involved ways to navigate and negotiate the schooling community. The contentious dialogue regarding color and class privilege resided within schooling communities. Mack’s honey-colored face was pensive as she discussed ways of negotiating class and color within the schooling community and found ways to “deal with it.” With hands clasped, she described issues related to color as an integral and intentional part of her lifeworld. “Color is really big in my family and in the community. That has been one of the things that has totally shaped not just my schooling experience but my life period.” Her mother dealt with these same issues as a girl, and she was determined that Mack would make the adjustment as well as she had. According to Mack, her mother admonished her to:

‘You go to school, despite what everyone says, You know, just do it, Just go as long as no one puts their hands on you, and School is there, you learn, you get your education!’

Mack’s mother’s encouragement inspired her to define what schooling would be for her. Mack insisted,

I’d motivate myself because I was a quiet child, I didn’t say much to anybody. So I think the people, the adults around me, kinda assumed that I knew what I was doing and I knew to go to school, I knew to do my work, but why should they have to tell me or encourage me. I’d bring home my little Honor Roll certificate and my mom was like, ‘Oh that’s good, put it in the scrapbook.’ And that was it you know.

Makesha’s mother’s messages were direct as well. She fondly recalled her mother driving her back to school to pick up her books whenever she completed homework and left the books at school.

Nina’s parents were involved in the discussions surrounding her education. Nina recalled how her mother signified the value of standing up for yourself and claiming the type of education you want. Nina’s story was rendered with emotion. She pierced her words with the bitterness of being denied opportunities to reach her highest potential.

I had to push myself, I had to push myself to know, not to just fluff my way through school, but to actually do more than the average student. I distinctly remember I was in the 11th grade year. I was looking at colleges and where to go to college I went to my counselor, a white man. He had pulled out all these different institutions and the institutions that he presented to me were technical schools, they were, they weren’t quote unquote elite, or A1 universities. They were not the top of the line schools, and that disturbed me. I went home. I actually was crying. I went home and told my mom

and she was like, ‘Why are you are crying?’ She got all upset and she pulled me aside and said, ‘Look, we need to go back. You need to talk to the counselor and tell him how that made you feel by him not presenting to you other alternatives. And that there were better schools out there.’ And sure enough, about an hour or so later—she was giving me time to recoup (laughing)—we went straight to the school! She said, ‘Look you offended my daughter.’ And she made me tell him how I felt.

For Nina this incident is a large part of what “drives [her] today” and “triggered all of this,”—*this* being the attainment of three degrees in four years. The counselor’s message buoyed by her parents’ vision for her future and the “value they placed on getting an education and going to college...they [her parents] had the greatest influence on me [her].” She insisted that while they never sat her or her siblings down to discuss education it was obviously highly valued. “They were good role models too in that they both have some college education even though they didn’t finish. They constantly pushed us to do our best and to never give up.”

Angelina, on the other hand, took what could have been well-intended words from her mother as a negative comment. In order for Angelina’s life to take a course different from her mother’s, her mother implored her, “You got to hang around people that make A’s.” Interestingly, Angelina took the statement to mean, “I thought she was telling me I was dumb.”

Anne had a couple of siblings who did not graduate from high school. Anne’s mother encouraged her to aim high and pursue her dream of going to college. Her mother’s words of counsel pushed her, “You can do what you want to do.” Anne shared, “I got encouragement from that.”

The participants believed they had the armament for the journey. Like words lifted from Glinda, “If You Believe,” they did “Believe in their hearts...No one [could] change the

path you must go.” The insistence for educational attainment was a common thread for participants; family members expressed it in notably different ways. The Scarecrow in *The Wiz* desperately sings “You Can’t Win,” a dirge to his belief that he has no control over his life. The song “You Can’t Win” embodies messages participants some participants received from family members. Unlike with other participants, in the case of these women, decisions were made for them. For example, Clovia’s parents were explicit in their encouragement of education, but did not foster a vision beyond high school. Clovia had to go to school, but beyond that, there was no positive encouragement. She determined this was due to her parents’ limited formal education. Clovia remarked,

Since my parents were not formally educated (my mother did not graduate from high school and my father barely finished elementary school) they did not possess the knowledge about how to access and use the many resources the public library offered. Also, they did not attend PTA meetings and other school events. Nevertheless, we were required to attend school, in rain or shine, in sickness and health. I only remember missing school when I was very ill.

Makesha recalled not wanting to go to school. Early on, Makesha’s mother pushed her out of the neighborhood school and into a private, elite school. Of her mother’s push, she shared,

She was a kindergarten/day care type of teacher in one of these schools and she decided long before I ever got there that she was never going to let me go to those schools. So I started at this Endicott School which was not my choice but I went anyway.

With parents as college professors, Elena responded to a query about the direct messages about education from parents as follows:

They invested the time and money. I was always in private school, from nursery school through high school. My sole responsibility was to do what was expected of me to the best of my ability. Looking back, I guess the fact that since all of my early education had been in private schools, I view education as a privilege and something that should be taken seriously. My aunt - my mom's oldest sister, a retired elementary school principal, always told her two daughters and me, 'Your only JOB is to go to school and do your work.'

Inside of our experiences there is a celebration of a strengthening quality in these Black girls and women—the family role model and support—those who despite overwhelming pressures and odds, exhibited an extraordinary capacity to touch the lives of these participants.

*Engaging family role models and support*

They were women then  
My mama's generation  
Husky of voice – stout of  
Step  
With fists as well as  
Hands....Headragged generals....

Alice Walker, *The Women*

*Grandmothers as Glindas.* Another aspect of heeding family encouragement and emphasis on education is the engagement of family role models and support. Many participants credit familial support and models as pivotal to their academic pursuits. Of the eight participants, five gave accounts of how our grandmothers' support and influence impacted educational and academic pursuits. My Grandma was not schooled as much as she was educated. In the Black community education implies wisdom that one often does not get

from schooling. With this idea in mind, I am defining education as both informal (mother wit, street smarts, communal and cultural inculcation) and formal (school, tutoring, academic clubs), both of which are highly valued in African-American communities.

Angelina's family revered her paternal grandmother, and this grandmother wielded the power awarded her. According to Angelina, family gatherings were an especially important time for celebrating decisions, challenges, and successes in the presence of those who "loved and supported" her. Angelina referred to her grandmothers throughout each interview. Their presence in her narratives is *frequent* (Alexander, 1988: see Appendix G). Angelina was raised by her maternal grandmother. "My mama's mama was like my soul, she was my spirit." Her grandmother's determination set Angelina on the path. Angelina recalled the way her maternal grandmother influenced her academic pursuits:

[Grandmother was] very instrumental in my education; she paid for me to go to private elementary school while I was living with her. This was the same school my mother attended, and she believed it offered me a better educational experience than what I would have received in public school. She wanted me to have options, to love God and love life. She would tell me to take my time growing up, because it was rough being an adult. She said enjoy school, friends and it was important to respect what my teachers had to say. My grandmother only went to sixth grade and didn't read very much English. Again my grandmother was Creole and spoke mostly French. To her it seemed that I needed to get ahead but to enjoy myself as I pushed through.

Whether grandmothers lived within the same households, within the same state, a few states away, or across the waters, their engagement with granddaughters reverberated in narratives as a lifelong influence. Makesha visited her paternal grandmother in the islands

during summer months. She playfully credits her grandmother's passion for learning as evidence of the value placed on education. She shared,

So my grandmother was a teacher, she was a principal. Now [the island] educational system is completely different than the States. They don't let you not do stuff; you gotta do what you gotta do. So over the summer although I got to do a lot of fun stuff, I got to go to camp. She used to knit and crochet so I used to get to do that with her, but she made me do work everyday. We had school, everyday. And I had to do homework, everyday, which I hated, I hated, hated, hated and she was . . . my grandmother was the nicest lady she really was. But when it came to work she was so strict. Like it was a woman I had never seen until like one hour out of every day and then she would sit down and make me do what I had to do and I just remember it was a lot better than doing it at home because my mother use to get very frustrated with me because I would just fuck up because I wasn't paying attention. My grandmother had a lot more patience so I got schooled all year round.

