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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the ways in which Black women across the Syracuse community embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation for Black youth and their families within and beyond the school setting. The purpose is to understand in more nuanced ways Black women's activation of their own lived experiences to dismantle systems of oppression and realize education as the practice of freedom for Black youth. Informed by Black feminist and womanist theories, this study employs narrative analysis, and sister circles—two methods which testify to the power of Black women's her-stories and its impact on Black youth and their families. Knitting together stories and lessons from qualitative semi-structured one-on-one interviews and sister circles, I illuminate the ways in which Black women serve as conductors on the contemporary Underground Railroad. Laboring within a city that holds complex legacies of abolition, resistance, and occupation, this study foregrounds the idea that Black women are critical agents in the realization of education for liberation within *and* beyond the confines of the school setting. By drawing upon the expertise and knowledge of 14 Black women who live within and serve Black youth throughout the Syracuse community, I contend that this study has implications for how we foster *and* strengthen relationships between Black youth and their families, the communities from which they come, and schools.

Keywords: Black women, ethic and pedagogy of liberation, Black youth, education as the practice of freedom, Black feminism, womanism, narrative analysis, sister circles, Syracuse, NY, Underground Railroad

Black Women and the Struggle for Education as the Practice of Freedom: Embodying an Ethic and Pedagogy of Liberation

By

Camilla Josephine Bell

B.S., Syracuse University, 2014
M.S., Syracuse University, 2018

Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Foundations of Education

Syracuse University
May 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I had fainted unless I had seen the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Thank you, Lord, for seeing me *all* the way through a tumultuous graduate school career. I am eternally grateful for the people You have put in my life and the places You have led me to. I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able.

To Professor Haddix—*the first* Black woman I saw in the School of Education my sophomore year who looked like me. I cannot tell you just how important it was for me to know you existed. Who I have become is largely due to your mentorship and commitment to activating your teaching philosophy. You are one of the many Black women who joined hands with my mother and sisters to nurture my potential and promise when I left home and embarked on this intellectual journey. Thank you—for everything!

To Mario—the advisor everyone knows by name in my family! I knew the type of educator I wanted to be when I was in your EDU 310 course my junior year of college. When you permitted me to write a response paper for "Dark Girls" instead of whatever was assigned, I was convinced that true educators build room within their syllabi for flexibility and critical inquiry. Allowing me to engage with issues and texts that spoke to my lived experience and identity as a racialized and gendered being revived me—literally. You are the one who gave me space to breathe my second semester of grad school when my grandmother left the land of the living and I will never forget that. You exemplify care and I am so grateful for who you are.

To Professor Mayes—Being in Paris as a Black girl from Brooklyn and having you as my first professor as a graduate student changed my *whole* life. You expected excellence—at all times and you *never* allowed me to give less than what you knew I was capable of. When I delivered my final presentation and you told me that I would thrive in graduate school, I saw myself as capable and equipped to navigate another two years of what was already a hostile learning environment. When you told me that I could, I believed you. Fast forward six years later. Thank you for your confidence in me—always.

To Jeff Mangram—As an undergraduate student, although I did not have the privilege of taking a course with you, I distinctly recall that you were unstoppable—literally. Always heading to some meeting or hurrying to some class to teach. So much to do, and so little time. But! I appreciate the fact that you *always* made time to acknowledge my existence when you saw me within *and* beyond the lonely hallways of the School of Education. *That* has meant the world to me and I thank you for *still* making time to be a member of my committee. I am ending this journey the way I began it—with people pushing me forward to do the work I have been dying in the halls of academe to *do*.

To James Haywood Rolling Jr.—Thank you so much for the time you put in to provide me with the resources necessary to think through my Public Humanities project. I had no idea then that my initial encounter with you would inform my final one. It is my sincere hope that the artistry that is this work compels you to continue teaching about the power and possibility of narrative inquiry and analysis.

To Professor Bryant—You made history come alive for me every week I walked to Bowne and into your African American History through the 19th Century course. You intentionally and thoughtfully brought texts out of the annals of obscurity and into our classroom. How you simply, yet powerfully unpack an idea is something that I have always admired. Please know that every office visit, resource shared, and encouraging word has kept me going from junior year until now. Thank you for always magnifying the importance of oral histories and underscoring the very thing others would prefer to shove under the rug *and* forget.

To Linda, Brenda, Carol, Sequoia, Tanaya, Asteir, Victoria aka "Ms. Vickie," Dr. Hodge, Talina, Eva aka "Ms. Eva," Debra aka "Ms. Debra," Octavia, Gloria, and Brandi—Without you all, this work would have no meaning *whatsoever*. Your support of my work and of me is unparalleled. I appreciate every call, every prayer and word of encouragement, and every text message and Facebook message. You all availed yourselves to me and entrusted me with your stories and I am so grateful for the privilege of talking with you, seeing my own struggles in your stories, reflecting with you, and healing with you. It has been one of the greatest honors to do this work with you all and it is my humble prayer that I have done your stories and lived experiences justice.

To Mariel Rivera, Cleopatra "Cleo" Benitez, Dr. Tanisha M. Jackson, Diorra S. Cole, Oubon Bagchi and Debdulal "Deb" Bagchi: From opening and closing the South Side Communication Center and the Community Folk Art Center, to putting me on the schedule so that I could have a space to conduct one-on-one interviews, you all have been so seminal to this dissertation process and journey! Furthermore, your assistance with managing food orders so that I could focus on organizing and facilitating sister circles made each session all the more meaningful because you *literally* gave me time and space to think and process. I am so thankful for each of you and recognize that this work would not have been able to move forward had it not been for your ongoing support. Blessings to you all!

Ma, I love you. Words are *never* enough. I am returning to you with everything you sent me away with and more. Your love literally carried me through and kept me. When I thought I could not go forward, you reminded me of why you named me Camilla. Josephine. Bell. This work originates with you and I thank God every day for a mother who shows me love and encourages me to share it with others. Your light shines so brightly, and I am honored to call you mother and friend. Thank you for continuing in me what Aunty could not. Her legacy lives!

Pops! Before I could fully step into my identity as a teacher educator, you were the one who called me Professor Bell. With no degree in hand whatsoever, you saw in me the educator that I would become. Thank you for your vision and foresight. I believe God granted you both so that you could speak this possibility and reality over me even during the nascent stage of my graduate career. Thank you for being my father. I love you, and contrary to popular belief, always will!

To the 5 Flags, I made 6: How could I be talking about Black women and the struggle for education as the practice of freedom without mentioning the resilience and business acumen of Sam, the loving and high expectation having educator that is Sha, the historian and listening ear that Shama has *always* been, the justice finding and high adrenaline detective that Nay always *will* be, and the hustler and tag that Tina *is*. I am because ya'll are. PERIOD—Ubuntu.

To my extended family in the U.S. and across the waters. When I was hungry, you fed me. When I needed reminders of where I came from, you gave them to me. When I was searching for perspective, you showed me. As long as I have the language of love on my lips, I don't think my finite Kwéyòl will ever pose a problem for how we communicate and express our care for each other.

If I had to record the names of everyone who has supported me during *both* my undergraduate and graduate years, I would definitely have to construct an additional dissertation on the persistence of Black women in academia given the supports in place by faculty and staff of color: Adventist Christian Fellowship, Center for Academic Achievement and Student Development, McNair Scholars Program, Office of Supportive Services, Office of Multicultural Advancement, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Community Folk Art Center, and Dimensions Mentoring Program—without you all, and without these programs, I would *not* have made it at Syracuse University. My success is your success.

To Dr. Blair E. Smith and Bridget L. Lawson. Your mentorship, counsel, scholarship, and praxis are what drew me into the Cultural Foundations of Education program when I was still an undergraduate student. Words do not convey how much I admire and respect you both. And while this experience has not been easy, I do not for a second regret my journey, as I would not have had the privilege of meeting so many sincere, dedicated and critical thinkers like you, who have disrupted classroom spaces, hallways, and other places folks of color meet to retreat, find reprieve, and be affirmed.

To my sisters and brothers in the struggle: Kishauna, you were the forerunner. Thank you for your mentorship and commitment to excellence. Like you said, there is never any pressure—just God's "divine timing." Phillandra, your Wednesday prayers kept me going, sis. You will forever remain the godmother to this dissertation. Telsha, you kept me encouraged and prayed with me when I needed it. I am anticipating your *final* praise report! Benesemon, those random texts and meetings gave me life! You WILL win. Don't let anyone tell you different! Terrance, trust and believe that your science acumen helped shape a richer discussion of what it means to land and be on "free soil." Thank you for staying motivated enough to fan the flame of inspiration. I appreciate you! Martín, I can't give you a paragraph. Not because you don't deserve one, but because I'm afraid that it'll turn into another chapter on how the support of brothers from othermothers play critical roles in the lives of Black women navigating hostile living and learning contexts. And although I don't have any biological brothers, you *truly* are a brother to me. Thank you for pushing me to higher heights even while you were trying to get there yourself. When you spoke my victory into existence the day we parted ways at the airport, I felt that. It means a lot to me. All love.

For those who *know* we have something special, *please* don't feel any kind of way that your name is not listed above. Rest assured that it is emblazoned upon my heart!

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PROLOGUE

"first grade"

~Jacqueline Woodson, 2014, pps. 158-159

My hand inside my sister's hand
we walk the two blocks to P.S.106—
I am six years old and
my sister tells me our school was once a castle.
I believe her. The school stretches for a full city block.
Inside
marble stairs wind their way to classrooms filled
with dark wood desks
nailed down to dark wood floors polished to a high
and beautiful shine.

I am in love with everything around me,
the dotted white lines moving
across my teacher's blackboard, the smell of chalk
the flag jutting out from the wall and slowly swaying
above me.

There is nothing more beautiful than P. S. 106.
Nothing more perfect than my first-grade classroom.
No one more kind than Ms. Feidler, who meets me
at the door each morning,

takes my hand from my sister's, smiles down and says,
Now that Jacqueline is here, the day can finally begin.

And I believe her.
Yes, I truly believe her.

****

Mirrors surrounded me. At home, I saw who I wanted to be in my mother's smile and my sisters' side-swoops, the mountains of books on the bookshelf in the living room, and the hands, which held mine so tightly when crossing the street to elementary school. Mirrors surrounded me at school too. I have *always* been surrounded by Black women who were very clear about who they were in the world and how they wanted the world to be so that they could *be*—freely.

My academic foundation was laid by Black women educators committed to my learning and preparedness. Ms. Rainford was Jamaican, and Ms. Prince was Trinidadian. As early as kindergarten, we were expected to be great and to do great. In fact, they gave us no other choice. They lived in my community, frequented the same corner stores and food markets, and *always* had a warm smile to give my mother every time they crossed paths. To this day, every time I see Ms. Rainford, we hug. She is the *only* person who can call me *Millie*. The only indication that she is aging is her daughter's transition from adolescence to womanhood. We basically grew up together in the same school—she, just a little younger than me.

****

I distinctly recall my fifth-grade teacher—a Black woman from the South—tossing our social studies textbook to the side when the lonely paragraph on slavery and the Black experience insulted not only her intelligence, but also did no justice whatsoever to the harsh reality of her own lived experiences. I remember Ms. Coleman telling us that she required no textbook to teach us what she herself had lived. How it was only natural for the community to support the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. How her own family had welcomed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at their house for dinner. How disappointed she was with us whenever we failed to take school seriously. Ms. Coleman knew all too well the costs of oppression.

****

My high school principal, Tamika Matheson, grew up in the same neighborhood where our school was located. She expected excellence—at *all* times. Never mind that the area was deemed a "dangerous" one. In fact, she knew many of the people outsiders shunned personally and made it her business to build authentic relationships with us, our families, *and* members of the surrounding community. Her commitment to excellence was apparent in whom she selected to

teach and nurture us. Our school motto was Frederick Douglass' renowned quote, "Without struggle, there is no progress." Who could have known that this motto would live in my consciousness and come alive as I engaged stories of struggle and progress in the heart of Syracuse, New York?

****

And while the concept of education as the practice of freedom was nonexistent in my lexicon, what I knew then was that education granted me glimpses into worlds I did not yet know. Through the Black women that raised me, through the Black women that informed my development beyond home, and through the Black women that mentored me, I saw possibilities that I wanted to always share with learners who have windows, but no mirrors, and go through the motions of school without knowing the power of education.

CHAPTER 1: SITUATING SELF, CONTEXTUALIZING PLACE, AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE

“Don’t you know that I come from woman warriors?”

~Camilla J. Bell circa 2016

“Every day, you put another turtle shell [on your back] until [NOTHING and] NO ONE can penetrate it.” Like a shield, I carried the weight of my mama’s words. I *needed* her words. They were tools in the struggle to persist and resist during a trying first year of graduate school and beyond. For without them, how could I continue in the tradition of woman warriors who had come before me? In fact, these exact words are what led me to a further exploration of how Black women like my mother embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. How they remain committed to education as the practice of freedom for Black youth and their families within and beyond school contexts is the burning question that drives this study. And while the African proverb reminds us that, “It takes a village to raise a child,” I argue that to understand how a village is sustained, one must engage with the very pillars that hold it together. Thus, by tracing my own genealogy of struggle and resistance, I have been led to the woman warriors upon whose shoulders I stand to do this work.

And, as I re-member and honor the legacy of the (un)known Black women who joined hands with my own mother and sisters to raise me, I am reminded that what continues to anchor the village is a deep commitment to both my wholeness and survival. And while spirited and learned Black women from across the African Diaspora continue to nurture my intellectual potential, I have found that my most memorable teachers were credentialed by way of their lived experiences. From them, I have learned that a critical awareness of our lived experiences and how it continuously shapes our identities as Black women has the power to revolutionize the contexts under which we work, live, and serve.

Therefore, by asserting our humanity, exercising agency, and advocating for more just living and learning spaces, we remain at the forefront of the struggle to realize "Liberty and justice for ALL." It is by re-turning to and reflecting upon my own academic and personal trajectory, that I have developed a more nuanced understanding of how Black women have and continue to labor, sacrifice and struggle for education as the practice of freedom. Like me, I have encountered many Black youth across the Syracuse community (within my capacity as an educator, community member, summer camp facilitator and mentor), who have also been nurtured by Black women within and beyond the school setting. And because the needs of young people often dictate the roles many Black women play at any given moment, the lines between each role are oftentimes deeply blurred.

Consequently, the continuity across roles such as community othermother (Docka-Filipek, 2016), teacher, counselor, advocate, and mentor, makes it difficult and downright futile to unblur the lines. Given this, when it comes to the academic and personal development of Black youth navigating the Syracuse City School District, I think it is imperative to unpack the ways in which this development takes shape. Invoking the words of Audre Lorde, I am ultimately looking to understand more deeply the shape of Black women's impact. More importantly, I am determined to bring Black women to the center and even more determined to disrupt narratives that force them into the corners of the educational field.

Tapping into Black Women's Literary and Oral Traditions

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

~Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" (1978)

By tapping into the literary and oral traditions of Black women to produce meaning of the ways in which Black women embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation for Black youth, and their families within and beyond the school setting, this dissertation magnifies narratives of resistance that builds on Syracuse's larger legacies of survival, abolition, resistance and freedom. And while this work is based specifically in Syracuse, New York, you will find that it functions as a compass towards other geographic places and spaces beyond Upstate, New York whose buried histories await re-discovery and renewed appreciation. Therefore, to do these narratives justice, I am compelled to interweave the literary with the academic, for it is the only way I can honor the voices and stories of the Black women who extend *and* revolutionize our understanding of liberation and the Underground Railroad as we know it.

For these reasons, I am particularly drawn to the works of Black women writers. Not only are "Their writings...chronicles of Black survival…[but they also] offer the sharpest available view of the Black community's soul" (Cannon, 1995, p. 68). According to Katie G. Cannon,

> Black women writers partially, and often deliberately, embrace the moral actions, religious values, and rules of conduct handed down by word of mouth in the folk culture. They then proceed in accordance with their tradition to transform the cultural limitations and unnatural restrictions in the community's move toward self-authenticity. (Cannon, 1995, p. 68)

Given the richness *and* dismissal of such chronicles, it also behooves me to engage with Black women writers who charge us to think critically about the plethora of master narratives circulating with impunity. The late Toni Morrison, in her renowned interview with journalist,

Bill Moyers, speaks to the pervasive nature of master narratives. She states, “The master narrative is whatever ideological script that is being imposed by the people in authority on everybody else. The master fiction. History. It has a certain point of view.” Cognizant of the fact that this “point of view” is primarily informed by “white male life,” Morrison challenges us—through her texts—to contend with the human condition through the eyes of Black folk. In so doing, we are provided other lenses through which we can produce meaning of the world we live in.

Katie G. Cannon’s “The Black Woman’s Literary Tradition,” (1988) is in conversation with Morrison’s position. Cannon maintains,

> Throughout the various periods of their history in the United States, Black women have used their creativity, to carve out “living space” within the intricate web of multilayered oppression. From the beginning, they had to contend with the ethical ambiguity of racism, sexism, and other sources of fragmentation in this acclaimed land of freedom, justice, and equality. The Black woman’s literary tradition delineates the many ways that ordinary Black women have fashioned value patterns and ethical procedures in their own terms, as well as mastering, transcending, radicalizing and sometimes destroying pervasive, negative orientations imposed by the mores of the larger society. (Cannon, 1988, p. 76)

I argue that “...in this acclaimed land of freedom, justice and equality,” it is critical to speak back to the histories that have been passed down, re-articulated, and revived in order for one to create new ways of being—be it real and/or imagined. Mary Helen Washington’s “’The Darkened Eye Restored”’: Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women,” situates the literary works of Black women within a larger literary tradition and sociohistorical context. In so doing, Washington further substantiates the claim that,

> If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women—and this accounts for their lack of recognition—it is this: their literature is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written. There are no women in this tradition hibernating in dark holes contemplating their invisibility...Women talk to other women in this tradition, and their

> friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers—are vital to their growth and well-being." (Washington, 1990, p. 35)

Thus, in the words of Cannon, Morrison, and Washington, we are given a charge to disrupt exclusionary master narratives with *new* scripts centered on *our* lived experiences and what they teach us about the world, to re-claim and create "living spaces" that enable us to enter—fully, and to foster relationships that push us to grow into our best selves. The kernels of wisdom offered above align with the West African concept of Sankofa—translated to "go back and get it" in the Twi language of Ghana. Having returned to the lessons and tales of old, and with the narratives of the Black women I have engaged with throughout the course of this study spearheading the design, I attempted to weave together a new kind of her-story. Why it is of the utmost importance to do so can be found in the introduction of *Her Stories: African American Folktales, Fairy tales, and True Tales*. In it, acclaimed children's book author, Virginia Hamilton, provides a working definition of her-stories and the power therein. She asserts,

> In the centuries of the Plantation Era, the black slave woman was the keeper of households. She was a laborer without pay for any work, from dayclean to daylean—sunup to sundown. When the owner's work was done, she went home to her cabin and helped take care of her own family […] Often, the late night was her time alone. Again and again, she let her tired mind fly free to remember good times. And when they weren't any, she made up what such times would be like [...] She imagined all kinds of things—[…] So it was that she made up *her* stories, some out of her own imagination and others she'd heard told by both men and women. These last she would alter to fit her experience. Later in the dayclean, she passed tales along to her own children and those in her care. That is how I imagine some of *Her Stories*, household tales, first came to be. Such stories have continued to be devised and told. For stories of the female kind have a wide, creative range. They are difficult to categorize and often fit more than one type. Having grown out of the generational folkways of African Americans, they represent a body of traditional lore that is uniquely American. (Hamilton, 1995, p. xiii)

Drawing upon the working definition Hamilton provides in her text, I contend that her-stories are perspectives clarified and refined through lived experiences and dialogic spaces where Black women gather to understand who they are, what they stand for and why they stand for it.

While Syracuse is a city within the U.S. geopolitical context, it is important to note that many of my participants have come to Syracuse by way of another city, state, and/or country. Thus, there is a diasporic element that accompanies her-stories shared by participants of this project. Nevertheless, Hamilton's working definition is useful in that it points us to the ways in which Black women produce new ways of understanding self, others, and the world. Having said this, it is my sincere hope that the her-stories captured in this dissertation study are also told and re-told, re-articulated and revived—and most of all re-membered.

****

Pass it down to the children.
Pass it down.
Carry it on.
Carry it on now.
Carry it on
TO FREEDOM!

Assata Shakur "The Tradition"

The excerpt below, taken from *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, told by Virginia Hamilton, speaks to the power of shared memory, lived experiences, and collective meaning-making around the idea and possibility of freedom. This folktale, sharing the same title as the text itself, illustrates the degradation of slavery and the generational strain it imposes on all who hope for *and* desire freedom. Toby, the protagonist of this folktale, is described as an old man who embodies the vestiges of the African continent most had only heard stories about—stories of the supernatural, and of the long hard passage where those who could fly were forced to "shed their wings [for] they couldn't take [them] across the water on the slave ships" (Hamilton, 1985, p. 166). Stories of the dangers of capturing and caging *beings* that were always meant to *be* free.

Hamilton proceeds to tell us about Sarah, an enslaved woman who once had wings. As she "hoed and chopped the row," tied to her back was a hungry baby whose cries could very well have been likened to the cries of all those "who trembled to be so hard worked and scorned" (Hamilton, 1985, p. 167). Incensed that she could not silence the crying baby, the Overseer, described as "a hard lump of clay. A hard, glinty coal. A hard rock pile, [who] wouldn't be moved," proceeded to "crack his whip across the babe anyhow. [And it is then that] [t]he babe hollered like any hurt child and the woman fell to the earth" (Hamilton, 1985, p. 167).

I want you to notice the point at which Sarah fell—when it became too *unbearable* for her to keep on pressing on. When her baby was reduced to a "thing" to be whipped, a "thing" to be subdued, a "thing to be killed." It was *then* that she "fell to the earth." How often are Black women falling to the earth and feeling *unable* to keep pressing on knowing that their children are being whipped by White supremacy, subdued by racial microaggressions, and killed by inhumane actors of the penal state?

Helping her to her feet, Toby reassures her that "Soon," they will go (Hamilton, 1985, p. 169). While we do not know where exactly, what we *do know* is that wherever it is, it is a place where Sarah's strength and humanity are restored. "Get up, you black cow," is what the Overseer calls out to a depleted, weak, and crestfallen Sarah. And the same earth that she fell to when her baby was reduced to a "thing" is the same earth that received the blood that poured from the whip that "snarled around [her] legs" and tore "her sack dress[...] into rags" (Hamilton, 1985, p. 169).

"Now, before it's too late," panted Sarah. "Now, Father!"
"Yes, Daughter, the time is come," Toby answered. Go, as you know how to go!"

Hamilton tells us that the "thing" and the "black cow" soared like eagles, and as "The Overseer rode after her hollerin[,] Sarah flew over the fences. She flew over the woods. Tall

trees could not snag her. Nor could the Overseer" (Hamilton, 1985, p. 169). We are told that "No one dared to speak about it" nor could anyone believe it, "[b]ut it was, because they that was there saw that it was" (Hamilton, 1985, p. 169). I want to underscore the fact that just because no one physically beheld her wings while she toiled and labored, it does not mean that they were not there to begin with. And yet, the question remains: How did she *know*? Having been so long an objectified, subjugated subject, how did Sarah *know* how to go?

Needless to say, the next day arrives, and we are told that it was "dead hot in the fields. A young man slave fell from the heat. The Driver come and whipped him. Toby come over and spoke words to the fallen one [...] The words of Ancient Africa once heard are never remembered completely. The young man forgot them as soon as he heard them. They went way inside him. He got up and rolled over on the air. He rode it awhile. And he flew away" (Hamilton, 1985, p. 170). Soon after,

> Another and another fell from the heat. Toby was there. He cried out to the fallen and reached his arms out to them. "*Kum kunka yali, kum...tambe!"* Whispers and sighs. And they too rose on the air. They rode the hot breezes. The ones flyin were black and shinin sticks, wheelin above the head of the Overseer. They crossed the rows, the fields, the fences, the streams, and were away...There was a great outcryin. The bent backs straightened up. Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands...They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue...Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to *Free-dom.* And the old man, old Toby, flew behind them, takin care of them...His gaze fell on the plantation where the slaves who could not fly waited. *"Take us with you!"* Their looks spoke it but they were afraid to shout it. Toby couldn't take them with him. Hadn't the time to teach them to fly. They must wait for a chance to run. (Hamilton, 1985, pps.170-171)

Through the story of Toby, Sarah, and other enslaved persons who "flew away to *Free-dom*," we observe that taking flight functions as a motif for re-connecting with the knowledges, understandings, and places that we have been forcefully uprooted and disconnected from. Thus, this tale closes with expectation—the end, simply a prologue to other stories where those who could not fly seized an opportunity to run. In fact, Ann Petry's *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on*

the Underground Railroad offers a biographical account chronicling Harriet Tubman's commitment to taking others with her who wanted to fly, but could not, and who wanted to run, but did not know the way to *Free-dom*.

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Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go!

An allusion to the biblical account of Moses, a faithful leader called by God to shepherd the Israelites out of bondage, across the Red Sea, and towards the Promised Land, this song was a reminder that freedom was neither unfathomable nor impossible. And yet, "[t]hey had to be careful which songs they sang. They could no longer sing that fiery song, sound of thunder in the chorus:

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go!"

But "Old Rit taught Harriet the words of that song that the slaves were forbidden to sing, because of the man named Denmark Vesey, who had urged the other slaves to revolt by telling them about Moses and the children of Israel. Sometimes, in the quarter, Harriet heard snatches of it, sung under the breath, almost whispered: 'Go Down, Moses. . . .' But she learned the words so well that she never forgot them" (Petry, 1955, p. 24). Where her mother, Old Rit, taught her the songs of freedom, it is said that her father, Ben "...could prophesy about the weather [and that] Harriet stood close to him when he studied the sky, licked his forefinger and held it up to determine the direction of the wind, then announced that there would be rain or frost or fair weather" (Petry, 1955, p. 22).

Endowed with navigational capital from her parents, Harriet's desire for freedom only intensified upon learning that she and her brothers would be sold down South. Making the decision to leave behind all she had ever known for the "glory [that came] over everything," in "...the free state of Pennsylvania," it would not be too long until Harriet felt more like "a stranger in a strange land" instead of a citizen planting her feet on the soil of free land for the very first time (Petry, 1955, pps. 101-102). It was not enough that she *alone* was free.

> "[Harriet] decided that as soon as she could, she would go back to Dorchester County and lead her family North, too. She knew the way now. She knew what a fugitive would do on the nights when it rained, and the North Star was obscured...she had done it once, alone, and with the help of the Lord, she would do it again, and again, until she got all of her family out of Maryland." (Petry, 1955, pps. 102-103)

Once she accomplished this mission, she would later embody the commands of the song "she learned the words [to] so well [so] that she [would] never forg[e]t them:

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go!" (Petry, 1955, p. 24).

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Immersing ourselves in tales of flight and the ongoing struggle for "liberty or death," brings us to yet another struggle still— the struggle for literacy. In Heather Andrea Williams' "In Secret Places: Acquiring Literacy in Slave Communities," she references the life story of Mattie Jackson, an African American woman who "came of age as the institution of slavery faced its final challenge" (Williams, 2005, p. 8). In fact, "...her personal efforts to free herself are suggestive of other people's experiences in slavery. Once free, Jackson told her story to a more literate black woman who wrote it down. This narrative helps us to understand the key role that literacy—and gender—could play in the crusade for freedom" (Williams, 2005, p. 8).

I *know* that I have been given words and I believe that my purpose is to use them. I have been entrusted with the stories of Black women who labor for freedom for Black youth *and* their families throughout the Syracuse community. Recording and capturing these her-stories has empowered me to devise another chapter on the subject of freedom and the ever-evolving Underground Railroad. Only, this chapter centers the lived experiences of the contemporary conductors of this movement—Black women throughout the Syracuse community and beyond. What is the struggle you may ask? The actualization of education as the practice of freedom for Black youth and their families within and beyond the schooling context. Thus, Black women's embodiment of an ethic and pedagogy of liberation in a region that once safeguarded freedom seekers testify to the ongoing struggle to obtain that which is ever elusive—an education that liberates.

Research Questions

Driving the questions that I posed for this research are my own lived experiences within and beyond the Syracuse community. And although I had already conceptualized and constructed my research questions long before I came to the work of Venus Evans-Winters, it was after reading *black feminism in qualitative inquiry: A Mosaic for Writing Our Daughter's Body*, that I received revelations about how I came to these questions in the first place. Asking them enabled me to honor my own genealogy of struggle as well as document and map new pathways for Black youth born and not yet born. Thus, the research questions, which anchor this dissertation study are the following: 1). How are Black women still serving as conductors on the Underground Railroad? 2). How do Black women tap into their own lived experiences to strengthen their work and relationships with Black youth, their families, and communities? 3).

How can the narratives of Black women come to bear on how we operationalize education as the practice of freedom?

Posing the questions above granted me access to Black women whose work revolves around liberation, justice, activism and community organizing. Honoring the Black women in my life as well as the Black women I have come to know stems from my identity as a daughter who watched her mother bring folk into our home before embarking on the next half of their life's journey, who listened attentively to the stories she told when we sat at the kitchen table together, who saw her experience liberation when she herself came to know the importance of doing our own work. Overflowing with encouragement to do work that transforms us from the inside out, my mother's testimony is one of lessons learned that were not taught, but lived through, and deep love for those others are content with leaving at the wayside.

As Venus E. Evans-Winters asserts, "Black women and other feminist and womanist scholars have already established the worth and legacy of mother scholars; but we have undertheorized the act of being a Black daughter. Daughtering is a worldview that shapes your state of mind, and it is a way of being and navigating the social world" (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 137). She goes on to declare that, "As daughters, we are taught to think critically…Daughtering demands that you think for yourself, and speak up for yourself and other people's daughters" (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 138). Rather than being passive, Evans-Winters (2019) suggests that the act of daughtering evokes subversion and vigilance for the sake of survival (p. 138). And as Audre Lorde reminds us, "We are powerful because we have survived." But *what* have we survived? What do the narratives reveal about the spirit of the Black women I have engaged with during one-on-one interviews and the sister circles that followed?

All of the Black women that I have worked with for this dissertation study are daughters and through this work, I have come to embrace Evans-Winters' offering that daughtering not only transcends genetics, but it is also embodied and spiritual (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 138). Because of this,

> Daughtering reminds [us] that [we] are never alone in the world. [We] are always somebody's daughter, sister, niece, cousin, or spiritual descendant. Kinship requires responsibility. Imagine that every piece of data analyzed implores a daughter scholar to think about how her interpretations and representations would affect her living and deceased relatives near and far. (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 138)

How do these imaginings influence how I think through the work and lived experiences of Black women locally, nationally, and globally? During critical reflection, Evans-Winters asked herself key questions about her own research process. Directing her questions to myself and my own research process, I query,

> How does engagement with inquiry and data serve my family, my communities, my self-worth, and the person I want to become? How might knowledge of science help me become more humane, the world a safer and comfortable place, and help me to understand the purpose of my life? What does a slice of culture, text, artifact represent to my daughter, someone else's daughter, or a mother of a daughter or son? How can I help my analysis relate to the lived experience of a daughter? An ethics of daughtering? Daughtering embodies an ethics of love; emotionality is not taken into consideration in institutional research protocol protections, in essence, it is forbidden. (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 139)

Daughtering, according to Venus Evans-Winters, centers intentionality, memory, and responsibility. I am Camilla Josephine Bell—daughter of Camilla and Modestus Bell. What this means is that I am called to make clear my intentions when conducting research with women whose lives and stories have historically been mis-managed, overlooked, and mis-construed. What this means is that I am called to re-member where and from whom I have come from. Situating self enables me to understand who and where I am in relation to others. Lastly, what this means is that I am called to be responsible. The Black women I have engaged with have

entrusted me with their laughter, pain, joy, sorrow, hurt and hope. I bear a responsibility to do justice to what I have heard, seen, and felt while working with them as I attempt to better understand the work they do, the lives they touch and the footprints they leave behind.

Why Syracuse?

[I] remember the first time I ever saw free land. It was not when I was in Maryland...It was not when I was in Virginia...I went to Pennsylvania...but there was no free soil...I went to New Jersey. There the ocean sung its wild chorus of sounding waves, and ebbed and flowed in tameless freedom, but there was no free soil there...I came to New York, and there was Niagara chanting the choral hymn of Omnipotence; there she stood, crowned with a rainbow, and robed with crested spray; but from the "lordly Hudson" to the Northern Lakes, **unless we except Syracuse**, **there was no free soil.**

~Frances Ellen Harper, May 22, 1858

"Unless we except Syracuse, there was no free soil." How do we even begin to unpack such a loaded statement? Furthermore, why should we attend to how Frances Ellen Harper situates her freedom within the heart of the earth? Soil, having the capacity to both foster and facilitate, is a medium through which dead matter transforms into diverse life forms. This process—complex, messy, yet generative. I argue that by using Harper's statement as a point of departure, we can critically map the intersections of freedom, Black women, liberation, and education as the practice of freedom endemic to the geography of Syracuse.

And yet, I have a burden to situate Syracuse within a larger narrative around issues of place, space, ownership, occupation, and reclamation. But before doing so, it is imperative to preface this section with a brief exposition of who Frances Ellen Harper is, how her political convictions drew her to the physical landscape of Syracuse, and the ways in which these political convictions translate to larger conceptualizations of freedom and liberation within *and* beyond Syracuse.

Born free in Baltimore, Maryland, to free parents in 1825, Harper understood early on the struggle to safeguard that which one was entitled to but deliberately denied: *freedom*. As a matter of fact, with the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, persons born into freedom like Harper, as well as those who fled to freedom, were *all* susceptible to being captured, arrested and (re)enslaved. Therefore, not only does Harper's "Bury Me in a Free Land," (1858) encapsulate her deep abhorrence of slavery, but it also unearths an intense desire to "breathe the air of freedom," rather than bear witness to a "mother's shriek of wild despair/Ris[ing] like a curse on the trembling air." Harper's wish to live, die, *and* rest in a land "Where none can call his brother a slave," is underscored in the last stanza of her poem. She declares, "I ask no monument, proud and high/To arrest the gaze of the passers-by/All that my yearning spirit craves/Is bury me not in a land of slaves." As a writer, lecturer, abolitionist, teacher, and suffragist, Harper's activism, leadership, and active involvement in the Underground Railroad, was fueled by her lived experiences and relationship to freedom within *and* beyond the United States.

By returning to the quote that anchors this section, we observe how Harper purposefully traverses spaces and places in efforts to locate "free soil." In so doing, she invites us to relive the journey, and to remember with her the very "first time [she] ever saw free land." In a letter written to a friend in 1856, Harper discusses her return from Canada and describes just how overcome with emotion she was upon "gaz[ing] for the first time on a land where a poor slave, flying from our glorious land of liberty(!), would in a moment find his fetters broken, his shackles loosed…" Thus, in the speech where the anchor quote is extracted, Canada is ultimately *the land* where ironically, one is *free* to realize "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" as delineated in the United States Declaration of Independence. However, while en route, Harper stops in several states and distinguishes Syracuse as a space and place that contains "free soil."

It is critical to note here that Harper's use of the phrase "free soil" is connected to discourse on land. And quite frankly, conversations about land *cannot* occur outside of the history of settler-colonialism, the forced removal and genocide of Indigenous peoples, and the concerted efforts of the Onondaga Nation—People of the Hills—to exercise self-determination and sovereignty. Not only is Canada *the land* where ironically one is *free* to realize "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," but we are also reminded that

> Historically, […] the Onondaga Nation's aboriginal territory, which [they] enjoyed up until the incursion of the Europeans about 400 years ago, was an area of land approximately 40 to 50 miles wide that began on the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario in the north and ran down well into Pennsylvania to the south. (Onondaga Nation: People of the Hills, 2018, Declaration section, third paragraph)

As a matter of fact, while perusing the "Facts" section of the OnondagaNation.org website, we learn that "Between 1788 and 1822, the Onondaga Nation lost possession of approximately 95% of its land through a series of illegal "takings" by the State of New York" (Onondaga Nation: People of the Hills, 2018, Facts section, second bullet point). Thus, not only does "The Complaint in the Onondaga Land Rights Action [Open] With The Following Words," but it also grants us a more nuanced understanding of why self-determination and sovereignty are vital to preservation efforts, reconciliation, justice, and peace. Having said this, the opening lines of the complaint reads as follows:

> The Onondaga People wish to bring about a healing between themselves and all others who live in this region that has been the homeland of the Onondaga Nation since the dawn of time. The Nation and its people have a unique spiritual, cultural, and historic relationship with the land, which is embodied in the Gayanashagowa, the Great Law of Peace. This relationship goes far beyond federal and state legal concepts of ownership, possession or legal rights. The people are one with the land, and consider themselves stewards of it. It is the duty of the Nation's leaders to work for a healing of this land, to protect it, and to pass it on to future generations. The Onondaga Nation brings this action on behalf of its people in the hope that it may hasten the process of reconciliation and bring lasting justice, peace, and respect among all who inhabit the area. (https://onondaganation.org/land-rights/complaint/)

Bearing these entangled histories in mind, what I am struggling towards is a fuller picture of this "free soil" that always *was* and perhaps still *is* Syracuse. And though Harper was born free, I find myself *still* struggling towards a fuller picture of the land that received her when she arrived in search of true freedom and liberation. Therefore, I contend that how we understand freedom and liberation in the context of these multiple and intersecting histories warrants dialogue—one that I am not well equipped to facilitate but remain open to initiating.

To begin, let us consider Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "Decolonization is not a metaphor." In this piece, Tuck and Yang provide a basis for initiating dialogue about the distinct yet overlapping histories of both Indigenous and Black peoples. More specifically, Tuck and Yang work together to trouble the language of decolonization often used across educational circles. In fact, both scholars argue that "The metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or 'settler moves to innocence,' that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity" (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 1). Moreover, Tuck and Yang take issue with anti-racist, social justice, and critical scholars' commitment to "decolonization," but continued silence on the ongoing struggle of Indigenous peoples to maintain sovereignty. Added to this silence, is the casual dismissal of stories *as* theory (Brayboy, 2006).

Having said this, what I appreciate most within Tuck and Yang's piece, especially as it relates to Harper's description of Syracuse, is their discussion on the centrality of land, its ties to one's identity, as well as how the relationships Indigenous people have to the land renders divestment both a disruption to *and* violation of Indigenous ways of being. Both scholars assert,

> Within settler colonialism, the most important concern is land/water/air/subterranean earth (land, for shorthand, in this article). Land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their *new* home and source of capital, and also because the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land

> represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence. This violence is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler, but is asserted each day of occupation. (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 5)

Later, both go on to analyze the complexities of the "settler-native-slave" relationship to the land. They state,

> In order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there. Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how they came to be in a particular place - indeed how we/they came to *be a place*...For the settlers, Indigenous peoples are in the way and...must be erased, must be made into ghosts. At the same time, settler colonialism involves the subjugation and forced labor of chattel slaves whose bodies and lives become the property, and who are kept landless. (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 6)

Now to be clear, the idea here is not to conflate the histories of Indigenous and Black peoples. Rather, the objective is to magnify the complexities and nuances that are characteristic of the Indigenous *and* Black experience. When Harper discusses Syracuse—Onondaga Nation—the home to the Haudenosaunee people: the keepers of the Central Fire—I argue that whether or not she possessed an in-depth understanding of their struggle to maintain sovereignty, based on her evaluation of the land, she did have an acute awareness of how one's state of being is inextricably linked to their relationship with the land.

Thus, in the midst of her pursuit for land that would receive her and safeguard her freedom was an *already* messy history of "kill[ing] the Indian and sav[ing] the man" (Adams, 1995). And yet, this racial project, when juxtaposed with the "[p]ersonal and societal consideration of the Seventh Generation"—illuminates the ongoing efforts of the Haudenosaunee to maintain a land conducive to the healing and preservation of future generations. (Onondaga Nation: People of the Hills, 2018, Today section, second paragraph) It is within this context that Harper "except[s] Syracuse" on her mission to find "free soil." To ignore this nuance would be

to eliminate a seminal part of Syracuse's legacy of violence, struggle, resistance, and self-determination that undergirds the very question that anchors this work: "Why Syracuse?"

"Have you ever noticed how cities always have a south side?"

~Bebe Baines

What happens when the histories endemic to the geography of Syracuse fades into the background? When narratives of deficit elide narratives of struggle, agency, and resistance? Furthermore, how does this erasure thwart efforts outlined in "The Complaint in the Onondaga Land Rights Action" to heal, protect, and pass the land of Syracuse to future generations? Here is where the story shifts, and a new chapter unfolds. The "free soil" Harper describes—completely eroded.

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In Alana Semuels' "How to Decimate a City" (2015), she contends that "The story of how poverty became one of the defining characteristics of Syracuse is specific to the city and the region, but in some ways it is illustrative of the many policy decisions that have made all American cities more segregated by race and income over the last 15 years." In fact, Semuels' work is in conversation with Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton's *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (1993). Connecting these two texts underscores the idea that cities *like* Syracuse do not become impoverished overnight. Rather, there is a calculated and intentional disinvestment that occurs, which further destabilizes and uproots communities already experiencing marginalization.

S. David Stamps and Miriam Burney Stamps' *Salt City and Its Black Community: A Sociological Study of Syracuse, New York* provides a much-needed backstory to Bebe Baines' inquiry to her spouse: "Have you ever noticed how cities always have a south side?" According

to Stamps and Stamps (2008), “In the early 1980s, the south side of Syracuse was made up of numerous small neighborhoods (intermixed with striplike business areas) that extended south from the central business district (CBD) to the city limits. Also intermixed in the south side were predominantly black neighborhoods and businesses” (p. 199). In the above excerpt, Stamps and Stamps re-construct the landscape of the south side prior to the construction of 1-81 and the subsequent upheaval, demolition, and dislocation of Black communities and businesses.

They both go on to state that,

> One of the main streets that ran through the south side of Syracuse was South Salina, an extremely busy street because it was one of the main north-south thoroughfares that extended through the city. North Salina bordered on an Italian working-class neighborhood, and South Salina ran through working-and lower-class black neighborhoods. However, as pointed out, white families and white businesses were intermixed with black families and black businesses in the area. The CBD separated North and South Salina. (Stamps and Stamps, 2008, p. 199)

Additionally, “Although many businesses within the area were black owned, they did not serve as a source for jobs, nor did they bring significant amounts of money into the black community because they were run by nonpaid family members and barely stayed alive financially from month to month” (Stamps and Stamps, 2008, p. 200). While Stamps and Stamps put forth a more dismal picture of the success of Black businesses within the area, what is most important to note here is that Black people mobilized to foster and build community. Through businesses such as Percy Jones Furniture Store, Delight Barbeque, Starlight Holiness Church, the Cross Church of God by Faith, Blue Brothers Barber Shop, Black folks were making attempts to meet the needs of the community (Stamps and Stamps, 2008, p. 200).