Sometimes the influence was in what was not said. Regarding her education, Makesha noted her maternal grandmother seemed pleased. "When I was in a white school . . . I think that made her happy." Her grandmother was "the only one of her generation that did not graduate from college." There were others of us with grandmothers who did not finish high school or in some cases grade school, but their encouragement was explicit. Elena, Clovia, and I had grandmothers who either earned a living by "wash[ing] someone else's clothes" or "doing day work." We all cited the influence of our "formally uneducated" grandmother as profound and endearing, touching us for a lifetime. We admired their values impressed upon their children. Elena praised her maternal grandmother, a determined woman

with a fourth grade education, for raising a family of “six children (five out of six of whom have post graduate degrees) and her ten grandchildren (seven out of ten of whom have post graduate degrees).” Her influence was present in Elena’s life as early as the age of five.

I recall spending time with my grandmother and helping her with household chores while my grandfather worked as a carpenter during the day. I always enjoyed helping her wash clothes and hang them on the line to dry, and I loved sweeping, mopping, and setting the table for dinner. One day while I was helping to fold my grandfather's newly washed and dried clothes, I told my grandmother, "When I grow up, I want to do housework like you, grandmommie." I couldn't have been more than 5 or 6 years old at the time. She looked at me, sighed, and said, ‘Oh, no, Elena, I don't want that for you. You'll never have a day's rest.’ I recount this brief conversation as my grandmother's way of instilling, early on, the importance of my getting an education to ‘improve my lot in life.’

My grandmother worked as a domestic for over 30 years, never losing hope that her dedication to education would produce a legacy of formally educated kin with a better station in life. Her message is, ‘Get that paper, girl!’ Participants were urged onto the path, encouraged by the ways grandmothers gave voice to mother wit by narrating or performing their lives and experiences. Their insistence on “getting the paper,” and desire for us to do our best and actualize greater dreams and goals was a wave of the wand.

*From a velvet sky, a summer storm.  
But not even lightning will be frightening my lion.  
And with no fear inside.  
No need to run.  
No need to hide.  
You're standing strong and tall.  
You're the bravest of them all.  
If on courage, you must call,*

*then just keep on tryin' and tryin' and tryin,'  
Be a Lion in your own way.*

“Be a Lion,” *The Wiz*, 1975

*Menfolk: Influential roles.* As we think of influences, many participants cited family menfolk as models of support and as a dramatic impact upon their education and academic potential. I summon imageries of courageous men, courageous Black menfolk. Because of them, we are. The courage motif associated with the tune, “Be a Lion,” stands as a testament to the complex, dramatic lives of our menfolk. They were Black menfolk, “pushing against the current of [their] environment” (Wright, 1993 p.168), being brave when they could have chosen to hide. Amidst their trials and tribulations, they represented *courage* needed to survive societal challenges and renderings of who they were. Celebrating the lives of Black men dedicated to the uplift of their Black girls/women is just that, a celebration. The supportive father and stepfather stories represented in these narratives buoy the lives, lore, and language of Black girls and women in this study.

Contrary to the critiques society places on Black men, many participants shared stories paying homage to male influences in their lives. It has been Black men (as well as Black women and Native Americans) who have provided in this culture the most inspiring directions for everyone’s freedom (Walker, p. 539). Historically, the wider society has held negative images of Black men (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Yet, these participants resoundingly laud the role of fathers and male figures and their influence in participants’ lives. All of the participants shared similar stories of ways that parents and family, and specifically Black menfolk, emphasized education. Interestingly there were few instances of Black men who had limited expectations of them. Males were often at the epicenter of participants’ education.

My granddad was paying my tuition to go to this school. My mom wanted me to go to public school. I wanted to go to public school. But granddad wanted the best, the best is private school, the best Buster Brown shoes, the best, you know.

Anne, a preacher's daughter, recalled not just her mother, but "*Even* my dad was pretty strict about us going to school... he was a preacher pastor. His education was towards Christian indoctrinations." Although he was not formally schooled beyond high school, his influence was set against a backdrop of some of his children dropping out. Fathers with advanced education and/or training had daughters actively seeking counsel regarding decisions related to schooling.

I remember having a conversation with my dad about attending a HBCU versus mixed or all white school and he felt that the best school to attend would be one that was mixed. So I of course I adopted this same feeling which meant I ruled all predominately Black schools out.

In some narratives males in their families held advanced degrees and special places in their lives. Mack cherished a supportive relationship with her stepfather. Of their relationship, she shared,

He's been in my life since I was two. And I guess as I get older I knew he went to, got his bachelor's and his master's in sociology. He's always been really encouraging and he would even substitute teach at my elementary school. And so to kinda see him, sometime he would sub in my class and whatnot. To see him really kinda encouraged me and kinda modeled that for me.

As the daughter of educators, Elena received early messages regarding education from her father—whose mother was a schoolteacher. She recalled, "My dad would say, if they were

‘*somebody*,’ and *somebody* meant not only your heritage, but your education. You’re making something of yourself.”

Makesha’s father was a college graduate. Although Makesha did not share the class conscious stance of her grandfather and uncles, when referring to their PhDs, she stated,

I wanted one. My grandfather was a pharmacist, he had his PhD. All of his brothers had PhDs, they’re all pharmacists, they had a family pharmacy in North Carolina...so these are all pretty well educated people for the time and I think they really thought they were the higher class Black people.

Women shared that fathers and/or male figures’ love of books, use of big words, sharing philosophies, life lessons and commitment to education, family, and community gave them inspiration. My father reminded my siblings and me that, “Without degrees there are limitations, and people climbing have degrees.”

Interestingly, there were few instances of Black men—fathers, boyfriends, spouses who had limited expectations or influences upon the participants. In Angelina’s narrative she described her father as “on the scene but minimally, so I would have to say he was not an influence.” Others still dismissed their father’s influence (Alexander, 1988: Appendix G) or we never had the opportunity to address it. For some others, males concern about a participants’ status as an unmarried woman was recollected. Elena, an only child, recalled,

After my father passed in 2001 and I had decided, in 2002, to return to graduate school to begin work on my PhD. I recall telling my grandparents about my plans [for a doctoral program]. My grandfather, who also impressed upon his children the value of education but felt that young women were not considered adults until they married (and

I was still single at that time), told me he thought I should stay at home with my mother (She was a widow and I was yet unmarried).

When my father passed this summer, I realized, the first man I ever loved could not accompany me on future journeys, nor would I hear his raspy baritone voice ask ‘Hey, Kiddo, you a doctor yet?’ Elena responded to my father’s death with words that help assuage my spirit and could possibly stand as a totem for me and my participants regarding Black menfolk—the bold and the courageous—“know that you are one of your father’s [menfolks’] most beautiful legacies....Embrace that!” *A mighty roar*, indeed.

### Recognizing Community Models of Support

*Community “Lanterns.”* These Black women’s narratives are rife with examples of influences (voices) that reinforced educational attainment. In her role of the Good Witch Addaperle, Glinda’s sister, not only gives Dorothy the silver slippers of the Wicked Witch of the East, she tells Dorothy of “the world and the way things are.” Like Dorothy the study participants are guided by *lanterns*, a community member with vision (Edelman, 1999)—lighting the way with words of inspiration and wisdom. Our lanterns emphasize the pursuit of education as a high ideal reached by using ones own “fantastic powers.” Mack recalled two church members, her lanterns.

I went to a small church in Plymouth, Georgia, and there were these two old women, they were like ancient—they were like a million years old. They were the Franklin Sisters and their father started a middle school. He was the founder and so they would donate money to the R.Q. Franklin Scholarship Fund. Each of us that went to college would get a \$100 every quarter from the fund and for our books. And these women as old as they were, always talked about the importance of education, because they were

both teachers. I would talk with them from time to time. They would tell me to, ‘Keep on going, keep on doing the good thing.’

When asked during her interview how important was community or family in terms of your education or your school experiences, Anne replied,

I think there was a lot of community vibe. When somebody in the community graduated or did something unique and there was a lot of celebration there. People honking at you and, ‘Hey, Anne how’s school going?’ So they were investing in my education just as well as my family. I can’t think of anyone in my community at home that was not supportive. It was a sense of pride to help somebody in the community who was doing something. Even when I go back now, ‘Are you Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ yet?’

Some lanterns are recalled from the earliest memories, like mine. Earlier I fondly recalled one, community activist, Elma Lewis. As an activist her strokes—grand and miniscule—reified *lantern*. This was especially true as I recalled whisperings that I was too dark or too chubby when she selected me for the ballet role of Suzy Snowflake; nonetheless, I was cast in the role. Consequently, these revered educators—by educators I mean all those that educate Black young people in the community—led by example, wielded authority, and in some cases readied themselves to protect their charges. I have a memory of another such lantern. I used to ride the bus to school. Our bus monitor, also a teacher’s aide, was old school, cultured, and refined woman. Mrs. Richardson would tell us not to say ain’t and definitely not to be so loud. She was extremely eloquent, poised, and grand. She never breached her façade—even the day white parents, came to meet the bus with hockey sticks, bats, and sticks...she was our *velvet fist in an iron glove*, I’ll never forget her or that day.

Not all participants recalled support or encouragement from community. Clovia and Angelina share similar stories. They both grew up in poor communities in the southeast part of the United States. Both had parents with little education. Both were heavily influenced by their maternal grandmothers. Clovia and Angelina insisted their close bonds with siblings and grandmothers helped circumvent environmental stressors. Within their communities they dealt with realities of survival on basic levels. Clovia's worldview as a Black girlchild reared in south during integration of schools mirrors Angelina's, a post integration child.

Many of the participants' narratives depicted variations in the messages from family influencing their schooling. Families were responsive and began preparing them early to manage the variations of their experiences. Indeed, participants' experiences can no longer be viewed as something separate and they had to be seen as part and parcel of the larger milieu of schooling experiences.

**Clovia: Coalesced**

Every time she saw me,  
That teacher,  
I was my momma. My auntie.  
Someone who cleaned her house  
*round brown unpretty girlchild*

Every time they saw me  
They feigned remembrance  
I am unnoticed  
One Black child  
Like any other  
*round brown unpretty girlchild*

Every time they see me  
I am untalented.  
*round brown unpretty girlchild*

I am invisible  
Coalesced into one identity.

But, I said hello, anyway.

### Schools as a Reflection of Society

The analysis for theme four: schools often reflected society in attempts to construct these Black women in narrow ways. Clovia's data poem expressly related how as the daughter of a domestic and as a student, Clovia could not be distinguished from other Black children, even though she knew white people—specifically—teachers through two distinct settings. She recollected:

When the white people moved in [surrounding a small black community] they built Astordale for the “country club” kids. Most of the kids who went to school there were very wealthy, owned mansions, horses, and went to “cotillion.” All of the schools except Astordale were located in African-American neighborhoods... There were only about 15 or 20 black kids at the school, most of us were descendents of Brooke County residents, and most of our parents worked in the homes of white people or in the nearby cotton mill (my elders did both).

The Black women who appear in these categories have been schooled, educated, and reared in different places, some in small, rural towns, or mid-western and northeastern cities. While there may be a difference in their cultural backgrounds, the Black women in this study that as a part of their schooling experiences identified school make-up, limited identity construction because of peer, teacher and staff, and teacher engagement as an integral parts of life lessons and critical incidents influencing their decisions, challenges, and successes before the pursuit of doctoral degrees. So what are the implications of these school make-ups? Are there any?

The make-up of the schools attended by the participants varied from all-Black Catholic schools (elementary), integrated and segregated elementary schools, and white or Hispanic populated middle and high schools. No participant attended all Black schools during their

entire schooling journey. Half attended predominantly white schools for most if not all of our schooling. Two attended an HBCU. Only two older participants' early schooling experiences were in segregated elementary schools; yet, all of their subsequent schooling was in predominantly white schools. As participants shared their stories from early schooling onward, it is critical to note how they described their school make up with varying degrees of tension. In fact, no participant shared these stories with elation. Participants were forthright in their recollections of not only the physical locations but sociocultural locations mapped onto their specific school types. For instance, according to Elena, Catholic schools were generally viewed as a social class determiner. All three participants, Elena, Angelina, and Mack attend to this notion, albeit with differing perspectives. Elena's introspective recollection was:

In many respects [Catholic schools are] supposed to represent an upper middle class privilege...the experience in school was kinda convoluted like I said before usually you equate Catholic school, parochial school, private school with an upper middle class privilege or for upper to upper middle class privilege. But not in Banksville now people still do but in retrospect I had nuns as teachers or I had from 1st – 8th grade I had one nun teacher, I had third, first & second grade really good teachers and ended there. I think it was a comfort zone but also maybe (pausing) I think by the time they were hired in parochial school they were just tired. They may have been top notch teachers in their day, but at St. Sanitra's we got leftovers.

Mack on the other hand recalled that community hierarchies existed. Separation based on class and color was common. Using a chopping action, she demonstrated the hierarchy: darker skinned Blacks lived on one side and lighter skinned Blacks on the other. She lived with her paternal grandparents during the week, as they lived on the same side of town as the all-

Black Catholic school, and her grandfather was, “big in the community and whatnot.”

Although Angelina’s lower socioeconomic background differed from both Mack and Elena’s she recalled the Catholic school experience as one where social classes meld. Angelina noted, “All of us wore uniforms, all of us had lunch. It wasn’t noticeable differences.”

For others the differences regarding race and class were stark. As Makesha recalled attending an all-white Elementary School, “I went to a school called the Endicott School in Milton and up until . . . from first grade to sixth grade and it was all white, predominately Jewish. I won’t even call it predominately white because there were like most classes didn’t have Black kids. I was just *lucky* my class had 2 ½.”

But Makesha contrasted her early schooling experience sharply to her high school experience where color mattered less, and rich, white, liberal peers did not seem as taken aback by her color, hair, or wardrobe. But class took the place of color and race issues. Her peers lived a drastically different life from Makesha; they had “Rolls Royce’s with drivers, vacation in the Hamptons,” while she on the other hand had a mother who, “was not poor but she definitely wasn’t rich. We never had a driver. She drove me everywhere I needed to go. So that’s what I remember about school.”

As we examine the dimensions of schooling experiences, these narratives offer purposeful stories to guide us further in our understanding of early schooling experience for Black girls and women. In the next category related to schools as a reflection of society, participants’ stories remind readers of the possibilities for constructions and constrictions, within schooling communities.