In fact, not only does this next point serve as a backdrop for Semuels’ analysis, but it also bolsters Massey and Denton’s (1993) argument and further amplifies the question Baines poses:

> Much of the deterioration found on the south side began in the early 1960s with the construction of Interstate 81, which sliced through it. The impact of Interstate 81 on

> residential housing was the greatest in areas inhabited by the poor. After this section of the south side was broken up by Interstate 81, white lower-middle-class and working-class families that had inhabited the area moved out. The only residents left were lower-class and older whites on fixed incomes who could not afford to move. Lower-and working-class blacks replaced the whites who moved because they could not find affordable housing in other sections of the city." (Stamps and Stamps, 2008, p. 201)

With the above excerpt in mind, it is therefore no wonder why Massey and Denton assume the position that "The segregation of American blacks was no historical accident...As in South Africa, residential segregation in the United States provides a firm basis for a broader system of racial injustice" (Massey and Denton, 1993, p. 16). While likening the segregation experienced by Blacks within the United States to that of Apartheid in South Africa engenders its own push back, what can be taken from this parallel is the detailed blueprint used by those in power to engineer *and* exacerbate racial and economic inequalities.

In 2015, Semuels recounted the story of Genea Coston, a single mother of four who talks about wanting more for her children, "but is worried that they are trapped." Coston goes on to admit that she's "'cused out'—slang people in the city use to describe someone who has given up on a better life." In 2019, amidst ongoing deliberation about what will take the place of I-81, Robert Samuels also amplified the thoughts of Syracuse residents. Thus, with or without national coverage, many are continuing to weigh in on what the change will mean for them, their families, and their quality of life.

And unlike the fears of Coston, Ryedell Davis looks forward to the possibilities that can emerge from the tearing down of I-81. Davis imagines that,

> He could open a restaurant, near the one his grandparents had before it was bulldozed to make space for Interstate 81. Surrounding it could be other black-owned businesses, largely absent from the city's south side because banks historically refused to give loans there. Maybe, he thought, the state would give them all tax credits or offer financial assistance to address the past injustice.

Samuels reports, “For Davis, reinvestment in his neighborhood is more than a dream; it is a form of reparation, a way for the city to atone for the damage the highway inflicted on this community.” *Reinvestment*. *Reparations*. *Atonement*. Foregrounding these processes renders the hopes and dreams of both Coston and Davis less elusive.

By tying in the works of Semuels, Stamps and Stamps, Massey and Denton, and Samuels, and centering the voices and concerns of Syracuse residents, I am better equipped to highlight the ways in which Syracuse as a city is evolving *and* teetering on the cusp of change and *perhaps* healing. In turn, the questions that remain are as follows: How is Coston’s feeling of being ‘cused out’ informed by the “damage the highway inflicted on th[e] [Syracuse] community?” In what ways can reinvestment create new opportunities and possibilities for Davis and others with a larger vision for what Syracuse *can* be? Here, we observe how the ongoing development of the built environment impacts one’s relationship to the land, complicates their place within it, and exacerbates their sense of dis-ease.

Thus, as I started this section with Bebe Baines’ question, I think it is essential to end with the very same question: “Have you ever noticed how cities always have a south side?” We would do well to remember that this same south side is home to places like Cafe Sankofa: “a new arts and cultural space designed on the principle of cooperative economics” (www.cafesankofacoop.com), the South Side Communication Center: a space driven by educational and community-based programming, the Syracuse Dunbar Center: the historical “core” of the Black community, committed to serving and meeting the needs of members since the 1930s, (https://www.syracusedunbarcenter.org/copy-of-history) and the South Side Innovation Center: a facility which “increases the vitality of the local and area economy by recruiting, nurturing, and

training a diverse group of emerging and mature businesses” (https://southsideinnovation.org/south-side-innovation-center/).

Having said this, now the questions become: Who is at the center of revitalizing and revolutionizing the south side? What are the material costs of revitalization and revolution? And to Baines’ question, I respectfully ask, “Have you ever noticed who struggles to *keep* south sides from going *under*?”

The Underground Railroad Then and Now: Embodying an Ethic and Pedagogy of Liberation

I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations.

~Harriet A. Jacobs, 1861, p. 6

As a literary genre, slave narratives are texts that speak directly to the degradation of slavery (Andrews, 1988; Lewis and Gates Jr., 1991). Juxtaposed with this directness is an intentional ambiguity surrounding the intimate details of escape to freedom. In other words, free persons *deliberately* withheld details surrounding their escape, and thus used the writing process as a strategic act of subversion. I argue that these ambiguities and deliberate omissions speak to the functionality and efficacy of the Underground Railroad. More specifically, formerly enslaved Black women tapped into the power of their own lived experiences and underscored the ongoing struggle to reclaim their humanity in the midst of constant dehumanization (Tanner, 1987; Moody, 2009; Minor and Pitts, 2012). At the crux of these narratives are calls to be seen as agential subjects as opposed to objects to be owned, dominated, and sold at one’s whim. Nevertheless, the harrowing accounts of escape, close calls with recapture, and eventual arrival to places and spaces of freedom, attest to Black women’s intense desire to *get free* and *remain free.*

To demonstrate, let us consider the life story of Harriet A. Jacobs. Referred to as Linda Brent in the publishing world so as to "add [her] testimony to that of abler pens," without endangering loved ones and comrades committed to the preservation of the Underground Railroad, Jacobs uses her story as a way to "convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is." Born enslaved to Mulatto parents in Edenton, North Carolina, Jacobs was wholly shielded from the terrors of slavery. Her father, a skilled carpenter, had the privilege of earning wages and living life beyond the gaze of the slave master. In fact, to maintain a life of comfort for his family, Jacobs' father was permitted to "work at his trade, and manage his affairs" under the condition that he would "pay his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and support himself" (Jacobs, 1861, p. 11).

Of her childhood, Jacobs states, "I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to [my parents] for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment" (Jacobs, 1861, pps. 11-12). Even with the comforts her father's trade afforded, and the privileges garnered on account of her maternal grandmother's business prowess, Jacobs and her family remained in a perpetual state of precarity. On the contrary, it is important to highlight that with the convergence of skin privilege, social status, and literacy, Jacobs and her family were granted a kind of mobility and security others *within* and *beneath* their station were outrightly denied. Thus, by bringing these facts to the fore and contrasting it with the reality that even with these privileges, one was *always* in danger of exposure and death, there is an added gravitas to Jacobs' revelation: "[…] I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to [my parents] for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment" (Jacobs, 1861, p. 11).

And although the sexual depravity of her slave master and the sheer cruelty of her mistress was unbearable, ever before Jacobs was the urgency to obtain freedom for her *and* her children. Thus, *getting free* and *remaining free* had larger implications. She recounts,

> I had my woman's pride, and a mother's love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each. (Jacobs, 1861, p. 130)

Accepting *disabling* conditions that would *enable* her to realize plans for escape (Bell, 2010), Jacobs hid with "friends" unknown to the reader, disguised herself in sailors' clothes, and laid prostrate in her grandmother's cramped pent roof measuring 9 feet long, 7 feet wide and 3 feet high for a period of 7 years. "Give me liberty or give me death was [her] motto" (Jacobs, 1861, p. 151). In 1842, after 7 years of being in hiding, Jacobs made her way from Edenton, North Carolina to Pennsylvania by boat. Thereafter, she made her way to New York City by rail. And though navigating within a free state, Jacobs was constantly in fear of being found out, sent back, and subjected to the abuse the Flint family were authorized by law to inflict.

Although Jacobs' story concludes with her reuniting with her children in New York City and being freed from the grips of her slave master, many of the details surrounding the who, what, where, when, why, and how of her escape and arrival are shrouded in mystery. It is this mystery which attests to the functionality and efficacy of the Underground Railroad as a larger network and structure, which facilitated the leading of enslaved persons to freedom. And while Jacobs surreptitiously recounts her careful navigation of a system whose function was to carry those considered "merchandise," through to freedom, it is imperative to connect her story to that of others beyond the borders of the United States.

For instance, like Jacobs, the life story of Mary Prince, a woman born in Brackish-Pond, Bermuda, illumines readers about her lived experiences as an enslaved woman and maintains

that she wished to write her life's story so that "good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave had felt and suffered" (Prince, 1831, p. i). Similar to Jacobs' narrative, Prince's perspective and insights into the system of slavery as well as the details surrounding her transition from enslavement to freedom are also shrouded in mystery. As a reader, not being privy to the specifics of escape only adds to the intricacies of this larger, clandestine network.

In *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* (2014), Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, a historical and archaeological consultant, conducts a place-based study of free Black communities in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. According to LaRoche,

> Blacks exploited the landscape to stake a claim for freedom within the Underground Railroad movement even as one law after another attempted to thwart escapes. Moving through the land as a method of securing freedom typified the Underground Railroad movement from the beginnings of enslavement until after the end of the American Civil War. Escape and reliance on the land lingered to the last [...] Whether in maroon communities or within the Underground Railroad movement, freedom has been as much about place as it has been about liberty. The history of African Americans written in the land reveals the pragmatic uses of the terrain. (LaRoche, 2014, p. 157)

I believe that this work is in conversation with my own in that, it speaks to the power of place and the politics of space. As LaRoche highlights above, histories of resistance are written into the very land Black women traverse to secure freedom for themselves, their loved ones, and future generations. Where women like Jacobs and Prince sought liberation from chattel slavery and navigated the Underground Railroad with the aid of family members, friends, neighbors, feminists, abolitionists, and members of slave-holding families sympathetic to the plight of those enslaved, *now*, Black women are assuming the position of conductors on the Modern-day Underground Railroad by embodying an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. Embodying this ethic enables Black women across the city of Syracuse to get Black youth and their families *through*—be it through systems not engineered for their survival or through institutions not equipped to

nurture their potential. Black women getting Black youth and their families through is political. Intricate. Creative. And, it is urgent.

Roadmap for Reading This Dissertation

Mirrors remind us of who we are, offer us glimpses into who we can be, and afford us opportunities to look deeply at ourselves. This dissertation begins with memories of Black women who functioned as reflections of who I wanted to be. It is essential that I remember how I was raised and nurtured by these Black women within and beyond my first school: home. From there, I connect my continued intellectual and personal development to that of Black women who used the school setting as a space to promote education as the practice of freedom.

Rooted in both freedom and dispossession, resistance and occupation, I begin this body of work grappling with the complicated relationship Black and Indigenous people have with Syracuse land. What does it mean to find “free soil” in a place ravaged by settler colonialism? To further expand on these complexities, I center voices from the community, and bring them in conversation with scholars interested in the construction of Syracuse as a city and its current state as a city *under* construction. Moreover, I consider the ways in which south sides are literally *engineered* in efforts to eliminate connections to larger legacies of freedom and liberation.

Chapter 2 leads you through a genealogy of Black women who challenge narrow conceptualizations of leadership as well as embody best practices for critical engagement with Black youth, their families and the communities from which they come. In this chapter, I also highlight Black women whose lived experiences accredit them to “school” Black youth and their families on how to navigate and disrupt systems of oppression. With the life force of future

generations driving their resistance, I magnify the ways in which Black women have and *still are* organizing, struggling, and mobilizing change agents.

Following in the tradition of Black women who use theory as a tool to chart new pathways towards critical consciousness, healing, and organizing, Chapter 3 includes a theoretical and conceptual blueprint for navigating this dissertation study. Using the framing offered by Leslie Brown and Susan Strega, the main question that I ruminate on is this: What does "research as resistance" look like within a city that holds such complex histories of struggle? For this reason, I am intentional about engaging with Black women throughout the city of Syracuse in ways that honor their stories, and voices. Furthermore, my objective in this chapter is to illuminate how the Black women within this study tap into their own lived experiences to operationalize education as the practice of freedom.

Chapter 4 traces the organic manner in which sister circles transformed into homeplaces for participants seeking community, affirmation, and release. Here is where I provide an overview of sister circles, offer more details about the planning process for each one, and discuss the lessons learned as a result of engaging with Black women cross-generationally. This chapter concludes with post sister circle reflections, which emphasize the importance of exercising reflexivity when engaging in qualitative inquiry.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I direct your attention to the narratives that have emerged from wading in the waters of the analysis and interpretation process. Each section in these two chapters speak to the complexities, which underlie the idea and praxis of embodying an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. The her-stories told uncover critical encounters with injustice, racism, marginalization, and exclusion. But, they also reveal the importance of self-care, community building, and love. How each Black woman understands who they are in relation to the work that

they engage in magnifies the continuity of the Underground Railroad and the ongoing commitment to liberation for Black youth, their families and communities.

In Chapter 7, I speak to the current moment we are in and ground my findings in an ethic of love. What does this love look like when conducting research *with* Black women whose work within the community both drains and fuels them? What have I learned in the process of doing this work? And, what do I want to leave behind?

As Sonia Sanchez reminds us, we are *always* in danger of forgetting. Knowing this, how do memories help us to honor legacies of struggle and resistance exercised by Black women who are no longer with us? I argue that memory is essential to this study as it is connected to her-stories that attest to a larger desire for freedom and liberation.

This roadmap is a guide and a light, and I intend to let it shine.

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CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW:

BLACK WOMEN DISRUPTING, DISSENTING, AND EDUCATING

In efforts to magnify how Black women promote education as the practice of freedom within and beyond school contexts, the following literature review will consist of three subsections: 1). Black Women as Teachers 2). Black Women as Leaders and 3). Black Women as Community Organizers. Anchoring each subsection will be historical, literary and contemporary references that further build the argument that Black women's embodiment of an ethic and pedagogy of liberation occurs within as well as transcends the confines of the school setting.

Black Women as Teachers

"The purpose of education then is not entrenched within the discourse of escape, but rather a discourse towards disrupting, dismantling, and designing schools and classrooms as sites of liberation."

~Dr. Reba Y. Hodge, 2017, p. 268

Positioned at the crux of Stephanie Y. Evans' "Teaching: That Which Relieves Their Hunger," lies a series of unsettling questions, which serve as a point of departure for me as I unpack the ways in which Black women have intentionally "designed schools and classrooms as sites of liberation." To provide a sociohistorical and sociopolitical context for these questions, it is imperative to situate them within a larger understanding of struggle. In the chapter, Evans references a passage from Mary McLeod Bethune's "A Philosophy of Education for Negro Girls," (1920). In it, Bethune states the following:

> Negro women have always known struggle. This heritage is just as much to be desired as any other. Our girls should be taught to appreciate and welcome it [...] Every Negro girl should pray for that pioneering spirit. Let her Arithmetic, History, Economics, and what not, be taught with the zeal of struggle; the determination to win by mettle and fairness and pluck. For such she needs after she leaves the school of life and enters life's school. (Bethune, 1920, p. 3).

However, in response to Bethune's assertion, Evans queries, "This question of noble struggle is significant; one might ask, should this be a universal principle of education? Should all students aspire to struggle? Did black women's historical struggles make them especially equipped?" (Evans, 2007, p. 168). And while Evans does not pretend to have any answers to these thought-provoking questions, I am most interested in the idea that Black women are especially equipped to "enter life's school" given their intimate knowledge of and experience with struggle.

From this excerpt, it is evident that there are two types of schooling and teaching taking place here: teaching and schooling for intellectual development and teaching and schooling to better prepare students to navigate an unjust world. Thus, Bethune's assertion that "Negro women have always known struggle," suggests that "not knowing" also comes with its own consequences. In fact,

> She knew that learning equated to freedom and did not miss any opportunity to teach a lesson that might mean the difference between poverty and prosperity for black students. That the ignorance of her childhood was followed by her educational success in adolescence provided the impetus for her role as an educator. She felt that her role as a teacher was to "meet the pressing needs" of those in her community...She was aware of the discrepancy in resources and critical incidents that spurred her to dedicate her life to learning." (Evans, 2007, p. 164)

For further emphasis, Evans goes on to highlight a 1940 interview Bethune had with Charles Spurgeon Johnson where he asks her to recall an early hurt that was foundational to her development and maturation. In response, Bethune talks candidly about "the first and real wound that [she] could feel in [her] soul and [her] mind" (McLeod-Bethune, M., 1940). She goes on to talk about an experience wherein she encounters a young, White girl who, when she attempted to pick up one of the books she and a few others were reading, said to her, "You can't read that put that down. I will show you some pictures over here" (McLeod-Bethune, M., 1940). In this

memory, Bethune is positioned as incapable and inept. “You *can’t*” is what the young, White girl says to her. I would go so far as to suggest that “*can’t*” equates to “you shouldn’t” and as a result, “you never will.” How many of our Black youth are told that they “*can’t*” and are therefore offered remedial and subpar instruction injurious to their intellectual development? Hence, Evans’ offerings regarding the purpose *and* place of struggle in the context of education. What role does it play in developing a critical consciousness of the systems in place that need “disrupting and dismantling?”

In efforts to add to this already complex conversation, I want to put forward Karen A. Johnson’s “The Antioppressionist Thoughts and Pedagogies of Anna Julia Cooper and Septima Poinsette Clark.” In this chapter, Johnson (2017) focuses on the teaching practices of both Cooper and Clark and contends that,

> As womanist educators, they were clear about the need to engage in educative work that would promote racial empowerment, self-improvement, and macro-structural transformation. Cooper and Clark challenged the dominant discourses and offered dissident counter-narratives and anti-oppressionist pedagogies on how African Americans should be educated. (p. 50)

Johnson goes on to assert that, “In reflecting a womanist tradition, Cooper and Clark viewed education as a major vehicle to fight for a radically and socially just society” (Johnson, 2017, p. 50).

How does one begin to develop a clarity and consciousness of what the needs are? And, how does one go about *meeting* those needs? Like Bethune, when Cooper and Clark’s antioppressionist pedagogies—informed by womanist principles—are situated within a larger context, we can better understand the urgency with which both Black women and others thereafter acted to construct learning spaces that would prepare and embolden young people to challenge racist, sexist, and classist institutions. In fact, “Cooper argued that schools in general

and teachers in particular were parts of communities and were therefore responsible to parents and families [...] Instead of blaming parents, teachers needed to hold themselves accountable for assisting students in any way possible and for gathering relevant information that might assist in fairly assessing and appropriately facilitating the students' development" (Evans, 2007, p. 161).

Coopers' stance points to a clear understanding of self as a "community servant who was not bound by school grounds or college campus" (Evans, 2007, p. 161). Johnson contends that "Cooper's early antioppressionist thoughts about education and racial justice were influenced by her childhood lived experiences. These experiences with oppression contributed to her overall fight for racial justice, educational access, and social change" (Johnson, 2017, p. 53; Johnson, 2000). In addition, Johnson highlights Cooper's social location and the role it played in her commitment to educational equity, access and social justice. She states, as "...an ex-enslaved child living in the rural South during the Reconstruction era[,] [t]here is little doubt that being Black, poor, and female in a climate of social change profoundly shaped her race, class, and gender antioppressionist consciousness" (Johnson, 2017, p. 52).

Needless to say, we would do well to remember that Cooper was also a part of the Talented Tenth, an elite class of Blacks who led the way forward in the struggle for racial uplift (Cusick, 2009, p. 21). Thus, fusing her lived experiences as an "ex-enslaved child living in the rural South during the Reconstruction era" *with* her lived experiences as a member of an elite class of Black leaders is seminal to understanding the building and subsequent transformation of her race, gender, and class consciousness. Why is this important to mention? Well, amongst the teachers mentioned, the connecting thread is a nuanced understanding of one's lived experiences and its centrality to their political commitments as teachers, *and* servants to the community.

Clark's genealogy, on the other hand, draws our attention to a diasporic and transnational commitment to liberation, be it from colonial rule and imperialism, or political and social upheaval. Where "Clark's father was enslaved by the well-known botanist Joel Poinsett, who named the red poinsettia plant (Clark, 1962) [...] [h]er mother was a free woman of color who was born in Charleston, South Carolina but raised in Haiti (Hall, 1976). Clark's mother learned to read and write in Haiti" (Johnson, 2017, p. 55). Because of the illegality of teaching enslaved persons literacy skills, Clark's father "did not learn to read and write until World War I" (Johnson, 2017, p. 55; Clark, 1962). And yet, Clark's parents wanted for her and her siblings what they were unable to have for themselves—an education that would render them "free from a state of illiteracy, poverty and disenfranchisement" (Johnson, 2017, p. 55). Thus, "[h]er experiences with her childhood poverty also became a factor in Clark's ability to empathize with impoverished African Americans who had little to no schooling experiences. It also contributed to a womanist antioppressionist desire to fight against racial oppression" (Johnson, 2017, p. 55).

Thus, by tapping into their lived experiences, Bethune, Cooper and Clark transformed into teachers who engaged in "that which relieves their hunger"—teaching that would equip young people with the necessary tools to fight educational and social injustices. As Vanessa Siddle Walker (2001) posits, "To reduce the African American teachers' role to one in which they merely "care," diminishes the professional and community knowledge that explains their caring [...]. Likewise, the portraits of African American teachers as passive victims of inequality fail to account for the resistance, resilience, and agency that was the nature of the African American teaching act. To see these teachers through one lens and to operate with assumptions derived from that lens is to perpetuate an historical inaccuracy" (p. 774). By delving into the lived

experiences of Black women teachers, we are afforded a richer understanding of how political commitments around access, equity, and social and educational justice are formed.

In addition to understanding the lived experiences of Black women teachers, it is also important to acknowledge the contexts they navigated, the traditions they tapped into to do so and how that informed their pedagogy and relationships with Black youth and their communities. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant argues that Black women who are guided by womanist principles possess three particular characteristics: the embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk. According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "...as the traditions of caring in which black women have been involved have had an explicit focus on helping other women and their children survive the degradations of physical, economic, and political enslavement, so has womanism provided an interpersonal base for social action in education" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 77).

Furthermore, she declares that, "Being a womanist educator entails more than simply having a professed love for children: A womanist educator loves children, especially those considered "other" in society, out of a clear-sighted understanding of how and why society marginalizes some children while embracing others" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 80). More importantly, this "clear-sighted understanding" enables many Black women teachers to raise expectations for Black youth—especially when others purposely lower them (Delpit, 2012).

The act of raising expectations and providing the necessary supports to best educate Black youth positioned Black women teachers as seminal figures within a larger professional community who understood the needs of the larger Black community and shaped their teaching around meeting those needs. And while Siddle-Walker (2001) discusses African American teachers in general during the years of 1940-1960, she is intentional about challenging unidimensional analyses of the contexts under which they taught, served, and developed

professional identities and communities committed to educating Black youth. She maintains that "teachers existed in a complex system where the needs of African American children were formulated and communicated in systematic and purposeful ways. This system created, sustained and was informed by the beliefs of the African American teachers and the community; it represented a plan for the education of African American children, the tenets of which were commonly agreed upon" (Siddle-Walker, 2001, p. 773). What I find to be a critical link between her work and this larger discussion of Black women teachers is how she talks about their existence within a larger cultural community that supported their efforts and rendered them assets to the intellectual and social advancement of the Black community at large.

In fact, Audrey Thompson's "Not the Color Purple: Black Feminist Lessons for Educational Caring" speaks to the dangers of not attending to issues of race, culture, and identity. In this piece, Thompson challenges dominant theories of care and identifies the ways in which they fail to account for difference. Rather than simply critiquing these dominant theories, Thompson goes on to propose how Black feminist and womanist frameworks can transform how we enact an ethic of care that attends to and respects one's racialized identity. Nevertheless, not only does Thompson affirm educators who are aware of the needs of their students, but she also affirms those who are concerned with being racially responsible as well. She states,

> For educators, moreover, considerations of what will nurture, and support students are crucial moral and pedagogical questions. [Thus][,] we need theories of nurturing, accordingly, that help us to think about what will support students, theories that help us envision more responsive and fulfilling relationships, theories that help us argue for the kinds of institutional changes that must be made in schools, the workplace, and government so that we can address the pressing needs of students, children, families, communities, and individuals. (Thompson, 1998, p. 528)

Furthermore, she goes on to suggest that, "The important structural criticisms that have been raised with regard to caring, then, should not be used to dismiss theories of care, but should

serve to inform and reorient them in ways that systematically account for race, class, gender, cultural and other differences" (Thompson, 1998, p. 528). Therefore, Black women teachers who operate from this premise recognize the urgency with which they must act to ensure better living and learning conditions for historically marginalized youth, *and* Black youth specifically. This level of urgency informs the construction and preservation of learning environments that support and nurture agents of change.

Perhaps this is precisely why Bettina L. Love (2019) advocates for struggle driven by educational freedom rather than reform. Centering the freedom-dreaming of "dark folx […] [whose] dreams were filled with joy, resistance, love, and an unwavering imagining of what is possible when dark folx matter and live to thrive rather than survive," Love speaks candidly to a teaching force whose lived experiences differ from that of their students, their families, and the communities from which they come (Love, 2019, p. 93). Hence, the emphasis on abolitionist teaching and it being more than a teaching approach, but rather, "…a way of life, a way of seeing the world, and a way of taking action against injustice" (Love, 2019, pg. 89). And yet, for the Black women within this literature review, I argue that they are engaging in a specific type of teaching—one that is wholly embodied—one that is informed by an ethic and pedagogy of liberation.

This ethic shapes how Black women live and navigate the world as pedagogues within and beyond the school setting. Thus, rather than adopting an abolitionist "way of life," they operate from the understanding that education for liberation pushes back against histories of institutional neglect they are all too familiar with and remain bent on challenging. Connected to this idea is Leigh Patel's discussion of learning as a fugitive act. Not only are Black women enacting education as the practice of freedom, but when Black youth and their families tap into the power

of the learning process, like Black women pedagogues, they too are engaging in a revolutionary act. Patel maintains,

> "Black, Indigenous, and people of color are told regularly through their surroundings, through the Eurocentric curricula of schools and universities, that they are lesser or that they do not even exist, and inaccurate histories are presented as impermeable truth, strengthened though each false reprinting. And yet, learning has, I argue, never yielded fully to this settler project of colonization of the mind. From the lessons taught within homes to social movements that used explicit direct action, political and self-determined education has regularly involved careful study as part of the project of changing the opportunities to literally learn and live for children of the darker nations." (Patel, 2019, p. 257)

An example of this can be taken from the work of Tambra O. Jackson, Ashley Ballard, Marena Drewery, Brianna Membres, Laryn Morgan and Felicia J. Nicholson (2017). In "'Black Like Me'": Female Preservice Teachers of Color On Learning To Teach For Social Justice With A Black Female Professor," preservice teachers Ashley, Marena, Brianna, Laryn, and Felicia use "both culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race theory [to] describe critical incidents from their racialized experiences in their teacher education program, inclusive of how they perceived having" Professor Jackson, a self-identified Black woman "for a diversity course" (Jackson, Ballard, Drewery, Membres, Morgan, and Nicholson, 2017, p. 93). In this piece, the contributing authors mention that they "respected Jackson for making them dig deeper about the assumptions they had prior to the course" ((Jackson, Ballard, Drewery, Membres, Morgan, and Nicholson, 2017, p. 111).

Not only was there room for them to exercise reflexivity about their own positions as women of color, but they were also granted opportunities to dialogue and unpack assumptions that they carried with them to the course. In many ways, Jackson's disposition as a social justice teacher educator informed how she related to *and* engaged with women of color *also* driven by

their own lived experiences to pursue teaching as their life's work. Given this, they go on to assert the following:

> Working on this project also provided Marena and Felicia a space to explore their multiracial and biracial identities with Black women [...] Felicia specifically noted her comfort level with and affinity for Tambra because she reminded her of her Black aunts. So Ashley's comment of her teacher (Tambra) being Black like her, also resonated with Marena and Felicia, because they too saw parts of themselves in Tambra and were affirmed by her presence as their teacher. Thus, the need to continue to recruit and retain Black women faculty in teacher education is invaluable to creating spaces for multiracial and biracial female preservice teachers of Color who recognize and seek Black identity affirmation. (Jackson, Ballard, Drewery, Membres, Morgan, and Nicholson; 2017, p. 111)

Central to these reflections is the reminder that "knowledge and knowledge production are always political" (Patel, 2019, p. 260). Having said this, what does it mean for preservice teachers of color to see in their *own* teacher a reflection and extension of the very home community their White peers disparage during class discussions? Moreover, what does it mean for a Black woman to *create* space at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) for preservice teachers of color to critically engage the very issues their White peers hem and haw over? In many ways, Patel's assertion adds another layer to these inquiries. She states, "...when learning is engaged as a fugitive act, out of necessity, it should at once call educators['] attention to disambiguate learning from achievement and to not romanticize the risks so many have taken over the centuries to learn as an act of defiance and futurity" (Patel, 2019, p. 260). Thus, I maintain that for Black women navigating within a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) who *also* have a strong desire to teach within the same communities that have shaped who they are, learning *and* challenging ideologies steeped in deficit are truly "act[s] of defiance and futurity" (Patel, 2019, p. 260). I make this point with bell hooks' reminder in mind. She states,

> The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our

> comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 207)

"Not surprisingly, professors who are not concerned with inner well-being are the most threatened by the demand on the part of students for liberatory education, for pedagogical processes that will aid them in their own struggle for self-actualization" (hooks, 1994, p. 17). In Dr. Jackson's course, Ballard, Drewery, Membres, Morgan, and Nicholson underwent a transformation indicative of their commitment to learning more about self, as well as critical reflection on how their lived experiences have informed who *and* how they are in relation to others. Simply put, the works of Love, Patel, Jackson, Ballard, Drewery, Membres, Morgan, and Nicholson demonstrate the ways in which Black women teacher educators' commitment to an ethic and pedagogy of liberation can revolutionize how pre-service teachers view, engage with, *and* teach students who are also Black—like them.

Black Women as Leaders

"Why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist always represented as a black *man?* How does the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for its survival?"

~Mary Helen Washington, circa 1987

Reverend Jermain Wesley Loguen, touted as one of the most recognized station managers in Syracuse, New York, was born enslaved on a small plantation in 1813. In *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, As Slave And As Freeman. A Narrative of Real Life,* the writers "devote a brief chapter to the parents of Mr. Loguen" (Loguen, 1859, p. 11). Thus, the chapter begins with the following statement: "The genealogy of an American Slave may be traced with certainty to the mother, rarely to the father, never beyond them on the male line. It is the condition of the mother de facto that makes the slave. She is mother de lege only to the intent that her offspring may be

an outlaw. As to the progenitor on the male side, he is rarely known as the father in fact, never in law. The slave has no father" (Loguen, 1859, p. 11). Why is such a statement integral to this larger study? Integral to the idea that "the heroic voice and heroic image of the [B]lack woman get[s] suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for its survival?" It is precisely because throughout his childhood, and in the midst of her own enslavement, Loguen's mother recounted *her story*. We read that,

> Of her parents and kindred of any kind, she [was] perfectly ignorant. The extent of her recollection is, that she was free in her infancy, in the guardianship of a man in Ohio, by the name of McCoy, with whom she lived until about seven years of age. She remember[ed] that she was out of sight and hearing of Mr. McCoy's house, alone, when she was such little girl, and that a bad man got out of a covered wagon and took her into it with one hand about her body and the other upon her mouth to prevent her screams—that when she got into the wagon, he held her in his lap, and told the teamster to drive on—that there were several other little colored children in the wagon with her—and that they were taken over the river together in a boat; probably into Kentucky. This story she often repeated to her son, and kindled in his boyhood the intensest indignation against the institution which so outraged the mother he loved. (Loguen, 1859, pps. 12-13)

While Loguen shared his story with White sympathizers and friends, who would then take "features from him and fill up the picture" where "vacancies" existed, I do not want to undermine the significance of his mother's influence, as it serves as a point of departure for this section on Black Women Leaders. What is important to note about the excerpt above is that Loguen's mother, Jane, told him of her earliest memories of freedom and though it was quite literally stolen from her, she made it a point to share with her son the possibilities freedom engenders. While many texts contend that "In Jermain W. Loguen, Syracuse boasted one of the most effective underground railroad operatives in the entire North," and make mention of how "flagrantly public" his operations were in renouncing the ills of slavery and "publiciz[ing] the presence of slave catchers in the city, calling on residents to run them out of town," rarely is

there mention of his mother's fiery spirit, disdain for White patriarchy and domination, and memories of freedom (Foner, 2015, pps.179-180).

Having said this, the questions that I pose here are the following: How do Black women lead Black youth and their families toward a deeper understanding of freedom and liberation? In what ways do they tap into and re-member that which others want them to forget? How are her-stories used to chart new pathways towards liberation? In this moment, I bring to the fore Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son" to illustrate the power of a Black mother's counsel to her son and how her own lived experiences are what she draws upon to tell him of the world he too will have to navigate.

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been-a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now —
For I'se still goin' honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

In this poem, Hughes is invoking the voice of a mother who has experienced life with tacks rather than cushions, splinters rather than roses, darkness rather than light and yet—she is still a-climbin' on, and reachin' landin's, and turnin' corners." *How*? Or, maybe the question is, *Why*? Why continue or persist? What does her story, her re-membering and leadership teach us?

I argue that the examples above attests to the politicization of Black motherhood. Using their lived experiences as the curriculum, both women—literally *and* figurally—schooled their children on how to navigate and disrupt systems of oppression. In many ways, Black mothers who are attuned to and lead with the power of their voice, lived experience, and stories also have the power to nurture leaders and change agents.

And yet, mothering as a political act is not exclusive to women who have birthed children. In Danielle Docka-Filipek's "Community Other Mothers," (2016), she builds on the literature centered on othermothering. She states, othermothering "extends beyond parent-child relationships to include care for the broader community via forms of activism that take up collective responsibility for nurturance, advocacy, and justice on the behalf of others" (Docka-Filipek, 2016, p. 345). Moreover, "Vital knowledge imparted by othermothers ranges from the repertoire of skills necessary for navigating and surviving oppressive structures to practices and strategies designed to challenge, reject, transform, and transcend those structures" (Docka-Filipek, 2016, p. 345). In Dani McClain's *We Live for the We: The Political Power of Black Motherhood*, she affirms this idea and reminds us that, "This broad understanding of family responsibility often became a launch pad for public service. [And, as Patricia Hill] Collins writes, 'For many women, what began as the daily expression of their obligations as community othermothers...developed into full fledged roles as community leaders" (McClain, 2019, p. 4).

In Sonya Douglass Horsford's *This bridge called my leadership: an essay on Black women as bridge leaders in education* (2012), she unpacks what this development looks like in practice. By situating the social justice leadership of Black women within a sociohistorical context, Horsford "demonstrate[s] how the intersection of race and gender as experienced by the Black woman leader has, in many instances, resulted in her serving as a bridge for others, to others, and

between others in multiple and often complicated contexts over time" (Horsford, 2012, p. 12). According to Horsford, "[i]n the case of bridging race, gender, and class divides, the historical leadership contributions of Black females as clubwomen, suffragists, Black nationalists, civil rights nationalists, Black feminists, and culturally relevant educational leaders, from reconstruction to the post-Civil Rights Era offer many examples of a multitude of contradictions and divides traversed, negotiated, and bridged when and where others could not" (Horsford, 2012, p. 13).

Let us take for example the deanship of Dr. Valerie Kinloch at the School of Education, located within the University of Pittsburgh. In talking about the larger implications of her transition to the position of Dean, Kinloch contends that colleges within the United States, "generally make assumptions about people who should have certain positions. And oftentimes, we don't necessarily think that these people who are most qualified are black women" (Piper, 2019). Why is this statement so profound? Well, upon being inducted in July of 2017, Kinloch "did not know she was the first black female dean at the university" (Piper, 2019). And yet, while she was at first "floored," she quickly came to "see how the university took 230 years to hire its first black woman as dean" (Piper, 2019).

While 230 years may sound absurd to some, what this number demonstrates is how slow-moving institutions of higher learning are to change. In many ways, Dr. Kinloch is quite literally a catalyst to the change many *actively* resist. In this moment, it is important to note that the idea here is not to tokenize or exceptionalize Dr. Kinloch. Rather, what I intend to center is what she brings to this new position—namely, her understanding of community and "how one individual's success can bring success to a community" (Piper, 2019). To further accentuate this point, I want to draw your attention to an article written by Tiffany Pennamon. The very first paragraph reads

as follows: “Dr. Valerie Kinloch’s commitment to engaged pedagogies, community-centered work and educational equity and justice all stems back to the lessons she learned from her mother and father while growing up in the segregated south in Charleston, South Carolina” (Pennamon, 2019, p. 4).

Kinloch avows, “I think deeply about family, and to do right by them is to do good work in the world and to always remember their struggles.” Given this avowal, I would argue that memory plays a vital role in the work Kinloch engages in. By re-membering her family’s struggles, she is better equipped to articulate what her political commitments are as an educator and dean and why. Simply put, because of her positionality and epistemological standpoint as a Black woman, an entire School of Education is currently undergoing transformation. Kincloch’s leadership thus begs the following question: What possibilities can the instruction of critical and reflexive Black women like Kinloch engender for schools of education across the country?

The literature above provides a mere glimpse into the lives of Black women who purposefully used their lived experiences as guideposts when mothering, nurturing, advocating, *and* leading the next generation of leaders.

Black Women as Community Organizers

“You don’t make progress by standing on the sidelines, whimpering and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas.”

~Shirley Chisholm

Community organizing is a dynamic process that requires movement, initiative and an internal drive that kicks into gear whenever progress seems far beyond reach. Therefore, to invoke the words of writer, activist and Black feminist Gloria Joseph is to re-member and re-center Black women’s’ ongoing struggle and resolve to not stand on the sidelines, but rather,

make progress by implementing ideas—however radical. Joseph reminds us that "Black women historically have been central to educational change as teachers, survival technicians, administrators, and revolutionary thinkers. [Thus,] [i]t is politically sound to listen to the reason and intellect of our ancestral educational role models" (Joseph, 1995, p. 471). I argue that in so doing, we are more apt to move beyond school settings and instead actively engage with her-stories grounded in community organizing and the mobilization of young people.

"What was it like for these women to live their lives? How did they think about what they were doing? How did they think about themselves, their public and private lives? How did they perceive and conceive of their relationship to larger forces—to histories of racial violence and racial exclusion; the persistence of black women's devaluation?" (Lee, 2001, p. 139). Chana Kai Lee foregrounds questions seminal to understanding the depths of Black women's subjectivity. I would add that these questions move us to grapple with the factors that prompted Black women to organize and mobilize around social justice issues in the first place.

Although Lee's piece focuses primarily on Fannie Lou Hamer's trajectory into Civil Rights Leadership, she also speaks to the usefulness of memory, anger, and history in the shaping of Black women community organizers. It appears that Black women have *always* had to wrestle with the costs of using their rage. We are reminded of this through the work of Audre Lorde (1981). She states, "[w]omen responding to racism means women responding to anger; Anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation." So the question becomes, how do Black women transform this anger into a driving force for community action? In her public recollections, Hamer often situated herself in a historical legacy routinely passed on to her by an attentive mother and a far-sighted grandmother" (Lee, 2001, pps.140-141).

Concerning Fannie Lou Hamer's legacy as a community organizer and activist, Lee asserts that "Memory, anger, and history were the tools that she used to craft a public persona and mobilize her needy contemporaries in the Delta and beyond" (Lee, 2001, p. 139). Driven by her own familiarity with racism, poverty, and racialized sexual violence, Hamer consistently tapped into "A painful and collective past to transform an oppressive present (Lee, 2001, p. 140). "For Hamer, a meaningful social movement was one that addressed the everyday needs of people. It made little sense to recruit the disenfranchised to go into a courthouse and register to vote when they were worried about eating or having shoes to wear" (Lee, 2001, p. 154). Consequently, Hamer's politics and strategizing were deeply informed by her Christian convictions and her pragmatic approach to organizing. Thus, Hamer was committed to addressing the most basic needs of the community while concurrently working to dismantle Jim Crow.

What can we learn from Hamer's life as a community organizer and activist? We learn that it is actually not a question of whether the disenfranchised have needs. We also learn that meeting them required relationship-building—which she did—and mobilizing and partnering with other entities such as, "churches, civic clubs and trade unions" that would offer additional resources and support—which she also did (Lee, 2001, p. 155). In spite of *and* because of this, Hamer's community organizing, and activism had material costs.

Let us consider the leadership role Hamer assumed during the planning and execution of the Freedom Summer. Although committed to empowering both Black and White people from the South and the North to work collectively to facilitate voter registration, (in addition to carrying out a host of other responsibilities), in the process, Hamer experienced significant physical and psychic tolls. And while we can observe the convergence of race, class, and gender yet again, in Hamer's case specifically, we can also attach the additional layer of disability.

Subsequently, the intersections of race, class, gender, *and* disability position Black women like Hamer as subjects who are both emboldened by these identities, *and* extremely vulnerable as they work to challenge the same unjust contexts they navigate.

I end this discussion on Hamer with a question Lee poses toward the beginning of her chapter, "What language did they rely on to convey understanding and conscious purpose to each other and posterity?" Hamer's response to her girls after fleeing Ruleville, Mississippi on account of her decision to register to vote and thus being forced to leave the plantation where she and her family worked as sharecroppers, is a powerful one:

> But this what you got to look at. I'm not a criminal. I hadn't done one thing to nobody, I went down to register for myself and I got a right to live in Ruleville...My parents helped to make this town and this county what it is today, because it was out of their sweat, tears, and blood that they [white landowners] got as much land as they have here; and I [have - inserted by Lee] a right to stay here. (Lee, 2001, p. 148)

Although Black organizing, activism, mobilization and resistance is often met with violence, and hyper-surveillance, Hamer was determined to return. In fact, she was archiving the her-stories of old into her very being and tapping into them to pursue a life of ongoing struggle.

Let us transition here to a taped interview with Gerda Lerner in December of 1970, where Ella Baker, Hamer's contemporary, discusses her trajectory as an organizer. She states, "In my organizational work, I have never thought in terms of my 'making a contribution.' I just saw myself as functioning where there was a need. And if I have made a contribution I think it may be that I had some influence on a large number of people." Baker, renowned for engaging in struggles around "workers' education, consumer cooperative, consumer protection and community organizing," worked in a number of capacities such as, but not limited to, assistant field secretary for the NAACP, national director of branches of the NAACP, founder, and advisor of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, also known as SNCC (Baker, 1972).

However, what I want to focus on here specifically is Baker's disposition toward engaging young people committed to larger struggles. After the creation of SNCC, Baker states that it "opened up a new era of struggle [...] I had no difficulty relating to the young people. I spoke their language in terms of the meaning of what they had to say. I didn't change my speech pattern and they didn't have to change their speech pattern. But we were able to communicate."

What can we learn from Baker? She did not see her purpose as that of trying to change young people to fit her model of what an organizer should look like, sound like, or be like. Instead, Baker states, "I have always thought that what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people" (Baker, 1972). And while Baker herself was a leader, she cautions us about the depoliticization of leaders. She declares, "There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time, and they don't do the work of actually *organizing* people" (Baker, 1972).