*Limited constructions.* Another aspect of ways school reflects society is demonstrated through this category, limited constructions. Although some studies examined the schooling

experiences of Black girls/women—Grant (1992), Irvine (2002), and Johnson-Bailey (2002)—this study expands the dialogue and looks at schools as a reflection of society. These participants endured and in some cases fought against labels that narrowed their movement. Similar to the quartet of travelers along the Yellow Brick Road, the participants foraged through constrictions and constructions, acknowledging that their schooling experiences as Black girls/women would be different from others. Interestingly, Clovia described school as “an escape,” from impoverished conditions, while Angelina felt like “an outsider.” Through their narratives we learn that not only home but school contributed to their constructions. Clovia specifically stated, “My early schooling experiences are closely related to my home experiences because I come from a segregated environment and my family was poor.” Labels, such as “daddy’s girl,” “teacher’s pet,” “po’,” “nerdy,” and “loud” are among the limited constrictions. Whether participants attended all Black Catholic schools like Elena, Mack, and Angelina, or were schooled in integrated schooling environments *and* regardless of grade level, they wanted to “fit in” and find acceptance. Instead many found limited constructions from peers, teachers and staff.

***Mack: white girls don’t go to this school***

From day one of school!

*This li'l brown girl, I forget her name  
Hecklin' real bold  
**white girls don't go to this school***

*I'm lookin' round and above my head  
You know in that “who me?” sorta way.  
I don't know what you're talking about,  
(LOL) like what're you talking about?  
Hecklin' again.  
**white girls don't go to this school.***

*Whoa, I was like, **well** there's no **white** girl here!*

*You know,  
she was like, **welll** you **look** like it,  
I'm like **welll** I'm not!  
But.  
I'm thinking of mom, she's real light  
Granddaddy, he's real light  
Granny, she's real light*

*But, but I  
stand **my** ground  
kinda keep my game face on  
for whatever that meant at seven.*

*Hiding, hurting, hating*

*I'm supposed to be  
Deep chocolaty brown  
So  
I told mom  
we need to fix that.*

*Laughing. Shaping.  
from dark spaces.  
The taunting quiets but speaks just the same.  
**white girls don't go to this school***

*Peers.* Oftentimes participants had to deal with their peers' perceptions. Many found their peers had varying ideas: some peers perceived the participants as thinking they were better than others, while others found the participants acculturated quite differently from them. Mack's light-complexion prompted another Black girl to taunt her on the first day of school. For Mack this event was not only the beginning of years of peer and self-imposed isolation, but it was also the beginning of discovering who she was and how she could shape her world. Still others confronted perception different from theirs; such was the case with Nina. She solemnly shared:

I learned from the 1%, the handful of Black folks that were there [undergraduate], that everything I did there, all the successes that I had, the firsts that I had there, I was doing

it for my personal edification; I was also doing it to show them they could do the same. I learned that they didn't see it that way. They saw me as being Miss Goody Two-Shoes, Miss (choked up) in some respects they considered me being white, you know, 'Oh she's trying to be like them.'

Indeed most participants were viewed with narrower lenses that contributed to their shaping and molding and how they were socially cast. Clovia remarked,

I knew that I did not belong to any group at school. Since I attended a white school during my last three years of elementary school, I did not talk like the other Black kids. When I went to junior high, they called me "Uncle Tom." The white kids, on the other hand, acted like my friends in private, but in public would not acknowledge any relationship with me.

Many recalled their search for balance, especially in a society that dealt with young Black girls and Black women differently than others. They wanted the friendships, but usually those came at a cost. Anne shared, "They didn't call me a nerd, they called me 'Ms. Bookie' or something. I don't know but it was like they sometimes thought I was better than them or something."

Schooling experiences found many participants grappling with class constructions. Unlike elementary school where everyone wore uniforms, Angelina remarked, "I didn't know I was poor until I was in middle school." African American communities described by the participants could make a way out of no way, yet participants struggled to reconcile poverty and the requirements of society to sit outside of the social circle where many felt, as Angelina, like an outsider. Participants were cast in various stereotypical roles. While Angelina felt like an outsider, Elena battled with perceptions of coming from a rich family and popularity. Her

schooling experience is the antithesis of many of the participants in that “People called our crew, our circle; we were ‘the rich girls.’” Elena’s attempts at challenging her status as rich, was countered by her insistence that she was the “nice one,” of the bunch.

In sum, there is a song in *The Wiz* “Don’t Nobody Bring me no Bad News” that has a certain resonance with this theme: schools often reflected society in attempts to construct these Black women in narrow ways. In the stories related to constrictions and construction one can wonder what more “bad” news do social and educational institutions need to retools its strategies, if any, for addressing the educational experiences of Black girls and women.

#### *Teachers and staff*

At varying points in their schooling, all participants attended schools beyond their home communities. Regardless of where they attended school, their learning experiences—early through college—held issues related to racism, classism, and colorism. Often these moves resulted in lower expectations of Black students; students who were often ignored, invisible, or impotent. During the interviews many participants remembered some hurtful incidents involving teachers and/or staff for the first time. Makesha shared, “I don’t know who it was but, soon as I walked in I heard someone say and I never knew who it was ‘Oh my God, she’s Black.’” This was the first day of school and I just didn’t know what to do.” Clovia had little patience for the “isms” throughout her schooling. She remarked, “I had never been able to withstand injustice in any form; consequently, I engaged in verbal combat with the bigots with and from whom I was educated.” Anne’s recollections demonstrate ways constructions imprint one’s life. She recalled a white, male sixth grade teacher who made her “get licks” for an “attitude problem.” Regarding him, she noted, “I thought that he didn’t think we as Black children could really learn. I didn’t feel like he really cared.” While this incident did not deter her capacity for learning, its uniqueness (Alexander, 1988) prompted more suppressed

memories. She admitted, “I had another experience like Mole Face, I had Ms. Zoll, what was it about these folks! She said that this paper is an A paper, but she gave me a B. I didn’t understand it.”

I asked Anne whether that incident drives her today. She shook her head and laughed hauntingly:

It pisses me off! It really pisses me off! I think at that time I was more into the grades than I was the learning. Now I’m more into the learning. But, at the same time, if I do the work then I expect to get what I think I deserve. . . I will never forget . . . I had forgotten it until just now, that’s interesting.

Some participants shared their confusion regarding distinctions teachers made, both Black and white teachers, along color and class. Elena shared, “I had a hard time with some teachers because I was always deemed the Rousser girl. I was the golden goose egg—I was an only child.” The issue of construction based upon color was a strain on Mack throughout her narratives. Mack remembered attempts to remain invisible and her mother’s insistence, “I don’t want any of my children getting any preferential treatment just because of how they look.” Shaking her head, Mack recollected, “I was kinda the teacher’s pet, but I didn’t want to be, I didn’t want to be. But, as she described her teachers, especially Miss Lightwater, “gushed and gushed over me.”

Where Mack received overt attention, Clovia summarized her schooling experiences: “I was poor, untalented, and unnoticed. No one took special time with me.” Clovia’s narrative unabashedly looks at issues of class, race and color. For Clovia, this treatment was not the exception. She suggested, “I think every teenager feels somewhat inadequate. I do not know why I felt ugly. I do know that I was not that special child in my family [school] except in a

negative way. I always marched to a different drummer. I was passive/aggressive and rebellious.”

The participants’ danced purposefully on their respective paths—stumbling often; yet, never totally alone. Participants thrived and were encouraged along the Yellow Brick Road.

#### Cultivating Relationships and Encouraging Academic Potential

Overwhelmingly, in this final theme, participants cited teachers and professors who cultivated relationships with them and recognized their capacity. Like Dorothy’s Glinda, these participants’ had teachers and professors who led them through the poppies, bypassing its inducing powers. It would have been easy to saddle up next to mediocrity, for wasn’t that the expectation for so many of us? Teachers directed participants into Advanced Placement classes and activities fostering certain passions and skills. Mack’s favorite teacher of an advanced level English class acknowledged and encouraged her writing talent. Mack won the Promising Young Authors Award in the sixth grade. Mack recalled an incident that brings her joy, even now.