Thus, a practical example of Black women "do[ing] the work of actually *organizing* people" can be found in Cheryl Townsend Gilkes' "Holding back the ocean with a broom: Black women and community work." In it, she makes the argument that "Black women, through their work in the community, aid the community in its response to the problems of surviving in a racist society[,] while attempting to change that same society" (Gilkes, 1980, p. 218). It is important to note that within "[t]he [community in which these Black women lived and served, community members] generally agree[d] with them and defer[ed] to [their] expertise, treating them like the professionals they claim[ed] they [were] not" (Gilkes, 1980, p. 227). Take for

example, Mrs. Coven, the "director of a municipal education project which she ha[d] converted into an agency [that] also deal[t] with Black female juvenile delinquents" (Gilkes, 1980, p. 218).

While working to support teenagers experiencing difficulty within the school setting, Mrs. Coven soon had the following revelation: "I find out that working with the students is an intensely necessary sort of task. But there's something that comes before education. If you have a young person—be they male or female—who has encountered the system, and most of our young people do…it's very hard for them to think in terms of academics when there are so many other problems involved in their life— social, financial, environmental" (Gilkes, 1980, p. 228).

Not only did Mrs. Coven serve as a community organizer within the larger Black community of Hamptonville, but she also embodied an ethic and pedagogy of liberation by assuming the role of community othermother. She possessed a critical consciousness about the "schooling" Black youth required prior to them even entering the school environment. Consequently, being "schooled" by Black women like Mrs. Coven empowers Black youth to speak back to the oppressive systems they encounter on a daily basis.

Similarly, in Dani McClain's "What's Lost When Black Children Are Socialized Into A White World," (2019) she speaks to the power of organizing efforts prompted by the needs of Black youth navigating deleterious and anti-Black school environments. In this article, we are introduced to Jessica Black, "a Pittsburg, California, mother of two black teenagers, both of whom have been disciplined multiple times at their middle and high schools." At the crux of this piece is the conflation of discipline and criminalization, especially as it relates to the regulation of Black bodies across schooling contexts. In her role as Organizing Director of the Black Organizing Project (BOP) located in Oakland, California, Black "knows that her kids are not

alone in their struggles at school [...] [as she is connected with] many parents [who] say their children behave as all children do, but wind up targeted by school officials because educators misinterpret these students' actions, assuming the worst."

BOP, "a Black member-led community organization working for racial, social, and economic justice through grassroots organizing and community-building" aims to "Strengthen the Community" construct *and* sustain "Youth Space[s]" and "Better [Their] School System" (blackorganizingproject.org/about/). What this looks like in practice is fostering more salient connections to "their community, their history, and to themselves," "develop[ing] a new generation of black leadership that will build a community of trust, love, and consciousness" and "work[ing] to end the criminalization of Black and Brown youth in Oakland, CA" (blackorganizingproject.org/about/). In sum, BOP remains committed to "transform[ing] the lives of Black people" (blackorganizingproject.org/about/).

Having said this, let us return to Jessica Black's role as the Organizing Director. In efforts to further the aims of BOP, "Jessica embraces and is guided by the elders within her community. [In fact] [t]hese relationships aid her in recruiting and organizing Black parents, to encourage their involvement in schools, and influencing policy, procedures, and paradigm shifts [...] Through BOP Jessica hopes to continue her journey of achieving equitable access for Black people" (blackorganizingproject.org/about/). Firstly, Black's mobilization of other Black parents is heavily informed by relationships within the very community she serves. Secondly, these same relationships are what drive recruitment efforts. Thirdly, Black is committed to issues of equity *and* access for Black people as a whole.

Moving forward, my question becomes: how are young Black women organizing and "schooling" the masses on the enduring and persistent violence inflicted on their spirits, bodies,

and psyches? Let us draw our attention to the organizers of the Black Lives Matter movement and how they have ushered in a “new era of struggle” around police brutality, lack of accountability, and the deaths of members throughout the Black community. Using social media as a platform to create #BlackLivesMatter, Alicia Garza along with Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors were intentionally calling attention to the “anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements” (Garza, Tometi and Cullors, 2014, p. 1). After the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, #BlackLivesMatter grew into “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It [became] an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Garza, Tometi and Cullors, 2014, p. 1).

And while Garza, Tometi, and Cullors “created the infrastructure for this movement project—moving the hashtag from social media to the streets,” other allies in the form of “cultural workers, artists, designers, and techies” who “offered their labor and love to expand #BlackLivesMatter beyond a social media hashtag” were welcomed and embraced (Garza, Tometi and Cullors, 2014, p. 1). Ella Baker, in her taped interview with Lerner said the following: “I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed peoples to depend so largely upon a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public media, which means that the media made him, and the media may undo him” (Baker, 1972). Similarly, Garza, Tometi, and Cullors maintain that “If we are committed to a world where all lives matter, we are called to support the very movement that inspired and activated so many more. That means supporting and acknowledging Black lives” (Garza, Tometi and Cullors, 2014, p. 3). Rather than position themselves as *the* movement,

Garza, Tometi, and Cullors worked to "...connect people across the country working to end the various forms of injustice impacting our people. [They've] created space for the celebration and humanization of Black lives" (Garza, Tometi and Cullors, 2014, p. 1).

The point that I want to drive home is this: In her organizing efforts, Fannie Lou Hamer was driven by the erasure that comes with being Black and poor. She understood that in light of her organizing efforts, the intersections of her identities as Black, poor, and woman, would not only position her as a threat to the status quo, but an object of domination for Black and White men alike. Using her own stories, she brought to the fore the injustice experienced at the hands of the state towards members of the Black community whose class and gender made them more susceptible to state violence.

In the case of Ella Baker, she was an older Black woman navigating circles where men predominated. And yet, she states,

> For myself, circumstances frequently dictated what had to be done as I saw it...I knew from the beginning that as a woman, an older woman, in a group of ministers who are accustomed to having women largely as supporters, there was no place for me to have come into a leadership role. The competition wasn't worth it. The movement of the 50s and 60's was carried largely by women, since it came out of church groups. It was sort of second nature to women to play a supportive role […] From the standpoint of the historical pattern of the society, which seems to assume that this is the best role for women, I think that certainly the young people who are challenging this ought to be challenging it, and it ought to be changed. (Baker, 1972)

Baker, conscious of gender inequalities, points to the fact that Black women carried movements for social justice, in numbers greater than that of Black men. However, when I tie in the work of Garza, Tometi and Cullors and their ongoing mission to magnify the Black Lives Matter movement as an initiative developed by queer, Black women, we observe that in each example of community organizing, the interlocking identities and lived experiences of Black women are brought to the fore instead of being put on the backburner.

“Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement” (Garza, Tometi and Cullors, 2014, p. 2). We are reminded through the narratives above that “[s]truggle [is] historical and continuous,” ever evolving and ever growing (Lee, 2001, p. 162). In fact, the use of digital literacies to mobilize an ever growing collective of people committed to the “historical and continuous” struggle was an act and expression of subversion. Therefore, at the base of community organizing is love for the people, commitment to the struggle, and freedom—for *all*.

In sum, the her-stories of Black women in literature, popular culture, and in past and contemporary movements all attest to Black women’s embodiment of an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. In many ways, the sociohistorical and sociopolitical contexts under which the abovementioned Black women lived, learned and served, further honed their consciousness about systemic injustice, the power of education and their ability to strengthen ties between education, empowerment, and liberation. I argue that by understanding how Black women teachers, leaders and community organizers operationalize education as the practice of freedom, practitioners, scholars, and teacher educators will be more conscious about how to strategize, organize and galvanize others to construct and sustain transformative and liberatory learning environments for Black youth, their families, *and* their communities.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

“We got to go free or die. And freedom’s not bought with dust.”

~Taken from Ann Petry’s *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad*

For this dissertation study, I draw upon Black feminist and womanist theories to call attention to how Black women construct, enrich and revolutionize learning for Black youth, their families and communities within and beyond school contexts. I argue that such a political commitment positions Black woman as pedagogues dedicated to making real this concept of education as the practice of freedom. In so doing, Black women labor to disrupt deficit-oriented narratives that frame Black youth, their families and communities as incapable and worthless. By building on concerted efforts to challenge narratives of this nature, I intend to use Black feminist and womanist principles as the lens through which I analyze historical, literary, cultural and contemporary representations of Black women embodying an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. Thus, this segment will be divided into the following two subsections: 1). The Purpose of Theory and 2). Fusing Her-stories: Cultural Representations of Black Women and Theory.

The Purpose of Theory

When I consider the power of Black feminist and womanist theories and how they enable me to grapple with how Black women struggle towards education as the practice of freedom, I am brought back to bell hooks' statement on why the larger purpose of one's work should dictate which theories they draw upon to actually *do* the work. According to hooks, "Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end" (hooks, 1991). Created out of a need to experience healing, liberation, and revolution, Black women did not ask, but rather, *demanded* that Black feminist and womanist theorizing be directed towards this end.

In fact, the formation of the Combahee River Collective, attests to the need Black feminism met for Black women searching for theoretical tools to unpack and "…combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face" (Combahee River Collective, 1983).

Finding their "...origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation," the Combahee River Collective worked not only to "define and clarify their politics," but also sought to critically examine the "…oppressions [that] "create[d] the conditions of [their] lives" (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

This building of critical consciousness, mobilization of women across difference, and engagement in coalitionary work remains a form of disruption aimed at exclusionary racial and gendered politics. Hence, "...the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men" (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Consequently, "Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters" (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Operating from this premise informs how and why many Black women are so committed to continuing in the struggle towards freedom and liberation. Furthermore, to expand on the feminist principle that the "personal is political," the Combahee River Collective underscored the need to bridge gaps between our own lived experiences and that of larger political struggles. In other words, most Black women recognized that there was work to do and that the work often started with building consciousness around *why* the work must be done.

Despite the nuances that position womanism as distinct from Black feminism (Hill-Collins, 2006), both terms are often used interchangeably. In Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), she presents several definitions of womanism that speak to the parallels and differences. From the outset, Walker is clear that being womanist is disassociated from frivolity and irresponsibility. Rather, womanists possess an intrinsic desire to be conscious. Therefore, to engage in "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior," is to align yourself with serious, conscious, responsible and intentional women.

Walker also defines womanists as loving other women, sexually, and/or nonsexually. In this definition, there is recognition of the interplay between race, gender and sexuality—key facets that shape Black women's' experiences across varying social, historical and political contexts. In addition to being "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female," womanists also derive joy from love, struggle, their community, and themselves. Thus, at the very core of both Black feminist and womanist theoretical frameworks is an emphasis on the struggle for self-definition and self-determination. Hence Walker's final definition: "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender."

In many ways, both Black feminist and womanist principles bolster Deborah King's assertion that "A [B]lack woman's survival depends on her ability to use all the economic, social, and cultural resources available to her from both the larger society and within her community" (King, 2016, p. 49). Returning to hooks' discussion on the functionality of theory, I maintain that Black feminist and womanist principles provide me with a much-needed framework to critically unpack King's statement. Because of this, I am better equipped to make the argument that in spite of societal constraints, many Black women *still* manage to find innovative ways to use whatever is at their disposal to survive—and in surviving, teach lessons to others about structural violence in all of its unconscionable forms. Thus, by drawing upon this legacy of self-determination and struggle, I am calling attention to how Black feminist and womanist theories can be used to re-interpret how we understand the relationship between freedom and education.

Fusing Her-stories: Cultural Representations of Black Women and Theory

"Until lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter." Not only does this African proverb underscore the dangers of whitewashed and one-dimensional

accounts of history, but it also points to the possibilities engendered when we re-member and pass down the stories and lessons that challenge these whitewashed and one-dimensional accounts. In many ways, her-stories and media function as texts that enable us to do just that: re-member, pass down, and re-visit taken for granted interpretations of history. I posit that when analyzed through the lens of Black feminist and womanist theories, we are better prepared to contend with how multimodal texts point to enduring legacies of Black women embodying an ethic and pedagogy of liberation and working as conductors on the railroad to freedom.

Therefore, to begin with Harriet Tubman is to begin with the (un)speakable costs of freedom. Moreover, to begin with Harriet Tubman is to position Syracuse as a pivotal site on the journey towards freedom. Her-stories like Tubman's magnify the resiliency and vulnerability of Black women who center the needs of the community even at their own peril. For instance, despite being well aware of the stakes associated with "go[ing] free or d[ying]," Tubman remained committed to getting free so that others in slave-holding states could also experience freedom. This political commitment testifies to a critical consciousness that is continuously activated and drawn upon in order to dismantle, push back against, and aid others in navigating systems of oppression.

In Ann Petry's biographical account of Harriet Tubman's life, she speaks about how Tubman relayed to fellow freedom seekers "her own first, vain effort at running away [and how she] evoke[d] the memory of that miserable life she had led as a child" (Petry, 1955, p. 140). When fear of the unknown gripped men and women alike, Tubman recalled "[…] the long agony of the Middle Passage on the old slave ships, about the black horror of the holds, about the chains and the whips. [Although] [t]hey too knew these stories…she wanted to remind them of the long, hard way they had come, about the long, hard way they had yet to go" (Petry, 1955, p.

142). And though she could neither read nor write, her literacy in survival is what sustained and kept alive hope.

The lesson for us here is that danger lurks when we use stories to romanticize struggle. Instead of painting a picture of freedom as a bed laden with roses, Tubman used her-story to instruct freedom seekers on its value and how to strive for it. Moreover, she reminded them of the power of their shared history and encouraged them to re-member "...the long, hard way they had come" when the journey seemed pointless. How Tubman used *her story* speaks to how many Black women draw upon their own stories to inculcate communities with a greater understanding of the material costs of freedom, as well as the measures we must collectively take to dismantle that which kills the mind, body, and spirit.

Her-stories are a form of storytelling that can facilitate unsettling realizations and revelations about one's self and the world in which they live. While they are not always pretty or easy to hear, Tubman demonstrated, through the telling of her own lived experiences to those she led to freedom, that the stories we choose to share and to whom we share them with have profound implications.

CHAPTER 3: “RESEARCH AS RESISTANCE”

Overview of Research Design

“Revolution begins with the self, in the self”

~Toni Cade Bambara

Starting from self compels us to examine our subjectivities as well as clarify why we remain committed to the work and struggles of which we are part. In *Learning From Our Lives: Women, Research, and Autobiography in Education,* Gloria Ladson-Billings, teacher educator and pedagogical theorist, magnifies the importance of bringing who you are outside of the academy into the work you do within it. Discouraging fragmentation, Ladson-Billings instead calls for harmony between your academic and non-academic self. She declares, “As an African American female, public intellectual, I struggle to do intellectual work that is politically significant and culturally grounded. I struggle to do work as a way to acknowledge and revere those who must come after. This struggle is grounded in what I study and how I choose to study it” (Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 61). This interconnectedness highlights the criticality of grounding our scholarship, research methodologies and praxis in who we are as racialized, gendered, classed, social, spiritual, political, and cultural beings.

In a similar vein, throughout Leslie Brown and Susan Strega’s edition of *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* (2005), not only do authors “describe, in different ways, their encounters with and journeys through the boundaries of mainstream research, [but] most also consider how their journeys have been shaped not only by their commitment to emancipatory goals but also by their location on the margins” (p. 3). Thus, by beginning this chapter locating self in relation to the work I engaged in throughout the course of this dissertation study, I deliberately “consider how [my own] journey ha[s] been shaped not

only by [my] commitment to emancipatory goals, but also by [my] location on the margins" (Brown and Strega, 2005, p 3). Therefore, in the following sections, my goal is to continue building upon critical approaches that "push the edges of academic acceptability" (Brown and Strega, 2005, p. 2). I believe this is precisely what Cynthia Dillard (2006) encouraged in her discussion of full circle work. According to Dillard, the phrase "coming full circle" is a very sacred phrase and is a way to express the uncovering of the very purposes and possibilities of [our] lives generally and an academic life more specifically" (Dillard, 2006, p. 109). She declares that, "travers[ing] the places and spaces of research, teaching, and service work in Ghana, West Africa…[has] help[ed] [her] see the way that every experience in our lives is sacred and the coming together of all of life's experiences is but preparation for whatever happens next in our lives. That is full circle work" (Dillard, 2006, pps. 109-110).

Having said this, consider the following question with me: How can we truly revolutionize spaces and operationalize education as the practice of freedom for Black youth, their families and communities if we fail to engage in the interior work necessary to realize this vision? Thus, in an effort to do work that is "politically significant and culturally grounded," I incorporated one-on-one semi-structured qualitative interviews, sister circles, and narrative analysis. My objective was to capture in more nuanced ways how Black women across the Syracuse community draw upon their own lived experiences to transform the lives of those around them.

Employing these methodologies enabled me to engage in critical inquiry *with* Black women whose work impacts Black youth and their families, shapes their lived experiences within and beyond school contexts and critically engages the communities from which they come. In the following sections, I will discuss the theoretical and conceptual framework, the

criteria for participation in this study, the criticality of research as a form of resistance, as well as how the methodologies employed granted me richer insights into how Black women across the Syracuse community embody and operationalize education as the practice of freedom.

Criteria for Participation

For this study, those eligible to participate self-identified as Black women, who work/serve within a school setting or within the larger Syracuse community, have experience working closely with Black youth, their families, and/or the communities from which they come, and are also between the ages of 18-64 and 65 and older.

Recruiting North Star(s): Locating Black Women Working with Black Youth and Their Families within and Beyond the School Context throughout the Syracuse Community

The North Star, pervading narratives told by many who fled to freedom, underscores the astronomical knowledge tapped into and the spiritual discernment gained to secure liberation. Navigating without the aid of a GPS, compass, or map, illuminating the path towards freedom for many freedom seekers was none other than the North Star. I contend that by understanding the geography and astronomy of freedom, we can be more attuned to the ways in which Black women within and beyond Syracuse, serve as North Stars to Black youth, their families and communities along the Modern-day Underground Railroad.

“Follow the Drinking Gourd,” an African American folk song, though mired in ambiguity, has transcended the confines of time and attests to a mapping of sorts, towards freedom—the geography of freedom to be exact. Leading Black youth, their families and communities within and beyond the school setting to liberation disrupts narratives that position schools as the sole locus for learning, transformation and liberation. Thus, the Black women involved in this study not only pointed me to other Black women, but through their work and sense of urgency,

magnified the power of the following African proverb: “As you do for your ancestors, your children will do for you.”

In my quest to locate Black women who would push my thinking about the purpose of education, the power of our lived experiences and the cost of liberation, I encountered individuals along the way who pointed me in the right direction. As a result, I do not take lightly this idea that the Black women who were in this study served as physical embodiments of the North Star for Black youth, their families and communities, simply because physical markers of the legacy of liberation and resistance are few and far between throughout the city of Syracuse.

In the name of Urban Renewal and Development, many landmarks that attest to these histories have been demolished. Let us consider the home of Reverend Jermain Wesley Loguen. What was once a safe haven for freedom seekers en route to Canada has since become a Walgreens. Prior to this, it was a Rite Aid. Although a placard can be found not too far from the location, many a passerby have (in)advertently *bypassed* this critical piece of local history.

Consequently, not only is the argument that Black women are *still* serving as conductors on the Modern-day Underground Railroad at the crux of this dissertation study, but also *how* they are using their lived experiences to add texture to the ways in which they embody and facilitate an ethic and pedagogy of liberation remains integral to this work.

Recruitment happens in community.

Last October, I met with Spencer at Café Kubal. With a vibrant pashmina scarf wrapped around her head, a sweatshirt, a bulky scarf covering her neck and a cup of turmeric tea simmering in a cup, we talked about our journey through graduate school. Our faith. Our purpose.

Trying to articulate the work I hoped to engage in for my dissertation, Spencer immediately suggested that I speak with Keisha. She excitedly scrolled through her phone and gave me her contact information. I just *had* to speak with her. But, little did I know then that who I really needed to speak with was Spencer herself. Together, we discussed the possibilities engendered when sister circles are predicated on empowering participants to trust the lens through which they see themselves.

Recruitment happens in community.

Becoming. This was the book I bought over winter break and was determined to read. On the train. Before I went to sleep. On the bus. At my nail appointment. An opportunity to digest a new text and be able to unpack it with women from and beyond academia was so refreshing. I remember distinctly the shades of brown that filled the room.

The laughter. The truths spoken. The truths heard. The thoughts shared and the thoughts withheld. The unapologetic positions articulated came from a place of experience and expertise. And through dialogue, each woman offered and/or refined their definition and understanding of self.

Recruitment happens in community.

Walking together is our thing it seems—me and Evan. We talk about life beyond the Hill. He, from Syracuse, me from Brooklyn. We both have a love for the people. For the work. For the struggle. A newfound brother from another mother. Although he already knows, I tell him about the work that needs doing. Although he already knows, I tell him about my own offerings to the work. What I don't know is that again, he already knows—her—Carol, that is. "She'd be great for your study. Let me connect you two."

Recruitment happens in community.

Filled with vegetarian shito and waakye and homemade pound cake, we left Sister Pat's house and made our way to the jeep. Along the way, an older Black woman with gray hair and glasses stopped Jane. Known for her melodic voice, it is no wonder that this woman was inviting her to sing and the rest of us to attend a concert she was planning. Smiling and full of energy, she held onto Jane's hand and said that she looked forward to seeing us all.

After she left, we continued walking to the jeep. Jane told me who she was and I immediately shared how she might be a potential participant for my study. Happy to support, she said it would be no issue to connect us.

Recruitment happens in community.

After Kishauna's dissertation defense:

Coming down from the high of seeing my sister friend successfully defend her dissertation, my former supervisor, Angela, and I walked together, discussing the long journey to her defense. In the midst of our conversation, one of her committee members naturally fell in line with us. Wondering how we knew Kishauna, we told her how we were connected. How she is a friend and a colleague—knowing that she is more than just a friend and colleague, but a sister and confidante in larger struggles.

While Angela veered off to the entrance for Sims Hall, Gladys and I kept walking. Trying to control her dark brown hair from blowing wildly in the wind and every now and again adjusting clear glasses covering what looked to be pensive eyes, she asked me about *me*.

Me:
"I am in the Cultural Foundations of Education program in the School of Ed."

Gladys:
"Who's your advisor?"

Me:
"Mario Rios Perez"

Gladys:
"Ah, I know him, I've worked closely with him before. What's your research about?"

Me:
"Oh, my research is about Black women and how they make real, freedom and liberation for Black youth."

There is usually a silence that accompanies this description. I always feel the need to hype up my own work to counteract this silence. Even when no one else does, I believe in its power. But this time, the silence was different. She gave me a name: Brenda. Then, she showed me a picture. I knew the face and eventually connected the face to the name. Gladys gave me her card and assured me that she would be happy to connect us as she had worked closely with Brenda in the past. Little did I know then that this brief encounter would further solidify my commitment to doing this work.

Recruitment happens in community.

After exchanging text messages with Professor Haddix about my progress, I realized that I *must* attend this show. Sequoia, a known doula and activist in the community, sings. A testament to the myriad ways in which community activists use their voice. It is the end of the semester and all my "available" friends are either gone or busy. I go by myself. High bun, black headband, black turtleneck, dark blue jeans and black suede shoes. I step out in faith—literally. She can easily decline participating in my study. But what do I really have to lose? I believe I am meant to attend this performance of Blackness and pride and joy and zest for life.

Recruitment happens in community.

Continuing my trek from Syracuse to Brooklyn, I made my way back to Brooklyn and felt impressed to call Brenda. She assured me that we were connected now. And, I assured her that she could not get rid of me. We laughed together and it warmed my heart to know that even

when I was in Brooklyn, I had a community pushing me along back in Syracuse. My mother, downstairs in the den, overhearing our conversation just smiled. After saying goodbye to Brenda, I stayed at the top of the steps and reminded her of who Brenda was and how she came to be involved in my study. My mother responded with a laugh in her voice, “Look at my child. The church mouse.” She was taking in who I had become—and was still becoming. I want to believe that it imbued her with a deep sense of pride.

Recruitment happens in community. And, so does growth.

“Research as Resistance:” Disrupting Research As Racism

Before the one-on-one interviews and sister circles, I engaged in a recruitment process that deviated from standard ways of identifying potential participants and inviting them to be subjects in a research study. For these reasons, it was essential to consider how research conducted and scholarship produced across the social sciences informs how members of historically marginalized communities perceive “research,” “researchers” and this idea of being studied *on.* Thus, it goes *with* saying that in the name of “research,” many have invaded Communities of Color and instead of bridging gaps between the academy and the community, have planted mistrust, desecrated the principles of reciprocity, and caused irreparable damage to bodies, minds and spirits. Rightfully termed Scientific Racism, state actors began connecting what appeared to be two disparate systems, in efforts to exploit those rendered institutionally vulnerable on account of their race, class, gender, dis/ability, etc. and produced a profit that benefitted the status quo and further exploited members of historically marginalized communities.

In Vanessa Northington Gamble’s *A Legacy of Distrust: African Americans and Medical Research*, Gamble states,

> A historical analysis of racism and American medicine illuminates the ways in which the profession has been used to support racist social institutions and has, in turn, been influenced by them. Examination of this history demonstrates why so many African Americans mistrust the medical profession and its institutions. As efforts begin to include more African Americans in clinical trials and to develop community-collaborative research programs, this legacy of distrust must be addressed, not dismissed as paranoia or hypersensitivity. The challenge is to understand and confront the historically based realities behind the sentiments. (Gamble, 1993, p. 35)

A well-known and cited example of this “legacy of distrust” is the Tuskegee Syphilis Study where in a “40-year government study (1932 to 1972) [...] 399 Black men from Macon County, Alabama were deliberately denied effective treatment for syphilis in order to document the natural history of the disease” (Gamble, 1997, p. 1773). In a study conducted by Scharff, Matthews, Jackson, Hoffsuemmer, Martin, and Edwards (2010) participants questioned the benefits of participating in research studies where they are usually “conducted for the benefit of others, specifically, Whites” (p. 887).

And while the Tuskegee Syphilis Study serves as a primary example of the way research has historically devalued the lives of Black people, thus rendering them indispensable in the name of scientific advancement, her-stories further illustrate how bodies across the African Diaspora have *always* been exploited, mistreated, and brutalized.

Let us focus our attention on the story of Sarah Baartman. In efforts to not erase her African-ness, let us bear in mind how integral her identity as a South African KhoiSan woman was (Gordon-Chipembre, 2006) as well as the context under which she was taken from her homeland. While the specifics regarding her passage from South Africa to Europe is questionable, what we *do* know for certain is that Baartman was hyper-sexualized, exoticized and paraded around—the gaze of White men always upon her.

“Postmortem, Baartman’s body was dissected for scientific research and her reproductive organs were preserved. A cast of her body was displayed until the 1970s in Paris’s Musée de

l'Homme before her remains (brain, bones, reproductive organs, body cast, etc.) were repatriated back to her homeland, South Africa, and laid to rest in April 2002" (Jackson, 2013, p. 72).

As we journey from Europe to the United States, Vanessa Northington Gamble once again brings back to remembrance the painful reality that "Black Americans' fears about exploitation by the medical profession date back to the antebellum period and the use of slaves and free people as subjects for dissection and medical experimentation" (Gamble, 1997, pps. 1773-1774). Although Gamble makes a point to mention that "...physicians also used poor Whites as subjects," she also highlights the fact that Black people were frequently used to test, refine and perfect techniques. Consider the story of three enslaved Alabama women who were subjected to inhumane operations sans anesthesia. "Dr. J. Marion Sims, the so-called father of modern gynecology, used three Alabama slave women to develop an operation to repair vesicovaginal fistulas. Between 1845 and 1849, the three slave women on whom Sims operated each underwent up to 30 painful operations. The physician himself described the agony associated with some of the experiments: 'The first patient I operated on was Lucy…That was before the days of anaesthetics, and the poor girl, on her knees, bore the operation with great heroism and bravery'" (Gamble, 1997, p. 1774).

Gamble goes on to mention that while this operation was unsuccessful, "Sims finally did perfect his technique and ultimately repaired the fistulas. Only after his experimentation with the slave women proved successful did the physician attempt the procedure, with anesthesia, on White women volunteers" (Gamble, 1997, p. 1774). The questions remain: Success at whose expense? And, at what cost? The answer is: Success at the expense of Black bodies. The cost: The very life of Black women.

Or, how about the case of Fannie Lou Hamer, who in 1961 went to the hospital to remove a cyst only to be awakened to the news that without her knowledge and consent, a hysterectomy was administered. According to Chan Kai Lee (2001), "Even though Hamer was approaching the end of her reproductive years in 1961, the experience still became another instance of loss and dispossession in her life. The 1964 sterilization bill represented the same, although symbolically for her and realistically for others yet to experience such a violation" (p. 162). Although Hamer's case is not an example of research as racism per se, I argue that it is reflective of state violence on bodies that challenge White supremacy.

And how can we forget the story of Henrietta Lacks—"how researchers took cancerous cervical cells from a poor black woman, without even telling Lacks or her family, and how the cells evolved into the scientifically significant and commercially lucrative HeLa cell line while the family continued their hardscrabble existence after her 1951 death" (Northington-Gamble, 2014). The Henrietta Lacks story reveals the intersections of race, class, gender and how each marker of identity rendered her even more vulnerable to an already discriminatory health care system. Although I firmly agree that there is danger in focusing solely on the "exploitation, powerlessness, and victimization" Lacks and her family experienced, I argue that it is imperative to unpack how such "exploitation, powerlessness, and victimization" comes to bear on the current experiences of Black people (Northington-Gamble, 2014).

What is most disturbing about these examples is that even in death, these Black women restored life to others. These examples are in dialogue with Alexis Pauline Gumbs' (2012) *The Shape of My Impact*. In it, Gumbs avers, "The university was not created to save my life. The university is not about the preservation of a bright brown body. The university will use me alive and use me dead. The university does not intend to love me. The university does not know how

to love me. The university in fact, does not love me. But the universe does" (Gumbs, 2012). While the Black bodies described above existed beyond the university, the same undercurrents of racism and sexism bubble to the surface.

Brought to life for me by Ernest Daily, a colleague and friend, during a much-needed Town Hall meeting for my department, I was *and* still am reminded—daily—of the weighty realities that come to bear on Black bodies. And while these are just a few cases, there remain countless examples—known and unknown—which chronicle why the tenuous relationship between members of the Black community and researchers persists. However, there are researchers who are conscious of these delicate histories and deliberate about how they engage with members who have experienced trauma and thus harbor much skepticism as a result of it. In the work of Tanisha M. Jackson, she centers historical representations of Black women in the Western and African world to design a participatory action research project whereby she and her participants examine prevailing images of themselves in the media.

Furthermore, through this doctoral journey, I can attest to the fact that how we conduct research can function as resistance—a kind of resistance that disrupts what can often be oppressive and alienating ways of engaging with communities that are similar to and in many ways, very much different from our own (Brown and Strega, 2005). Through this research study, my objective was to magnify the possibilities engendered when a population, often mistreated and overlooked, are centered, rendered experts on their own lived experiences as raced, classed, and gendered people and acknowledged for their contributions to the community through the preservation and support of Black youth and their families.

One-on-One Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews

Central to this study were the stories shared during one-on-one semi-structured qualitative interviews. Occurring at the Community Folk Art Center, Dance Theater of Syracuse, Soule Branch Library, and Bird Library, each interview occurred in a space and place that participants were familiar with and were connected to in some way. The Community Folk Art Center, a hub for artistic and cultural expression across the African Diaspora, came out of collective efforts among Syracuse University faculty, students, and members of the Syracuse community to "create a setting for dialogue and interaction among emerging, mid-career and professional artists, in Central New York" (communityfolkartcenter.org/history.html). It is there that many participants come to both host and attend exhibitions, workshops and meetings on how to better address the pressing needs of the community.

Similarly, the Dance Theater of Syracuse, a dance institute known for nurturing and supporting young dancers and burgeoning choreographers, is a site where many Black youth within the Syracuse community come to obtain what is often hard to find across school contexts: opportunities to be creative. Nonetheless, before moving to the Community Folk Art Center, the Dance Theater of Syracuse, formerly located on Westcott Street, housed along its walls, pictures and documentation chronicling the history of its development. Such preservation efforts serve as a reminder to dancers, instructors, and parents that spaces such as these are special.

Soule Branch Library, a public library located on Springfield Road, was the location Ms. Debra recommended. Intimate and quiet in nature, Ms. Debra frequented this library when she was a child. I imagine that she found some type of solace here. Sitting across from her and listening intently as she talked about her connection to the library and what it meant for her to return, underscored the idea that spaces and places hold meaning. Unlike Soule Branch Library,

which is open and available to the public, Bird Library is located on campus grounds. The feel is different and so is the vibe. There are no fliers plastered on the walls near the entrance informing community members of upcoming literacy circles or summer workshops. Instead, stacks of books, computers, printers, and countless students occupying every corner of the café, computer cluster, and quiet area is the scene upon entering the library. Interviewing a couple of participants in reserved technology rooms felt strange. While the space was familiar, it felt odd listening to and sharing stories in a setting that rarely engaged them.

Nevertheless, a total of 14 participants were invited to participate in this study. I interviewed each participant once, resulting in a total of 14 one-on-one semi-structured qualitative interviews. Before and after interviews, I wrote field notes and memoed to capture details about the setting of our interview site, as well as key highlights that spoke to the dialogic exchange between participants and me. To produce meaning of each interview, I went back and listened to each audio recording. During the process, I indexed sections that aligned with the research questions I posed for this study. I wanted to understand more deeply how Black women were making sense of their own lived experiences and using them to connect with Black youth and their families within and beyond school spaces.

In addition, I combed through each interview and listened in for recurring ideas and phrases, making notations for each. And while I recognize that choices were made during the analysis and interpretation process, ultimately, the goal was to let each her-story speak for itself. My job was to listen and be attentive to what each her-story revealed about the storyteller. Nonetheless, on average, each interview lasted for about 1 ½ - 2 hours and most occurred at the Community Folk Art Center. Needless to say, the experience differed each and every time a participant and I sat down to speak.

Thus, I maintain that one-on-one interviews were not simply conversations, but opportunities to learn more about the geography of Syracuse and the sites that have nourished, challenged, and sustained Black women. Employing this method enabled participants and I to have more in-depth conversations about who they once were, how they came to be who they are now, and what drives them to continue working for the realization of education as the practice of freedom. Recognizing the nuances of interviewing Black people, and Black women specifically, Juanita Johnson-Bailey (1999) posits, "…it is assumed that when Blacks interview other Blacks an empathetic understanding will be accorded across racial lines. And the synergistic extrapolation of each of these conclusions would be that when Black women interview other Black women there exists an immediate perceptive bond of sisterhood that provides an ideal research setting" (p. 559).

In April L. Few, Dionne P. Stephens, and Marlo Rouse-Arnett's *Sister-to-Sister Talk: Transcending Boundaries and Challenges in Qualitative Research With Black Women,* they not only build on Johnson-Bailey's argument, but they also come together to discuss the ways in which identity markers beyond race and gender often complicates the interviewing process. In fact, Few, Stephens and Rouse-Arnett contend that "Issues of race, gender, class, and national identity matter because they inform the choices Black women make. [Thus,] [i]including interview questions that tap these issues allows for a more in-depth analysis of Black women's realities" (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett, 2003, p. 210).

In the work of Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack (1991), they talk specifically about oral history interviews and the process by which one derives meaning from the lived experiences of participants. Anderson and Jack maintain that,

> Realizing the possibilities of the oral history interview demands a shift in methodology from information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction,

> where the focus is on process, on the dynamic unfolding of the subject's viewpoint. It is the interactive nature of the interview that allows us to ask for clarification, to notice what questions the subject formulates about her own life, to go behind conventional, expected answers, to the woman's personal construction of her own experience." (Anderson and Jack, 2001, p. 23)

Anderson and Jack's point becomes especially important when we consider the ethical considerations Stephanie J. Shaw (2003) puts forward. Magnifying the power differential between White-collar interviewers and formerly enslaved subjects navigating the Great Depression era, Shaw charges historians specifically, to problematize old methods and questions with new frameworks and pose new questions to old material. Cognizant of her audience, I contend that her charge is also applicable to educational scholars who recognize and tap into the power of oral history when conducting qualitative research (Shaw, 2003, p. 658). Understanding the racial, social, spatial, and historical contexts enabled me to create spaces anchored by respect, sensitivity, and humility.

During this process, I watched as tears flowed like rivers, heard laughter fill the room, and saw participants transport back to a time and place of which I knew nothing about. I often felt the angst and passion of doing work that is so pivotal to the building up and preservation of the Black community. In efforts to capture the dynamism of each her story as well as the conversations participants and I had during *and* outside of one-on-one interviews and sister circles, narratives will be inserted throughout the section following this one.

Portraits of Participants

Through the retelling of three autobiographical stories, Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot in *Reflections on Portraiture*: *A Dialogue Between Art and Science* "trace[s] the origins of [portraiture] that seeks to bridge art and science" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 3). Lawrence-Lightfoot asserts, "There are lessons here about the power of the medium, about the relationship

between artist and subject, about the perspective of the person whose image and essence is being captured...as well as subtext about the making of a portraitist" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 3). In the first story, entitled "Roots," Lawrence-Lightfoot accentuates the contrasts between two experiences as an artist's *subject*.

The first experience recounted occurred when she was 25 and the second, when she was 8. In the first experience, Lawrence-Lightfoot recalls being asked by an artist to paint her portrait. She states, "At first the stance would feel natural, then I would lose my ease. My arms would stiffen, my fingers would press each other until the red showed through my brown skin, and my jaw would grow tight" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 4). And though she would be provided with breaks and instructions for how to pose and what to think about to help bring about the desired expression, Lawrence-Lightfoot would eventually see the final product and remember feelings of "shock, disappoint[ment] and awe all in the same moment" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 4). But what she says later is what I find to be most gripping, "Although many of the details of this representation seemed wrong, the whole was deeply familiar. She was not quite me as I saw myself, but she told me about parts of myself that I would have never noticed or admitted" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 4).

As she moves to the second memory, Lawrence-Lightfoot remembers being visited by "an old and dear friend" of the family," a 70-year-old Black woman "of warmth and dignity" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 4). She recounts,

> Midafternoon, with the sun high in the sky, she asked me to sit for her in the rock garden behind our house. I chose a medium-sized boulder, perched myself on it in an awkward, presentable pose, and tried to keep absolutely still. This suddenly static image disturbed the artist who asked me to talk to her and feel comfortable about moving. She could never capture me, she explained, if I became statue like. Movement was part of my being. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 5)

The lessons Lawrence-Lightfoot learns is what I want to foreground as I present portraits of the Black women who are central to this study. In both instances, capturing the essence rather than the literal representation of who Lawrence-Lightfoot was remained the focus. In fact, "...the translation of image was anything but literal. It was probing, layered, and interpretive...The artist needed to be vigilant in capturing the image but always watchful of [her] feelings, perspective, and experience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 5). Ultimately, Lawrence-Lightfoot learns "...that the portraits expressed a haunting paradox of a moment in time and of timelessness" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 5).

Through these portraits[1], my objective is to paint a picture of the women I engaged with, built relationships with and learned from in the process of understanding why it is that they are committed to Black youth and their families throughout the Syracuse community. It is through my engagement with them, the stories others have told me about them, and seeing them in action, that I feel burdened to capture the "essence" of who they are as well as who they are *still* becoming.

Linda

Unless you know of the street named in her honor, or that she is a former graduate student from Maxwell, and is now a retired administrator from Syracuse University, who served under the leadership of former Chancellor Nancy Cantor, Linda comes across as extremely humble, very attentive, and has the most infectious laugh you ever did hear. And yet, there is this gravitas about her. The way her eyes let you know that she has seen things and been through things that have taken a slight toll on her physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is evident that Linda is now in a place where not only is she reclaiming her time, but also reclaiming the joy sapped

[1] For a complete overview of all participants' names and descriptions of their work/service with Black youth and their families, please see Appendix A.

from her very being during her time working as an administrator for Syracuse University—a Predominantly White Institution.

When Linda agreed to participate in my study, I remember speaking to Professor Haddix about her. I distinctly recall her eyes widening as she queried, "*Linda* agreed to participate in your study?" At the time, I was unsure of the larger implications of her question. Not too long after, she followed up with, "That's big sis! I threw her 60th birthday party for her. Yea, she's great!"

Linda is well known in the community, walks with confidence and is very forthright. When we first sat down to speak and she said she was Harlem, Linda was just confirming what I already knew. Being from New York City myself, I could hear the slang of the city whenever she spoke. And yet, it was when she was asked to come back to the very place that had caused her so much anxiety and stress—the Southside Communication Center—that I understood just how much of a sacrifice Linda was making to be a part of my study. She was the first person to email me once the call for participants was sent out on my behalf. I juxtapose her sacrifice next to her willingness to share with me, her story.

Dear Camilla,
Thank you for inviting me to participate in your study of Black women who have worked with Black people in Syracuse. I would be pleased to be a part of your research.

Linda's sacrifice is not lost on me. Her story testifies to the magnitude of her belief in my work. By way of New York City, Linda made her way up north—to Syracuse. Although she left when the opportunity to make a difference came knocking, she found herself right back in the Salt City. There is always a return.

Brenda

"Greetings!" This is how Brenda answers the phone whenever you ring her line. It is filled with warmth and sincerity. Filled with lots of humor, encouragement, and straightforward-ness, Brenda will speak truth—in love.

Born during the early 60s, Brenda grew up in Utica, New York—about 55 miles from Syracuse. When she was younger, her father was assigned to come to Utica-Rome area as a migrant chaplain. During our one-on-one interview, she talked about how it felt to read articles about her father and his journey "from the cotton fields to the college." Brenda talked about her mother's search for her two brothers who were adopted when she was young. Even as a child, her mother was an investigator—seeking, finding, *and* nurturing the lost. "...[Y]ou know, my mother [...] worked at a daycare. She worked at a nursing home. She always did things that were caring for people."

Fast forward to Brenda's participation in the Black Syracuse Project wherein oral histories seminal to the local Syracuse community were captured and preserved. Brenda is not only a genealogist, but in many ways, she is following in the tradition of her mother who investigated, and in the tradition of her father who proclaimed, "You can qualify for anything!" What sky can be Brenda's limit?

A life-long learner and a woman of deep faith, to know Brenda is to know a woman who is deeply committed to the community and keen on building up the Syracuse Community as Executive Director of Focusing Our Resources for Community Enlightenment (FORCE). "Ain't nobody coming for *us*!" She said once. At the core of her leadership is the desire to mobilize for the purposes of realizing a better Syracuse for generations to come.

Carol

Katherine Dunham *lives* in her body. The Dunham technique is what she has spent her life perfecting and sharing with her students. Dance is not solely about movement, but a deep awareness of self. Born in the early 60s in New York City, Carol is no stranger to the inner workings of the Alvin Ailey Theater. Moving through life in the hub of artistic and creative expression, Carol was immersed in dance and the power of expression. Transitioning to Syracuse, Carol became the Director of the Community Folk Art Center at one point in time. Her experience vast and expertise strong.