She told us all to be quiet and settle down. She told us all to sit down and she would like to read this essay. She was like, I have this student that wrote a beautiful essay and so she read it. She had this, you know how teachers have that voice that sounds so, so soothing. So she started reading and something told me it was my paper, I just knew it! (smiling broadly) So she started reading it and I just got tears in my eyes.

Anne noted the ways another white teacher responded to her—acknowledging and accommodating—both of their learning styles. But, she most fondly recalled one Black teacher. She shared,

I remember Mrs. Mills. Sharp dresser. She became the principal of our high school. She demanded excellence and she showed excellence, she modeled what she expected. She was passionate about [teaching], she seemed to enjoy what she was doing. She did more than just read. She would assign us reading and give us time to read and then repeat what was in the text. So her style of teaching was more interactive and not . . . it seems as though she wanted us to get ahead. She was very respectful of us compared to [Moleface].

Nina wrote in an e-mail:

As I reflect back on my schooling experiences I distinctly remember three white female teachers one during my elementary, middle, and high school years in Davis. During elementary school Ms. Bannister, whose classroom I was assigned, as I recall, made me feel excited about learning. I remember how animated she was and how that spilled over into her teaching. She loved teaching. She was a small-framed woman about 5ft tall. When she smiled I remember seeing her coffee-stained teeth. (I have no idea why this image comes to mind but I feel compelled to share this). Even though that image surfaced her smile still comforted me.

Nina credited a middle school teacher, whose name eluded her, as the first teacher to inquire about gifted classes. Nina also noted, this teacher was caring and “helped to build my [her] confidence as a student.” For me, Ms. Randolph, the High School English Coordinator and Mrs. Butler, then the only Black teacher in the town, commandeered my high school courses and activities.

Regarding special teachers in earlier years through high school, Clovia wrote, “None that I remember. I was invisible except when I was in trouble for talking too much.” However,

in later years, Clovia befriended a woman who was Black, a nurse, and a professor. She was a RN with a PhD in the field of nursing. She gave Clovia advice regarding PhD programs. A few more of us cited professors as integral to our academic pursuits. At Clark College and Clark Atlanta University there were professors pushing me at every bend; challenging me, us, to ‘rise, rise.’ Mack remarked, “My professor and good friend now, always would tell me, ‘You’re going to be a strong writer one day. You’ve got promise. You’re good right now, but you’ll be great one day.’ So that kinda stuck with me.” Makesha also credited a professor for pushing her towards the PhD pursuit. She recalled,

I think a lot of it happened after my masters when I started going to Atlanta State just to take them classes because I lived around the corner from Atlanta State and I met Dr. Betty Jackson Parker, she’s a linguist and she became a friend. It was like one of the first Black female teachers I had.

Angelina exclaimed, “Believe it or not it was a professor who told me I was a good student. Girl, that changed my life!”

Black women responded to their own specific desires to move ahead despite race, color, or class. What is telling is the non-role gender seemed to play in their lives. Throughout their schooling narratives, and unlike other narratives relative to Black women, the fact that we are “female” seemed to be of little consequence as we grappled with other issues along the Yellow Brick Road. One issue was focusing on college goals. Our focus on college goals occurred through parents, family, and community members, or our own exploration. Some of us resisted while others acquiesced. With rare exception many participants opted to attend college away from home.

*Focusing on college goals.*

Mack, Makesha, and Elena’s parents began focusing on college goals as early as elementary school. While others like Nina, Anne, and I entered or considered discussions of college early in high school; others were uncertain whether to attend college or a technical school until nearly the 11<sup>th</sup> grade as in Angelina’s case. Angelina later attended an HBCU for her bachelor and Master’s degrees. Clovia—whose schooling trek is a mixture of self-determination, fortitude, and lack of familial involvement—trek determined, “I had to grope around on my own in this unknown territory.” Makesha’s mother was heavily involved in her schooling from elementary school onward; yet, Makesha described her tentativeness about schooling until the HBCU tour when her desire to attend a specific HBCU was one-dimensional:

I didn’t want to go to college, had no desire. I wanted to go to one school, and I got rejected, and when I got rejected . . . I only applied to one school and that was Spelman. I wore Spelman clothes my whole senior year in high school and I wanted to go to Spelman period. I didn’t get into Spelman early admission which would have been in the fall. So I tried again for the spring. I’m not smart enough, I guess I wasn’t at the time, I didn’t apply at any other school, I only applied at Spelman.

Anne also expressed a desire to attend the same all-female HBCU and like Makesha was not accepted—and consequently did not want to apply to other schools. It was at both of their mother’s insistence that they made application to other schools. Ironically, they both attended large, white universities. In sharing my journey, I too wanted to attend a specific HBCU. During the summer before my senior year, I was selected to participate in an Urban Journalism Workshop at a local university. We were visited by local media personalities and it

was that experience coupled with a need for a culturally relevant experience in an all-Black environment that led me to apply to an HBCU. I also applied to a few of New England's Ivy League colleges and universities to assuage mentors and models. I hovered around the mailbox for the acceptance letter to the HBCU all spring. Consequently, I attended the same HBCU for my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I landed in Atlanta to attend Clark College (and later Clark Atlanta University), where I danced through a world that embraced its rich culture through the arts, readings, presentations and performances that I only heard of fleetingly in Boston. Professors, Black like me, pushed me in search of possible selves. My primary reasons for attending a specific HBCU was its strong communications department, rich cultural experiences, and sense of community identity.

Angelina's quest for college occurred in her junior year of high school. She acknowledges living near an HBCU with a notable sports and heritage culture. Angelina recalled, "I grew up near Lagniappe University and wanted more than anything to be a part of the Lagniappe nation, but this was only when I realized I wanted to go to college." Like those of us with desires to attend an HBCU, the issue of considering or attending an HBCU resulted in provocative data. HBCU's historically attract students for a number of reasons. But there are those who questioned the strength of academic programs and an all-Black setting as an impediment for considering an HBCU. Many choose not to attend HBCU's for the very reasons Angelina and I attended. Nina not only recalled her particular frustration at a counselor's presentation of materials for HBCU's, but also cites other reasons for decisions leading her not to attend an HBCU but rather a small, white college in the southeast. She shared,

I didn't want to be stereotyped, and for people to say she went to an all Black school and therefore she didn't get all the proper education and all that and that followed me through college. Ever since I was a little girl I had wanted to become a doctor, specifically a pediatrician. I had always told myself that I was going to travel to Africa to help heal the sick children in that country. So becoming a doctor was my goal even after graduating from high school. The high school I attended was approximately 70% white and 30% Black student population. This mix had an influence on the college I selected. As my senior year approached I began searching for racially mixed colleges. I think my parents shaped my thinking regarding the latter statement. I remember having a conversation with my dad about attending a HBCU versus mixed or all white school, and he felt that the best school to attend would be one that was mixed. So I of course I adopted this same feeling which meant I ruled all predominately Black schools out. I also determined early on that I did not want to be just a number and as a result I immediately ruled [large white university] out. So then I began to look for small private colleges. After my first visit to the college I knew that I'd do well there. I felt comfortable. Even though it was mostly white I didn't feel that I would have a problem with racism. In fact, I felt strangely comfortable. The thought of attending an all Black school made me feel a bit uncomfortable.

Nina's stance may be particularly unique, whereas Clovia's background disembarked from the support and information systems to which so many others were privy. Clovia expressed her view on HBCU's:

I valued what white folks told me, I never considered going to an HBCU. Also, I felt the kind of people who went there were heavily ensconced in Black culture in

Mattapan. I was an outsider to that culture. No one in my family had ever attended college, so they had no advice as to whether I should have attended an HBCU. I believe the decision not to even apply to an HBCU was one of the biggest influences on who I have become. I wouldn't give anything for my journey now, but there is something that those who attended HBCU's have that I am missing.