Her faith fuels her passion to continue providing access to young people who want to dance. Never mind that they may struggle pointing their toes to the ceiling and arching their arms in ways that exude grace, poise, and control. Dance transcends precision. It is simply a way of *being*. Teaching in the Syracuse City School District, and pursuing her doctorate at the same time, Carol talks about her children—biological and those grafted into her lineage by way of dance. Though our one-on-one interview lasted for about an hour and a half, I stayed in the theater with her until closing. I took in all of the history she shared with me, the struggles to preserve a space for the community, and what it did to her on the inside when a student had walked all the way from the east side to come to dance class—her father picking her up on his bike.

Carol shows me pictures of when she first secured the building and how friends and loved ones came together to make it a space for young people. I looked at the dates and took in the richness of the history. While we spoke, I remember a young Black girl coming up to her and hugging her before she left for the day. Carol is committed. Carol keeps pushing. But, Carol is tired. Is there rest for the weary? Reprieve comes when she shows me a Facebook post of a

student who wrote on Mother's Day, that Ms. Carol is everyone's mom. This makes her smile. This gives her strength.

Sequoia

"Nobody cries for Black girls" is the refrain of the song sung for her late friend, Lovely. This was my introduction to Sequoia. Bold, bright smile. In it, you see the resemblance to her mother, Ms. Vickie, the community mom, who has nurtured Sequoia's communal and activist spirit.

Born in the early 90s, yet singing to the tune of Nina Simone as she croons, "Stars when you shine, you know how I feel/Scent of the pine, you know how I feel/Oh freedom is mine/And I know how I feel," Sequoia talks about self-care. She talks about people surrounding her, holding her accountable. She talks about saying, "NO" when everyone demands her "YES." She talks about the -isms that divide and the love that heals.

Black Lives Matter is her rallying cry—even from the womb. Not only does Sequoia use her voice for freedom, but she serves as the founder of Doula4AQueen and aspires to be a Nurse Midwife. In the Fall of 2019, I remember when the leaders of #NotAgainSU occupied the Barnes Center. Present to support those struggling for justice on a campus that has a long-standing history of neglecting the most marginalized, I remember looking up from the lone spot I could find near the wall, and seeing Sequoia speak to the organizers, listen to the needs, hug students—her embrace saying, 'I see you. You are me. I am you. How can I support you?'

Sequoia *came* "to the hill—a place that has not always been welcoming of members of the surrounding community. And yet, when the need arose, Sequoia made it her business to support the Black women and organizers of a movement she herself is all too familiar with, especially given her activism at the University of Rochester. Sequoia sings about, cries for, and celebrates

Black girls. Unconcerned with respectability politics, she powerfully croons that "It's a new dawn/It's a new day/It's a new life." And you know what? She's feeling good.

Tanaya

"You should know that you come from Kings and Queens!" Tanaya will be the first to talk about Black history. How we as Black people have *always* been creators and producers of knowledge. Our history is everywhere and Tanaya is committed to demonstrating that. Born in the 70s in Syracuse, New York, but also conscious of her Southern and Midwestern roots, Tanaya acknowledges the multiple dimensions of her identity. What with her African, Indigenous, and American heritage, she often troubles the history of erasure that undergirds ties between Indigeneity and Blackness and calls for more robust conversations around the power of ancestral healing.

Tanaya is a mother and served as a doula for others preparing for birth. Her journey to academia and community engagement stems from her love of children, and African culture and history. In fact, during our one-on-one interview, she stated, "Whenever there's an opportunity for me to work with youth in the community, I take it. Like, that's just because that's where my heart is." And although Tanaya has since moved out of Syracuse to pursue new opportunities, what she leaves behind is Cafe Sankofa, an educational arts and community space, youth within the Syracuse City School District whose academic trajectories have shifted because of the supports provided through STEP, and families who have been on the receiving end of the question that guides Tanaya's walk in this world:

> What [is] umm…[is] the best way to be a positive motivating force in this world without [...] taking from this world?

Working within and beyond the university, Tanaya's work captures the ingenuity of professional women committed to the very communities that have shaped them. Although the work is great

and the challenges greater, the question above seems to anchor every decision Tanaya makes and every opportunity she seizes. Rest assured that where Tanaya's heart is, there she will be.

Debra aka Ms. Debra

Debra was born in the late 50s in Mount Pleasant, Florida, "which is right outside of Tallahassee, about 30-40 minutes." During our one-on-one interview she says, "I never timed it 'cuz it's all country. I just be wanting to get to where I'm going." But when she returns back to the countryside, she's no longer Debra, transplant from Mount Pleasant to Syracuse, and founder of Poised, Gifted, and Ready Foundation Inc., but "cousin Debra." She declares, "I'm my grandmother's child. I'm Mary Davis' daughter." When she talks about her Southern roots, she remembers feeling welcomed and feeling secure.

The transition from Mount Pleasant, Florida to Syracuse, New York marks the beginning of resettlement, reconnections, and a tumultuous journey to and through higher education after being tracked into vocational education as a student at Nottingham High School. Ms. Debra recalls being in the EOP program at SUNY Brockport and the guidance she received from academic advisors and EOP counselors. "I worked so hard, 'cuz I didn't wanna go home, right? I was the oldest of 8 kids." Tears streamed down her face as she re-membered. There was no other explanation needed.

As the Founder and President of Poised, Gifted, and Ready (PGR) Foundation, Inc., formerly known as Pretty Girls Rock, Simply Because They Have To, Ms. Debra talks about the girls in her mentoring program and refers to them as "sisters." Everyone who comes into the program is part of a larger sisterhood of women committed to their personal growth, social development, financial literacy, and academic success.

During our one-on-one interview Ms. Debra said, “Sometimes people say to me, ‘Debra, you’re doing too much for them. No! Maybe they’ll do something for somebody else.” And while I am not exactly sure what triggered the flow of tears when we spoke over the summer, I should like to think that maybe, *just maybe* what she does for those sisters is what she wished someone had done for her. I would even go so far as to add that, in re-membering those who counseled her and invested in her, she understands more deeply the power of mentorship and the critical role sisters play in the lives of other sisters.

Asteir

Born in the late 70s, in North Carolina, Asteir talks about how her Black Southern traditions ground her. Though an only child, aunties, cousins, grands and great-grands formed a solid community around her. During our sister circle, Asteir worked through this idea of moving forward given the recent passing of her beloved grandmother—the loss so immense. I imagine that in those moments when a precious life is ushered into the world, she is reminded that there is still life after the sting of death.

As a nurse coach, Director of Village Birth International’s Community Doula Program, and the founder of Co-Mothering, Asteir is resolute about providing quality health and maternal care to Families of Color within the Syracuse community. And even given her wealth of experience, Asteir stresses that she is always learning from other women also committed to this work.

Ever conscious of her class status, Asteir finds ways to build community and works diligently to understand and meet the needs of the community she too is a part of, but often feels distanced from. Never really quite sure how she fits in despite the fact that Syracuse is now her home, Asteir navigates as both an insider and outsider. And yet, when Bill A364B emerged,

members of the community who also serve as doulas, clients who have benefited from her commitment, and other community members who recognize the gravity of reproductive justice and rights rallied with her and mobilized others. Together, an open letter was constructed. Below is an excerpt:

> We are writing today to oppose Bill A364B in its current presentation. We recognize the need for training, competency, and mentorship for any doula seeking reimbursement for serving birthing people receiving Medicaid. Certification can ensure that core competencies and principles of practice for doulas enrolled in Medicaid reimbursement programs are equipped to serve families of color and low-income communities. This bill is part of a larger initiative to address high maternal mortality and morbidity rates particularly for African American families. African descended midwives and birth workers have practiced for generations offering supportive care which centered community needs and self-determination. The regulation and restriction of all doulas in NY State, and implementation of certification policies without incorporating community-based doula models, erase not only this legacy but the potential to save lives and support families with the dignity and culturally sensitive reproductive care they deserve.

In an email Asteir sent out to all those concerned, impacted, and angry over Bill A364B, she concludes with the following: "All of us are committed to reducing barriers for the families we serve. Our work is vital to improving reproductive care." There is so much work that needs doing. So many People of Color are *depending on* and *dying* across healthcare contexts. So many birthed into this world are in need of adequate care to keep living—breathing.

Asteir has a vision for what can be. She envisions the possibilities of coming together to honor our traditions and legacies of birthing and caring. She envisions the possibilities of coming together to create new ways of *being* and *living* in this world. Asteir is one person, but she is making a difference and pushing others to do the same.

Victoria aka Ms. Vickie

"Her cup runneth over…" was the theme of our one-on-one interview. As she wiped the holy oil that had spilled in her purse, Ms. Vickie's tears overflowed. She knew that a blessing,

with her name on it, was on its way. In talking with me, she meditated on God's goodness and in the silence, there was peace.

Born and raised in Syracuse, New York during the mid-60's, Victoria's family roots can be traced back to South Carolina and Florida. Coming from a large family of phenomenal Black women who served as role models, there was no need for Victoria to look beyond the familial context for guidance or love.

When describing her life's work, Ms. Vickie says,

> I want to leave a footprint of hope [...] Living...overcoming obstacles and adversities—because my name is Vickie, that means overcoming obstacles and adversity and teaching people you can be victorious over those obstacles. You have to have resilience, you have to have self-love. You have to have patience [...] I want to be able to deposit that into other people's lives.

Ms. Vickie perceives herself as a vessel. Consequently, "whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things *are* honest, whatsoever things *are* just, whatsoever things *are* pure, whatsoever things *are* lovely, whatsoever things *are* of good report" she pours into others—be it youth "at [her] church, or in [her] community, [or] people that [she] do[esn't] know in passing."

Ms. Vickie has two daughters, one of whom is also a participant in this study: Sequoia. After interviewing Sequoia and walking her out of the room we interviewed in, I remember her exclaiming, "You need to talk to my mother!" It was not until I spoke with Ms. Vickie that I understood why. The origins of Sequoia's passion and deep love for people are clear. Sequoia is truly a reflection and extension of who Ms. Vickie is—naturally.

Reba aka Dr. Hodge

Born in St. Thomas in the 80s and raised with two older brothers by a single mother, Reba has navigated a plethora of systems that both aided and made more challenging her transition from St. Thomas to the Bronx. And yet, it is her experience with homelessness, her mother's

spirit of advocacy, and her journey from the Bronx to Syracuse, back to New York City and then back to Syracuse, that keeps her committed to "not throwing youth away" and recognizing the challenges that come from a life of struggle.

But when you meet Reba, you do not meet her story right away. Who you meet is a woman who will search the city of Syracuse for a missing student—who will be present to help another Black woman like herself reach academic milestones in the world of academe. Who you will meet is a woman who tells the story of how she struggled to honor her late mentor, Andrea, without casting her own mother in a negative light. Who you will meet is a woman who recently told this story of her mother sending her a Facebook message as follows: "I know that I don't have anything you need," or something to that effect. Like, "I know that I can't give you anything that you need anymore, but just know that I love you.' And I was like, I just wrote her back, I said, 'Mom, you are the best woman that I know.'"

Reba, also known as Dr. Hodge, recognizes the interlocking systems of oppression. Her race, nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, and socioeconomic status are all factors that inform her commitment to being an advocate for young people. Her office is a haven much in the same way her mentor was a haven for her. She honors the legacy of her mentor through her engagement with students. Moreover, Reba, because of her relationship with her mother, understands that food, clothes, and shelter are not the *only* things youth need. Dr. Hodge knows the power of love and exercises it through the expectations she sets for both her students and the teachers at Van Duyn Elementary School. This love language, when spoken by Black women is often misconstrued, but to those who need to hear it, they understand its worth.

Eva aka Ms. Eva

Born in Liberia during the 60s, Ms. Eva presents as a fair-skinned woman, with deep set dimples and piercing blue eyes. Her very appearance challenges static understandings of African-ness and Blackness. In fact, it is not until her Liberian accent bubbles up to the surface that you hear traces of a home ravaged by war and rebuilt from the ashes. I see Ms. Eva in her daughter, Lauren, who loves hard, and gives of herself to others in need of an encouraging word or hug. She reflects and refracts who Ms. Eva is.

The breadth of Ms. Eva's experience across schooling contexts is endless. And yet, during our one-on-one interview, Ms. Eva states, "I'm real regular." Juxtapose this statement with the innumerable plaques and commendations covering the walls of her office—demonstrating her commitment to leadership, academic excellence, and professional development. Reciting a quote often attributed to Nelson Mandela upon his release from prison, but actually written by Marianne Williamson in *A return to love: Reflections on the principles of a course in miracles*, Ms. Eva proclaims, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure...Your playing small does not serve the world...We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."

Like flies to light bulbs and honeybees to flowers, people literally gravitate towards Ms. Eva. She lives a "big life" so that her students can think big and imagine living big lives too. Though push back abounds, Ms. Eva knows that "playing small does not serve the world" nor does it serve the youth or families she is committed to. No stranger to struggle, Ms. Eva continues fighting for a school environment anchored by love, active engagement with families,

high expectations, as well as the necessary scaffolds that enable students to meet *and* exceed them.

Octavia

Born in the late 80s, Octavia was born and raised in Syracuse, New York. Most of her maternal side of the family hail from Alabama and migrated to Syracuse in the 60s. The younger generation born and raised in the city of Syracuse, have different stories to tell about struggle, freedom, or the lack thereof.

Wanting to make a difference in the lives of youth and their families sometimes leaves Octavia feeling "stuck" between a rock and a hard place. Though she loves being in Syracuse—the place where she grew up—there is still this gnawing feeling that there has to be "more." During our one-on-one interview, Octavia emphasized the centrality of hope. How crucial is the act of providing hope to Black youth who feel hope*less* and "stuck" in a place that was once an incubator for change and movement. I believe this is precisely why before the start of school, another Student Assistance Counselor messaged Octavia and told her that a student was anticipating the start of the school year just so she can speak with her.

What possibilities do we engender for youth by attending to their emotional *and* intellectual needs? How can we sustain the excitement of Black youth looking forward to the start of school—a place rife with its own contradictions.

The same streets they now cross, are the ones Octavia navigated as a youth. Some of the same burdens they carry are the ones Octavia hurled on her back, and some of the frustrations they harbor, she is all too familiar with and has learned to acknowledge, confront, let go of, and heal from. Needing someone who cared enough to talk to her, give her hope, say that she mattered seemed to elude her throughout most of her schooling experience. And yet, what she

always wanted is what she gives to her students daily. Octavia calls this her life's work—engaging with students and embodying possibility. Why can't *you* go to SU? Why can't *you* make a difference? Who made you believe that you are better off dead than in the land of the living?

Octavia reminds us that hope liberates; hope transforms; and when we are feeling stuck, hope can undo us.

Talina

T-A-L-I-N-A pronounced TAH-Lah-NA. Never mind what you thought. Born in the 80s, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York, Talina is about the people and lives for the people. She is quick to tell you about the love she has for her grandmother, how she listens to what no one wants to hear, and loves those others give up on. Talina has the same spirit.

Her son, Tahjee, fuels her advocacy work for Families of Color in need of resources, counsel, and supports for their children with intellectual disabilities. Where are the narratives that speak to the complexities of raising a Black boy with an intellectual disability? Where are the narratives that speak to the inextricable link between Talina challenging static conceptualizations of "smartness" and "intelligence" while also bridging the gap between the academy and the activism taking place on the ground?

"For whom?" That is the question we pondered over in the Tom Green Room during our first year as Master's students. Who do we labor for? Why do we do the work that we do? What does it mean to our loved ones back home, in Brooklyn? Talina is the one who will take someone in even if she herself has no permanent place to stay. She *will* apologize and speak to the limitations of being "unapologetic." Talina will cry—her tears a source of strength. Claiming fatness, claiming queerness, claiming her connection to the ancestors, as well as her love of

God, Talina is multidimensional. If she is the only one at the decision-making table when she looks around, she will be the first to question where everyone else is at? Theory is not enough without praxis and praxis is not enough without love. In the same vein as Dani McClain's work: Talina *lives* for the *we*.

Gloria

Springfield, Massachusetts by way of Wilmington, North Carolina, and eventually to Syracuse. That is the arc of Gloria's journey to Upstate, New York. Born in the 60s, Gloria talks at length about the ethic of care and love and how it has prepared her to take on the role as educator—be it teaching how to solve math equations, or counsel on how to exercise self-care through laughter and dance.

Drawing upon her mother's example to cultivate her own style of mothering, Gloria infuses her love for her own children, godchildren, nieces, and nephews, and students with such an unparalleled seriousness. In fact, there is no boundary between her identity as a mother and her identity as an educator. And though her mother is no longer with us physically, Gloria's memories of how she cared and loved are part of her.

When I returned to Syracuse during my first year of graduate school, and after laying my grandmother to rest, I attempted to find some sort of normalcy again. Robotically, I went to classes, benumbed myself to the toxicity of White silence and insensitivity, and managed to complete coursework I was behind in. And yet, above the fray of discussion and collegial exchange that took place during a class break in Mario's *Race in the Making of Education*, Gloria noticed *me* and gently said, "I didn't see you last week in class. Is everything okay?" Trying not to get to an emotional place of no return, I briefly told her where I had been—she looked at me with the comfort only my very own grieving mother could try to provide. What I

remember is her acknowledging my pain and offering words of encouragement when I needed it most.

As her own children are navigating the landscape of higher education, so too is Gloria navigating doctoral studies here at Syracuse University. And though her undergraduate and graduate experiences here have taught her many things, Gloria underscores the fact that she learns with and from her children and her students. They teach her about life, and she models for them how to derive joy from the learning process. Gloria reminds us that there is power in sharing *and* being a producer of new knowledge.

As I think through the revolutionary stance Gloria assumes, the melancholic trill of Odetta's 1963 rendition of "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child" reverberates. Taking seriously her role as an educator who mothers, who in her classroom is left to their own devices? Who in her classroom knows the pangs of feeling sometimes, like a motherless child?

Brandi

Born in Colorado in the 80s, Brandi is no stranger to frigid temperatures. In fact, the conditions under which she has lived and learned attest to an acquired adaptability, and flexibility. However, it is her capability to constantly re-assess, re-evaluate, and re-think that has been one of her greatest strengths throughout her personal, intellectual, and professional journey.

When Brandi steps into a room, one has no real idea of where she could possibly be from or who she really is. Attempts to "classify" her are futile. What matters most is her clarity about where she comes from and who she is. There is power in self-definition and the outright rejection of labels placed on us by others. Brandi is a mother, a friend, a student, an educator, and so much more. In the school of life, she is daily learning how to engage her students in ways that honor

her own mother's efforts to imbue within her a sense of criticality. In the school of life, she is learning from other educators who reinforce the power of loving through the construction of high expectations.

I got an opportunity to interview Brandi after a long day of her teaching and then attending an almost three-hour Qualitative Methods course. But as we sat in a study room in Bird Library, I listened as Brandi openly and honestly shared her journey from Colorado to Syracuse and talked me through some of the difficult decisions she has had to make concerning her and her son's future. What I realize now is that she was embodying and re-defining what she had learned growing up: "To be honest and transparent. To always help people[...] to be consistent[...] and [...] it kind of has to do with transparency—that, loving people is not always like a 'Yes' thing, right? So, setting expectations, and boundaries, umm, and being consistent with *that* is another way to show that you care and you love."

For many students who are at the pinnacle of their social and academic development, the value of an educator's commitment to being honest, consistent, and expectant of their excellence is priceless.

The Interviewing Process

Checkin' Me Before They Check For Me: Before the Interview

Brenda:

"Why a PhD?"

As I sat at my computer desk, I paused before I answered Brenda's question. It felt so heavy. Like, a mother calling you to task and holding you accountable for the decisions you have made. I knew that how I responded would forever change how she saw me and the work that I

was doing. As I ruminated on how best to respond to such a loaded question, Brenda remained silent—granting me time and space to come to voice.

Even the silence
has a story to tell you.
Just listen. Listen.
~Woodson, 2014, p. 278

Pursuing a PhD has enabled me to clarify—for myself—what the purpose of education *should* be. Ironically, in doing work that transcends academe, I was able to connect in more authentic ways who I am as a Black woman, daughter, sister, friend, aunt, cousin, mentor, leader, educator and re-searcher.

Brenda:

"I support everyone in their academic dreams. So let me know if I can be of help. "

Me:

"Thank you! I'm aiming for the sky—so I appreciate that."

Before delving into the complexities of the dissertation journey, Brenda affirmed me and promised me that she would pray for me. I trusted her affirmation and believed in the power of her prayers.

Pause!: Before Consent is Requested

Before every interview, it became a tradition to trace for participants the crossing of our paths. Moreover, it was important for me to communicate why each participant mattered to me and the work that I was committed to doing. All participants in this study are a part of a larger genealogy of struggle. The following anecdotes are examples of how connections were made with participants through the telling of how I came to know them and their work within the community.

I distinctly recall *finally* sitting across from Sequoia. With her ‘fro shaped like a crown of glory around her head, red and green earrings, glasses, and a black and white striped tube top maxi dress, I remember her listening intently as I explained to her how I came to know her. I told her how Professor Haddix encouraged me to attend The Lovetones’ set at Funk ‘N’ Waffles—a duo that consists of Sequoia Iman (Sequoia) and William James Nicholson. I told her how she reminded me of my sister, Tina, who sings with a deep consciousness of the power of words. How, in her song written and dedicated to her late friend, Lovely, I could not unhear the refrain: “Nobody cries for Black girls.” I just knew that I had to connect with her—it felt like the right thing to do.