Clovia's determination to stay put and "listen to the white folks," framed her life. Now in her late forties, she creates imagery regarding HBCUs. She sees the possibilities that her life may have been enhanced by this experience, no doubt. Six participants attended historically white universities and colleges. Many choose not to attend HBCUs for the very reasons that others decided to attend.

In my writings across time, I described young Black girls and women with fresh ideas, tresses and attitudes. I honored their thinking and social capacities. Their lights burned brightly. However, far too often, there are Black girls and women who experience an unscrewing, a diminishing of their light. I was one whose light flickered, but the filament of home and community was stronger. I persevered. I recall during my early schooling and junior high years when as a "smart" Black girl, I was often shunned in favor of white girls. I came from a "good, two parent" working middle class home. I dressed neatly, smelled sweetly—even more, I made good grades. My parents were called to the school often enough to know a problem was brewing.

The Scarecrow and Glinda the Good Witch of the South might say we find newer spaces in which to reside. In the soul-stirring tune, "I Was Born the Day Before Yesterday," the Scarecrow laments over his fate regarding his lot in life, yet he uplifts and croons with a hope that rests within, "*I know I'm going to make it this time.*" Scarecrow sings of the clothing

placed on him, and when I think of our “selves,” we, too, are cloaked. Without cultivating relationships and encouraging academic potential, what echoes in the limited literature and in the voices of myself and study participants, emphasizes that our learning experience was different from those of white peers. Like Angelina, we determined to move beyond our locations, literally and figuratively.

### **Angelina: Driven**

We were determined  
to not live in situations  
where we didn't have options

#### A Brand New Day: Implications

*Everybody be glad because the sun is shining just for us. Everybody wake up into the morning into happiness. Hello world! It's like a different way of living now...and thank you world; we always knew that we'd be free somehow. In harmony and show the world that we've got liberty. Can't you see a Brand New Day?*

*William Brown, The Wiz, 1975*

This interview study focused on the complexities of the sociocultural and sociohistorical context of a specific group of Black women's schooling experiences. My inquiry was driven by the following question: What do Black women doctoral students in a historically white southern research university identify as the life lessons and/or critical incidents within the home, school, and/or community that influenced their decisions, challenges, and successes leading to their pursuit of doctoral degrees? Specific implications for teaching and teacher education programs are critical when we look at the intersectionality of race, color, class, gender, and the affect on Black girls and women's schooling. As today's teaching force of mostly European American

women consider ways to inform their practice, the stories shared by the women in this study can inform them and others either currently teaching or in teacher preparation programs.

Literature is rife with examples of exemplary teachers and methods, but this study revealed the multiple ways Black girls' and women's schooling experiences were informed within and outside of schools by their peers, teachers and staff, and community. The data can inform these experiences for teachers and teacher education programs. For example, this study extended the dialogue on colorism and classism and its hierarchal structures within classrooms.

*Increasing attention during teacher education programs.* There needs to be increasing attention during teacher preparation to the experiences of young Black women. The knowledge of these experiences produced by this study optimizes schooling experiences and lessens the probability of society's narrowing constructions. The women in this study were often isolated or treated as if they were invisible, i.e. Mack's color, Elena's class, and Nina's smarts. Many of them were treated based upon how they looked or acted, where they lived or did not. Teachers need to know the impact of color, race, gender and class hierarchal structures within and outside of their own culture or simple their own comfort zone. Ladson-Billings (2001) takes an up close view of ways educators tend to ignore diversity. She, like me discovered diversity could also mean within one's race. Diversity in Boston's communities meant I was often in classrooms filled with Irish, Scottish, English, Armenian and more culturally diverse, however, their one commonality—skin color. But the experiences from within specific cultures required consideration and navigation from knowledgeable teachers. From *Ease on down the Road* I learned more about the residual effects of hierarchal structures within schooling communities that seek to dismantle spirits. Many participants talked about specific events related to the teachers' inability or simple willingness to make them "safer" inside schools. The rawness

related to hearing and seeing their physical reactions to specific events demonstrates their wounds are not yet healed. Teachers' own prejudices and paradoxes beg for the more information on successful models for working with diverse populations (Ladson-Billings, 2001). They also need a cadre of colleagues who can offer experiential elements as a core while investigating relevant programmatic components integral to their growth and development. They must be taught ways to consider the critical intersections of learner subjectivities, teacher expectations, and performance (Grant, 1992, hooks, 1996; Irvine, 1992, 2002).

Both Goodenough (1991) and Wolcott (1999) suggest that within a propriospect paradigm it is essential that we view ourselves where we are. Because subjectivities inform not only "self, but one's teaching and research, preservice teachers might do well to examine their subjectivities—*do* inward gazing. These introspections also called for by Irvine (2002), Ladson-Billings (1995), and hooks (1989), who urged teachers, specifically preservice teachers of various ethnic and socioeconomic locations, to look at themselves in terms of these locations. Ladson-Billings' work determined preservice teachers "academic and cultural wherewithal" would be contingent upon how they recognized and reconciled their fluid, but often fixed, subjectivities. Irvine (2002) and hooks (1989) suggested that teacher introspection could impede the larger society's ills from spilling into the hallways of schools, the poor to the elite (Hale, 1990). In this way, teachers can do like Dorothy: search for truth that "looks inside" as the first step in reaching home.

*Informing elementary teachers about the impact of early schooling experiences.* These eight Black women suggested that early schooling experiences were tantamount to their shaping, evidenced by comments, such as, "I've always been a knowledge seeker," Or "My

early schooling experiences are closely related to my home experiences because I come from a segregated environment, and my family was poor.”

Since education was consistently valued in participants’ communities, teachers might learn of its value (Hale, 1982; Henry, 1998; Irvine, 2001). For example, when we were “being made to go to school” or told “how to act” at school, our families and communities showed us that they valued our education and expected us to excel. Teachers, particularly elementary teachers, should become informed about the impact of Black girls and women’s experience as they adopt a “teacher as learner” model (hooks, 1994). Through this model they can enact change. For example, we know complexities existed within the constructs of the classrooms in the stories of these participants. When we adopt the teacher as learner model we can learn more about the impact of these experiences and do a better job serving all children. While addressing issues such as hierarchies within classrooms, the teacher-learner model presses teachers to become students of their students. Once teachers begin to co-learn and study their students, they develop sensitivities to various root epistemologies and axiologies of diverse groups of students. They no longer see their students monolithically or as a homogenous group of individuals.

The fact that Makesha’s mother visited during Black History month and Angelina’s grandmother paid for her private school demonstrate our families’ commitment to creating a successful educational journey for us. This is contrary to the view that many hold of disenfranchised and minority groups as having parents who are reticent regarding the education of their children. Also contrary to prevailing opinions, our teachers for the most part knew parents especially when we were schooled within our communities. I learned from this study that our agency and often our families’ commitment to education were needed for a successful

educational journey. Ways to inform teachers, veterans and preservice teachers, about how the high degree to which education is valued in Black homes can occur through communicative networks that bring the teachers out of classrooms and into communities or at least engaged in conversations with those seeking to bridge gaps between home and school. It is essential and needed.

Encouraging communal and familial support systems today could mirror periods in history where a seamless system existed (Siddle Walker, 1999; hooks, 1996). Developing relationships broadens and enhances *all* investors in the child's education. For teachers, these relationships can inform their understanding of issues facing families and children, thereby, increasing learning opportunities for teachers and decreasing the distance between themselves and their students (Allen, Michalove, & Shockley, 1993).

Schools are designed to develop children for participation in the general society; yet, the complexity of the schooling of Black girls/women also affirms the need for organizations such as Girl Scouts, rites of passage programs, and other type after-school programs. Schools can form and sponsor such clubs, and draw in community members to sponsor these integral organizations.

*Developing pedagogies that support the aspirations of all children, inclusive of race and class.* As I consider this study, I sense in education, we must do things differently—ridding ourselves of thoughts that keep us rooted in mediocrity and disenchantment. This study begs for developing pedagogies that support the aspirations of all children, regardless of race and class. Participants encountered teachers who supported or challenged their aspirations. In Anne's case, she was bused from a poorer section of town to the "white school" where a male teacher persisted in his attempts to thwart her pursuits of academic rigor. He either put her out of the classroom or gave her menial seat work. This teacher did not change even as when

Anne demanded more and harder work. What Anne's teacher needed was praxis or reflection and action in dynamic interaction that causes theory and practice to come together.

Ladson-Billings (1995) determined that culturally relevant teaching as pedagogy offers students a cultural referent and knowledge base. From parents to academicians, as parents and educators, a cry for alternate modes of pedagogy abounds. Delpit (1988) raised concern and simultaneously called for a dialogue among liberal educators and teachers of color to address the "unique demands of cultural difference in the classroom." As teachers created their own pedagogical structures, they dismantled traditional pedagogies that did little more than demand a regurgitation of facts and figures. While these narratives revealed a need for a variety of pedagogical styles; we must begin this praxis within the classrooms we teach.

#### Beyond the Yellow Brick Road: The Power

In *The Wiz*, the Gatekeeper, a wearer of green glasses, expended energy trying to keep Dorothy and her companions outside of the Emerald City's gates. Emerald City, a coveted space, barred travelers who did not look or act like its residents. Then Dorothy flashed her snazzy silver slippers given to her by Addaperle, a Good Witch, and the Gatekeeper granted Dorothy and her crew access. The slippers represented a certain tangible measure: power, class, color, smartness—what? I used this metaphor to show that with the right tools, one can gain access and proclaim their status or claim a new status. In Dorothy's situation, the slippers pushed the gate open. Within the framework of schools, the teacher is the gatekeeper, and power is the gate. Through it, my study participants, like Dorothy and her companions, had access to possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986). These Black women could pass through the gate—with or without shiny silver slippers—because they possessed magical powers of

their own. These powers came from their agency obtained as subjects rooted in struggle and resistance framed by race, gender, class and color.

My focus in this study has been to extend the research on the schooling experiences and girlhood stories of Black girls and women (Henry, 1999; hooks, 1996; Walker, 2000).

Informed by Black feminist thought and womanist theory, I examined in this study how eight Black women doctoral students, myself included, discussed and deconstructed our schooling and lived experiences. Long before Dorothy clicked her silver heels three times and Glinda the Good Witch of the South exclaimed, “Home isn’t a place you have to find child, if we know ourselves we’re always home,” there was a grand celebration of Dorothy and her companions’ journey. The celebration begins with the festive tune “A Brand New Day” and rings of the day’s newness, rid of armament and tools that destroy: flying monkeys, dank castles, witches casting incessant spells, and yes, an enigmatic Wiz. *The Wiz*, like our classrooms, offers a myriad of ways for us to see ourselves behind and in front of the curtain. While we simply hope to rejoice and sing in our roles as educators, our realities are far more complex, and less delusional than those of Dorothy and her companions. “Take your dilemma and lay it on the Wizard,” suggested Addaperle. We are true wizards enacting changes within ourselves. “A Brand New Day” exists as teachers and Black girls and women together examine subjectivities and attitudes and ease on down the road in their search for heart, courage, and wit. Perhaps Anne expressed the journey best:

**Anne: Loud, Black girl**

that really didn’t matter to me  
 I knew who I was  
 I think that comes from my parents  
 giving us each permission to  
 grow up  
 be

who we are.

To figure out  
where I wanted to be  
what I needed to do  
even if it meant  
not taking everybody  
with me  
but I could still go there.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### **Pilot study invitation**

**Date:** Wed, 20 Aug 2003 15:42:21 -0400

What an evening! It was so cool to see you and to think we could get 8 of our 11 in the same place, even if we had to close it down, smile. Last night really validated for me the need and the want to keep our "Sistahmates" connection. There are many topics that we discuss, but last night really flowed from the ACADEMIC to the ASININE to the ARCANÉ.

Now about the research --- last semester we touched on my research focus and the phenomenal shift from young black girls' (YBG) language use to Big, Black Girls (smile) which encompasses most of you with no intended slight to Caroline & Billie- it's just the direction my work is taking me. (I do see an opportunity to have you both contribute esp. in a sidebar format -- we can explore what that would look like for you both as women bonding with this special group).

The rich textures of our early schooling and graduate experiences buttressed by our sense of agency & protocol -- will serve as a critical lens for language/literacy, gender and race issues.

With your consent, I'd like to:

Tape some of our sessions (at least a portion of the session perhaps on a particular topic or burning issue),

Interview each of you within the group setting and solo,

Ask you for artifacts >>> bring "you" to the research

Here's what I am doing to get this done and what's to come:

I am framing this work with my advisor's input

I will do an IRB

I will conduct a pilot study beginning this semester

I will finish my story as a part of the larger study (useful guide to narrow scope)

I will ready the consent form for you

I will ultimately write the dissertation in a book format

This is a participatory research project and will engage you at levels that evoke your creativity, artistry and above all bring to light your experiences - because you have a story to tell. You will have an opportunity to write your own story if

you choose, this research project is open-ended and open to suggestions--it will be narrowed to what is manageable and doable. What's your comfort level with the approach, is it invasive, inviting, idyllic, high-fiver, what? Remember it is because of the strength of our relationship building & journey that the passion to tell "our" story, yours and mine, has occurred. (If we do not do the research on ourselves, others will and then what?-- that was my radical side speaking)

I WILL NOT invite others to our special gatherings as we acknowledged last evening the importance of keeping our "Sistahmates" intact. I will invite participation outside of the group (and possible outside of UGA) to expand the study. Our story will be different from others that do not have a "Sistahmates" connection. It is already different. I envision a time this semester when all of us can meet in the spirit of collegiality and sisterhood. I would like your feedback on this AND any names of potential participants to contact.

THOUGHTS??? I need them ASAP along with your schedules. You may respond openly to the list or to me.

After last night, we are duly dubbed, Sistahmates, The Renegades. And just how do we feel about naming???  
One Solitude.  
Crickett  
Peace.

**APPENDIX B****New participant invitation**

Greetings \_\_\_\_\_(pseudonym),

Thanks for expressing interest in participating in the study titled: Brown Girls in the Ring: A Palette of Possibilities. The study criteria: Black, female, PhD, aspiration to teach in a univ. post and/or non-traditional work, currently attending a white research I school. The initial interview is 1hr. There is a consent form attached with specifics of the study expectations for participants and me, the researcher. After reading the form should you like to commit to the initial interview, pls. let me know your available days & times. I am in Athens on Wed. & Thur. - but can adjust my schedule otherwise with advanced notice.

Peace,

Rachelle Washington (Crickett)

## APPENDIX C

## CONSENT FORM

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research study titled “Brown Girl in the Ring: Narratives of Schooling,” conducted by Rachele Washington, from the Department of Language Education at the University of Georgia, 542-7258 under the direction of Dr. JoBeth Allen Advisor, Department of Language Education, University of Georgia, Aderhold Hall, 542-7258. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed. The reason for this study is to explore the stories of Black female graduate students that can potentially lead to an understanding of the complexities of the sociolinguistic and sociocultural context of their schooling experiences.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

1. Participate in a 60 – 90 minutes audiotaped interview about my early schooling and graduate schooling experiences.
2. Write my experiences in a journal monthly for 12 months from the initial interview. This is expected to take at least 15 – 20 minutes each month.
3. Correspond with researcher via email as needed, most likely twice per month for a total of one half hour.
4. Take part in at least one, but no more than five, informal group data gathering sessions with other study participants. This is expected to take at least 45 – 60 minutes per session. The session will be audiotaped.
5. Fill out a demographic information sheet at the beginning of the initial interview. This is expected to take at least 15 minutes.
6. My emails, journal information, transcripts and audiotapes will be kept indefinitely for further research and analysis. All individually identifiable information will be assigned a pseudonym and this pseudonym will be used on all written data and artifacts. Audiotapes and transcripts will be maintained in a secure, locked location in the home of the researcher.

I will receive a writing journal as a token for my participation at the beginning of this study. Even if I do not complete the study, I will still receive the writing journal.

Participants will benefit from this study by having an opportunity to talk about their early schooling and graduate schooling experiences.

No information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission, except if it is necessary to protect my welfare (for example, if I were injured and need physician care) or if required by law. Any information used in the final research project or any publications will not be traced back to me. I understand that the researcher will utilize pseudonyms in place of real names and will secure all materials in her home. Regarding email utilization, there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself.

No anticipated risks, stresses, or discomforts are expected from my participation in the study.

The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project (404.234.7043).

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

<b>Name of Researcher</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Telephone:</b> _____		
<b>Email:</b> _____		

<b>Name of Participant</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>

**Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.**

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D. Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

## APPENDIX D

**Demographic Profile Information**

**Participant Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Home, School & Community Information:**

1) In what age range are you?

26 – 29 \_\_\_ 30 –35\_\_\_ 36 –40 \_\_\_ 41 – 45\_\_\_ 45+\_\_\_\_\_

2) Do you have any brothers or sisters? if so, how many brothers and sisters?

3) What are their ages? Sisters \_\_\_ brothers\_\_\_\_\_

4) Where did you attend Elementary School?

5) What region is it located?

6) Was the neighborhood,

Mixed, Primarily Black, Primarily white, Other, state

***Graduate school info.***

7) Where are you currently a student?

8) What year are you?

9) Where did you attend undergraduate school?

10) Was it a Historically Black College and University (HBCU)? Yes or No

11) What region is it located?

12) Where did you attend graduate school?

13) What region is it located?

**Activities**

14) What kinds of cultural activities were you involved in during early schooling years, i.e., church, after-school, dance school, etc.? Describe.

15) What kinds of cultural activities are you involved in now, i.e., church, community, civic, recreational, etc.? Describe

## APPENDIX E

## INTERVIEW GUIDE: PILOT

Tell me about your early schooling experiences, especially those between k – 3. as they relate to home, school and community that you attended as a young girl, espeically

How did your family view your language habits?

- How did your teachers view your language habits?
- 

How did your community members view your decision to attend graduate school?

Tell me about your decision to attend Roosevelt Univeristy

- o Describe “education” as you see it at Roosevelt University.
- o What do you like most about being a Black female doctoral student?
- o What do you dislike most about being a Black female doctoral student?
- o In your view, what do young black girls need from our communities and home?

What do early/graduate educators need to know about early schooling experiences of young Black girls? graduate schooling experiences of Black female doctoral students?

## APPENDIX F

## INTERVIEW GUIDE: STUDY

Tell me about your early schooling experiences, especially those between k – 3. as they relate to home, school and community that you attended as a young girl, especially

How did your family view your language habits/practices?

How did your teachers view your language habits/ practices??

How did your community members view your decision to attend graduate school?

Describe your community.

Tell me about your decision to attend Roosevelt Univeristy

What were some events or decision marking your pursuit?

o Describe “education” for you.

o What do you like most about being a Black woman doctoral student?

o What do you dislike most about being a Black woman doctoral student?

o In your view, describe supports young Black girls need in terms of schooling and societal.

What were the messages stated or implied regarding eduaction?

What do early/graduate educators need to know about early schooling experiences of young Black girls? graduate schooling experiences of Black female doctoral students?

## APPENDIX G

## ALEXANDER'S PRINCIPAL IDENTIFIERS OF SALIENCE

*Source:*

Schultz, William. (2002) The Prototypical Scene: A Method for Generating Psychobiographical Hypotheses. Published in: In McAdams, Dan, R. Josselson, and A. Lieblich, Up Close and Personal: Teaching and Learning Narrative Research. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press.

*Primacy:* what comes first sometimes tells us more than anything else, as in the tradition of attaching extra importance to earliest memories, first loves, first traumas, and so on.

*Uniqueness:* declaring your uniqueness or else speak in language that clearly departs from a usual mode of expression (Alexander, 1988; 1990). Other times, material stands out because of its patent oddity.

*Frequency:* When subjects frequently retell the same story, sometimes in almost identical language.

*Negation.* If one can entertain the likelihood of a truth by eliminating its negative component,

*Emphasis:* This cue includes "obvious forms of accent or underlining in oral or written communication" (Alexander, 1990, 17). Alexander names three types: overemphasis (attention focused on something typically considered commonplace); underemphasis (little attention paid to something important); and misplaced emphasis (when means-ends sequences stretch the limits of credulity).

*Hesitancy:* calculating the words one speaks, carefully, methodically.

*Omission,* another of Alexander's saliency cues, is emphasis' antithesis.

*Error, incompleteness, and isolation* conclude the list of potential saliency cues. I combine them here because they possess a kind of family resemblance. **Errors** include all forms of "mischievement"--verbal slips, distortions, miscommunications, and ostensible accidents. **Incompleteness** occurs when "an expository sequence begins, follows a course, but ends before closure is reached" (Alexander, 1990, 23). A topic is introduced then abruptly terminated without explanation. **Isolation** is called by Elms (1994) the "Come Again?" criterion (247).

Chart 1: Demographic and school information of participants

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>School History</b>	<b>Geographic Origination</b>	<b>Class origin</b>
Angelina	30	HBCU undergrad/grad	Southeast	Working class
Anne	45+	Segregated k-8 White undergrad/grad	Midwest	Rural; working
Clovia	45+	Segregated k-8 White undergrad/grad	Southeast	Rural; working
Elena	30	Segregated k-5 White undergrad/grad	Southeast	Upper middle
Mack	26	White undergrad/grad	Midwest	Upper middle
Makesha	31	White undergrad/grad	Northeast	Middle class
Nina	28	White undergrad/grad	Southeast	Upper middle
Rachelle	43	HBCU undergrad/grad	Northeast	Middle class

Scholars writing about Black women's lives have advocated a need to extend the research on the schooling experiences and girlhood stories of Black girls and women. Informed by Black feminist thought and womanist theory, I examine, as a participant as well as a researcher, how eight Black women doctoral students discuss and deconstruct our schooling and lived experiences. Similarly, participants' schooling narratives shed light on ways school, home, and community construct our identities. As such, the narratives provide a critical lens for illuminating the experiences that propel us women to pursue doctoral degrees. I conducted 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews and collected demographic profile information. The interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Get 'em up, goin' down, ease on down Get 'em up, goin' down, ease on down Get 'em up, goin' down, ease on down Get 'em up, get 'em up, ease on down the road. Get 'em up, goin' down, ease on down Get 'em up, goin' down, ease on down Get 'em up, goin' down, ease on down Get 'em up, get 'em up, ease on down the road. Submit Corrections. Writer(s): CHARLES EMANUEL SMALLS. Diana Ross lyrics are property and copyright of their owners. "Ease On Down The Road #1" lyrics provided for educational purposes and personal use only.