Before our interview, I remember showing Asteir a picture of my then, 1-year-old niece. As she held onto my phone and beheld the image of my niece, a bright smile emerged. I saw in Asteir’s eyes, what I felt every time I looked at that screensaver. Bria (aka Sistahgirl), whom I held tightly in my arms right after she came from her mother’s womb, sat in her pink chair, mid-laugh, her eyes looking off into the distance, her tiny legs outstretched and her huge ‘fro reaching to the sky. Asteir was able to capture with words why this image pulled at my heartstrings every time I saw it—Black Joy! I remember telling her that including her into this work only made sense as she helped to bring Black babies into the world and ensured that their mamas, caregivers, and extended kin were empowered to provide a healthy environment for them to grow into the best versions of themselves. Sharing Sistahgirl with Asteir enabled me to connect my work with hers in a way that put the focus on the lives we touch and are touched by. We magnified the humanity of others and discussed what it means to know joy not just in our youth, but throughout our lifetime.

During the Interview: For the Record

Reflection can be cathartic. Reflection can be a form of release. Throughout the course of my one-on-one interviews, sometimes there were no words. Sometimes there were no answers. Just revelations. I remember Ms. Vickie's eyes watering as she reflected on questions she had not anticipated engaging. They had taken her to a place. I saw her travel there with her tears. I was so moved by her vulnerability, for in it—I saw just how far she had come.

Together, we sat in the silence that ensued and I watched as a formerly "beat face" welcomed a fresh streak of tears. No tissues were needed—or solicited for that matter. Being able to talk about her journey to healing, her ongoing struggle to bring awareness to the experiences of Black families raising Black boys with intellectual disabilities activated self-reflexivity. Crying was both an expression of and a response to deep-rooted pain, frustration, anger, and joy unspeakable. She embraced each tear. They reminded her that it is perfectly fine to be in sync with your emotions—that her feelings *mattered*.

After the Interview: When the Recording Stops

Octavia seemed like a kindred spirit. Thoughtful. Reflective. Not one drawn to fluff, but honest and compassionate. Remembering that she talked about graduating from Syracuse University during our one-on-one interview, I told her that my sister also graduated from SU and that she might know her. Piqued, she asked, "What's your sister's name?" "Her name was, well, is Tina." After telling her my sister's full name, her eyes lit up. "I LOVE TINA!!!!" She told me about the courses they took together and about how she bumped into her last year in NYC. Though our interview had been over for some time, we ended up FaceTiming Tina.

The level of excitement in the room was palpable. I felt so much more connected to Octavia because she knew a part of me that I cherish dearly. Whoever my sister loves often

becomes someone I grow to love since she sees the absolute best in people. In the span of an hour and a half Octavia was no longer a stranger—but another one of my sister's friends that allowed her to grow into her best self. This was a day of reunions, full circle experiences and reflection.

As Ms. Eva buckled into the front seat, her spouse, settling into the back seat, resisted any suggestions that I could sandwich my way between the car seat readily available for their grandbabies, and the 50 lb. bag of flour Ms. Eva had bought to engage the staff in a professional development exercise before the start of the school year. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Williams, a thoughtful and attentive man, proceeded to fire away with questions. Where Ms. Eva's interview was over, mine was just beginning.

Sister Circles: "Bringing Sisters Together"

Sustained by Black women committed to critical engagement, sister circles were and still are spaces wherein issues central to the Black experience are acknowledged, discussed, and unpacked. In her chapter entitled, "Seeking After Truth," bell hooks avers, "Healing takes place within us as we speak the truth of our lives" (hooks, 1993, p. 29). In many ways, sister circles offer Black women opportunities to do the same: "speak the truth of [their] lives" without condemnation. Because of this, sister circles are not merely focus groups, but rather, sources of support for and by Black women. An example of this can be found in the work of Angela M. Neal-Barnett, Robert Stadulis, Margaret Ralston Payne, Lori Crosby, Monica Mitchell, Lakisha Williams, and Crystal Williams-Costa (2011). Together, they used sister circles to illustrate the centrality of Black women gathering as a way to facilitate mental health amongst professional African American women. Thus, sister circles functioned as a way to draw African American women in to receive support, share experiences, and learn techniques that would help mitigate

feelings of anxiety exacerbated by stressful working conditions. And while we know that treatment should not occur outside of a real commitment to holding workplaces accountable for hostile working conditions, specifically for Black women, centering the mental health and well-being of a population often prone to centering the mental health and well-being of others at the expense of their own is critical.

Having said this, where sister circles in this context were developed to foster mental health and well-being, the sister circles I designed for this study were intended to promote critical intergenerational engagement specifically around the relationship between education and liberation within and beyond the school setting. Thus, as I prepared for the first round of sister circles, I distinctly recall reaching out to Brenda.

> "Greetings!" Brenda said once she picked up the phone.
> "Hi, Brenda! How are you?"
> "I am well. How 'bout yourself?"
> "I'm actually gearing up for the upcoming sister circle and wanted to touch base with you about the specifics for that evening."

I told Brenda that we would be meeting at the Southside Communication Center, located in the heart of the south side, at 6:00 p. m. In the process, I gathered more information about her dietary restrictions and preferences, so that the refreshments provided would be something she could partake in as well as enjoy. But it was what she said as we neared the end of our conversation that brings me to the power of sister circles.

> **Me:**
> "I look forward to seeing you on Thursday and I hope that everyone who comes finds the experience beneficial and fruitful."
>
> **Brenda:**
> "Oh. It will be fruitful," she said matter-of-factly. "Bringing sisters together is always a beautiful thing."

I start this section underscoring this phone conversation with Brenda because it speaks to the beauty of bringing Black women together who are committed to the same cause: strengthening the community, supporting young people, and preparing the way for future generations.

Historically, "bringing sisters together" has been the focus of Black women invested in issues of representation, racial uplift, and oppression. In Deborah Gray White's (1999) *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994*, she states,

> At the end of the nineteenth century black people were not only responding to the new industrial environment but to racial repression as well. The period was remarkable for black peonage, lynchings, disenfranchisement, white primaries, race riots, and a white supremacist ideology which on the national level supported imperialistic expansionist policies. The race was under assault from all sides...It was during what has been called the nadir in the black experience that black clubwomen, with full knowledge of the ravages being wrought, proclaimed the advent of the "woman's era," and came forth with a plan that made black women the primary leaders of the race, a plan based on the premise of equality between black men and women. Clearly their burden was different—indeed many times heavier than that borne by white women. (p. 40)

White goes on to assert that while a few White organizations accepted and included Black women into their associations, the vast majority were "openly antiblack" (White, 1999, p. 40). Hence, the need to form clubs wherein Black women could come to voice *and* use their voice to speak out on issues of race, given their knowledge of and experience with racialized oppression, and issues of inequality, given their experience with gendered oppression. As White explains, "Only when black women were totally free would the black race be free. This was the meaning behind one of the most memorable passages in [Anna Julia Cooper's] *A Voice from the South*: "Only the Black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me" (White, 1999, p. 43).

In conversation with White's work is Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. The historical context therein offers us a

more nuanced understanding of how Black women have and *continue* to construct spaces that realize freedom and liberation for all. According to Giddings, “The organization of the [National Association of Colored Women] NACW was a watershed in the history of Black women” (Giddings, 1984, p. 91). By citing Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin’s declaration at the Boston national convention, Giddings captures the mission of the NACW as well as subsequent movements spearheaded by Black women. As Ruffin states, “Our woman’s movement is a woman’s movement in that it is led and directed by women…We are not alienating or withdrawing. We are coming to the front” (Giddings, 1984, p. 91).

This “coming to the front” encapsulates the function of sister circle dialogue. It is meant to center Black women, their voices, and their lived experiences. Thus, the enduring legacy of “Bringing Sisters Together” attests to Black women’s desire to engage with one another in spaces that affirmed rather than disparaged. Though the founding and maintenance of clubs for Black women were rife with their own challenges, the mission was almost always to understand and address the needs of the community and do so through the lenses and lived experiences of Black women. Incorporating sister circles into this study has led to the emergence of new lessons that can encourage educators and practitioners to reassess their perception of Black youth, the communities from which they come and the wealth of knowledge therein.

Narrative Analysis

For this study, narrative analysis has functioned as both a method and tool, which aided in the mining process of larger narratives. Searching for stories that spoke to the purpose of education, and the value of critical engagement with Black youth, their families and the communities from which they come, I pored over transcripts and listened to the audio recordings of both one-on-one interviews and sister circles. In so doing, I was better equipped to engage in

the meaning-making process, as well as discover overarching narratives about how Black women tap into their own lived experiences to instruct and resist—*concurrently*. Subsequently, I was afforded profound glimpses into how each participant not only embodies an ethic and pedagogy of liberation, but also serves as a conductor on the path towards liberation.

In addition,

> Narrative analysis focuses on the elements of discourse that do social work. For example, reference and predication work in narratives to point out people and name them as predictable types in the narrative through voicing. Also, context does important work in narratives, as contexts are often named and described in the attempt to construct larger storylines about literacy events. (Rogers and Wetzel, 2014, p. 35)

Over the course of this study, several storylines have emerged that further situate participants as agents actively recruiting Black youth and their families to realize their potential to effect change. Thus, stories are the bedrock of this research study. Through stories, participants recount how they came to work with Black youth and their families and discuss the vibrance and struggle of the communities from which they have come. In fact, during one-on-one interviews, follow-up conversations, sister-circles, and post sister circle correspondence, stories that illustrate the power of our commitment to education as the practice of freedom continued to emerge.

According to Rogers and Wetzel, "In spaces where narratives are shared, people intuitively do the work of narrative analysis. We listen to stories, correct ourselves when we misrepresent a part of our story, or perhaps return to earlier narratives to build meaning across our stories...Narratives draw us in because they are stories of life, of literacy, and of learning" (p. 40). This notion is supported by the work of Reissman (2005) who contends that "Narratives do not mirror, [but rather] refract the past. Imagination and strategic interests influence how storytellers choose to connect events and make them meaningful for others" (p. 6). To conclude, Reissman draws upon the work of C. Wright Mills and states, "...narrative analysis can forge

connections between personal biography and social structure—the personal and the political" (Reissman, 2005, p. 6). Not only has narrative analysis enabled me to better record and document the genealogy of struggle that connects the Black women within this study, but it also facilitated more salient connections between "the personal and the political."

To better understand the similarities and nuances across respective interviews, I set aside time to listen to each audio recording. While listening, I time-stamped and documented particularities that informed participants' commitment to Black youth and their families within and beyond the school setting. I then reviewed and noted sections of transcripts where participants *casually* spoke about how they engage with Black youth and their families—as if the work that they do is "regular" or nothing out of the ordinary.

Because of this, I became particularly interested in how each Black woman spoke *casually*, yet *passionately* about their line of work. In fact, I attributed that level of passion to the many ways in which participants embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. Subsequently, I identified sections of transcripts where that ethic and pedagogy was fostered in one's youth and sustained in adulthood. Questions that guided this identification and analysis process are as follows: Where did participants see this ethic modeled? At what stage in their development did participants learn this pedagogy? What steps do they currently take to refine this pedagogy so that the needs of both Black youth and their families are being met?

Paying careful attention to recurring phrases participants attached to distinct memories, as well as life events that propelled them into professions or areas of service that facilitates and promotes educational and social justice, I then juxtaposed each her story with the other. To be clear, the idea was not to engage in comparisons, generalizations, or essentializations. Instead, the objective was to understand more deeply the larger narratives being told about freedom and

liberation, one's relationship to educative spaces, and watershed experiences that transformed that relationship. Such a juxtaposition enabled me to extract from audio recordings and transcripts a sense of urgency for why the construction of an ethic and pedagogy of liberation is so critical for Black youth and their families within and beyond the school context.

Let us take for example Reba's continuous use of the term "throw away" and Octavia's frequent use of the term "generational trauma" throughout the course of their one-on-one interviews. Why are these terms so prevalent within their lexicon? How does Reba's lived experiences contribute to understandings of what constitutes a "throw away?" How does this inform how she embodies an ethic and pedagogy of liberation for Black youth others *are* quick to "throw away?" As for Octavia, in what ways does her own family's history with illiteracy and her mother's never-ending fight for her to obtain a quality education contribute to this notion of "generational trauma?" How do these histories inform how she works with Black youth to acknowledge *and* heal from their own trauma? Not only is the emphasis on these concepts very profound, but it is also very telling of how Reba and Octavia both use lessons from their own lives to shape how they understand and engage issues endemic to educational leadership and mental health counseling. Reviewing each audio recording and transcript enabled me to "intuitively do the work of narrative analysis" as Rogers and Wetzel suggested earlier. In fact, it is what led to the questions I posed above.

In addition, D. Soyini Madison's (1993) amalgamation of Black feminist thought with the performance paradigm and employment of both frameworks "as analytical constructs in unveiling the many ways people 'lettered' and 'unlettered' theorize themselves" is a powerful model for how we can thoughtfully comb through oral narratives (Madison, 1993, p. 214). Drawing upon the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, Madison underscores

“’theories of the flesh’ that ‘bridge the contradictions of our experience’—those root metaphors that keep us centered and sane” (Madison, 1993, p. 213).

According to Madison, “Theories of the flesh means that the cultural, geopolitical, and economic circumstances of our lives engender particular experiences and epistemologies that provide philosophies about reality different from those available to other groups” (Madison, 1993, p. 214). Although Madison’s scholarship is rooted in critical performance ethnography, what I find most useful about her work is the criticality with which she attends to and analyzes the performativity of oral interviews. Regarding my own work, the question remains: How are participants within this study performing their lived experiences and theorizing about the work they engage in through one-on-one interviews?

CHAPTER 4: SISTER CIRCLES AS HOMEPLACES

In the work of bell hooks (1990), we are reminded that Black women were *always* seminal figures in the construction *and* maintenance of homeplaces. In fact, when oppressive living and learning conditions taxed the soul, it was the homeplace that families returned to, to recover their humanity and find reprieve. And yet, hooks is intentional about foregrounding the sociohistorical context under which such homeplaces were developed. She asserts,

> Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination. Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however, fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of racial domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (hooks, 1990, p. 384)

And while homeplaces possess a "radical political dimension," I argue that sister circles also have a "radical political dimension" that positions them as central places Black women return to, to recover their humanity and find reprieve. In efforts to expand on bell hooks' delineation of homeplace in the context of facilitating my own sister circles, this segment of my research findings will be divided into two sections 1). Overview of Sister Circles 2). Themes for Sister Circles.

Overview of Sister Circles[2]

Although some participants were well acquainted with others, there were times during sister circles where no one knew the other participant personally—or at all. Yet, in the brief span

[2] For a chart summarizing the details of each sister circle, please see Appendix B.

of time that we were together, differences in lived experiences were laid bare and others listened as others shared their truths about being in the skin and bodies they were in. It is important to note that the fostering of community was one of the primary objectives of each sister circle. Based on who confirmed their attendance for each respective sister circle, I constructed a facilitation guide. And although each sister circle was semi-structured, I made it a point to build in room for participants to steer the direction of our conversation.

At the start of each sister circle, I had participants introduce themselves by name and talk briefly about the work that they do. This exercise not only set the tone for the rest of our session, but it also enabled everyone in the space to acknowledge one another and observe the myriad ways in which we all engage Black youth and their families within and beyond the school environment. Thereafter, I would often provide participants with a genealogy of how we came to be in that respective sister circle. It was always important for me to share with everyone why they remain central to my dissertation study and how we are all connected through the work that we engage in.

Following this genealogy, I would then talk more about the theme that anchored our session and how I planned our discussion around connecting threads that emerged from each participants' one-on-one interview. Once I introduced the theme and explained the connecting threads, we would spend more time collectively unpacking during the course of our sister circle, I would often pose a question. The idea was to get everyone thinking about the larger aims of this study, which is: What can we learn from her-stories shared by Black women who work with Black youth and their families throughout the Syracuse community? In what ways does our work intersect and complement each other? How do we, in our work with Black youth and their families, promote and operationalize education as the practice of freedom?

After offering space for each participant to reflect on and respond to each question, I would then introduce an exercise that would get us all thinking about the overarching theme for the evening. It was often during exercises when participants would have the most power as their responses and engagement with each other's thoughts would drive the direction of our dialogue. In these moments, I would often tap into my insider knowledge of participants from one-on-one interviews. Rather than take up talking space, I would make it a point to intentionally interject to keep dialogue flowing or to affirm points made by participants.

I was neither a fly on the wall nor the nucleus of information, but rather, I used my power to move our conversation along given the limited amount of time we often had. Although sister circles lasted about two hours on average, given the richness of each participants' her-stories, there was *always* so much more that we could talk about and share. In efforts to center the voices of participants and transition from one exercise to another, I would read, verbatim, each participant's response to questions that magnified the connecting threads across interviews as well as the overarching theme for our session. I cannot begin to describe how powerful it was to witness participants receive their truth and behold how other participants responded to and affirmed what was shared. From this experience, I can testify that there is much to learn from our lives and from that of others.

Needless to say, allowing participants to hear their truths was one thing, but providing opportunities for everyone to make meaning of texts that spoke to their truths? *That* was another experience altogether! For each sister circle, I included poems, excerpts from children's books, music, or pictures. Because the English educator in me is *never* silent, I built in time for us to read, write, think, share and just *be* in our thoughts—freely. Although Audre Lorde's "Poetry Is Not A Luxury" (1985) speaks about the power of poetry specifically, I contend that this piece

also captures how vehicles of expression can also function as vehicles for freedom and liberation for Black women. She states,

> For women...poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (Lorde, 1985)

Given the fact that participants were often coming from work after a long day, sacrificing time spent with loved ones or slipping away from activist or volunteer efforts, I thought that using multimodal texts would enable participants to "carve from the rock experiences of [their] daily lives" as they engage with and support Black youth and their families throughout the Syracuse community. Once these exercises were completed, and before I wrapped up for the evening, I would then check in with everyone to gauge how they were feeling. During this time, participants were free to reflect on and share key take-aways from our time spent together. And while food and fellowship were staples for each meeting, what I discovered was that for some, the physical fellowship was all the sustenance they needed.

Themes for Sister Circles

As mentioned earlier, themes for each sister circle were inspired by the connecting threads that linked one-on-one interviews together. The funny thing is that there was no way I could anticipate who would be available for each sister circle. Yet, I believe that divine intervention allowed for each individual to be available when they needed to be so that deeper connections could be fostered, and richer conversations could be had. Take for example the fact that due to prior commitments, Talina arrived later than expected to the scheduled sister circle entitled, "Rights. *For Whom?* Justice. *For Whom*?" Though she was not present when I provided everyone with a genealogy of how they came to be in this study and why they are important, it

became evident as soon as she entered our circle, apologized for being late, and seamlessly became a part of our community. It became a home and haven for her as each woman created space for her to be present and to speak back to their her-stories of triumph, struggle and frustration.

Nonetheless, after about a month of trying to figure out everyone's availability, adjusting meeting times and scheduling sister circles, I was finally prepared to lead my first one—or so I thought! Leading up to the first sister circle, I spent about two weeks listening to and transcribing one-on-one interviews with Gloria and Brenda. Throughout their her-stories, though I heard their laughter as they recounted childhood memories, I also tuned in to how they talked about their deep admiration and love for their mothers. I provide these two connecting threads because in them, I drew inspiration for the exercises we would engage in and the questions I would pose.

As mentioned earlier, the theme for this first sister circle, entitled, "Bringing Sisters Together," was actually inspired by a phone conversation with Brenda as we drew closer to our meeting date. Not only was togetherness in spite of our myriad differences a hope, but what I later found out was that though Gloria and Brenda were familiar with each other, they had no idea that they shared so many commonalities! That realization would not have occurred if these two were not brought in community with one another. Because Gloria has a deep love for literature and Brenda is truly a life-long learner, I thought it would be fruitful to include a poem by Nikki Giovanni entitled "Legacies." Both Gloria and Brenda read the poem aloud and it was incredible to hear how each voice provided a different texture to the poem. Below is a brief transcript of me introducing Giovanni's poem, talking briefly about how it is connected to our conversation and listening in as Gloria and Brenda interpret "Legacies"—together.

Me:
And so, something that I'd like to have us think about as we kind of conclude this part, ummm, it's a poem by Nikki Giovanni and I thought it was important to bring in some poetry because Gloria kind of, you know, brought me back to the importance of just, different voices.

Gloria:
Mhmmmm.

Me:
You talked about in our interview how like, you know, your mom is like a central figure that inspires you, but then also like, literary figures as well. Like, they also provide a new—a different vision, ummm, for Black women and for what they are capable of doing.

Gloria:
Mhmmm.

Me: *continuing*
In ways that sometimes we can't always see on the day-to-day, you know, in the real world.

Gloria:
Mhmmm.

Me:
And so, I have some copies for us today. It's a poem entitled, "Legacies" and it's by Nikki Giovanni. Do you know this poem?

Brenda:
No, the word legacies just…

Gloria:
I know! I feel like I should know it.

Me: *passing out copies*
You probably do! You probably do. And so, would you do us the honor of reading Gloria?

Gloria proceeds to read the poem

Me:
Would you mind reading it for us...

***Brenda*:** *said with all the confidence and ease*
Okay.

Me: *continuing*
...as well.

***Brenda*:**
Almost there.

Me:
Take ya time.

Brenda proceeds to read the poem and a brief moment of silence ensues

Me:
What are some thoughts? Initial thoughts?

***Gloria*:**
It brings back memories to me…

Me:
Mhmm.

***Gloria*:** *continuing*
...when I see this. Umm, you know, and I thought it at first when she said she didn't want to, you know, she was dependent on her spirit, but, I read into it as she didn't want to think about her ummm, not being there...

Me:
Yea.

***Gloria*:** *continuing*
...you know, anymore. And then I thought, okay, I'll say this memory. You know, my mother ummm, told me that when my umm, my grandmother, you know, the only grandmother I knew, she came to live in our hometown after her umm, my grandfather passed and then her brother passed and she was like, back there in the house all by herself. So anyways, I would always go over to, you know, my grandmother's house and ummm, my mother told me, and she said, 'You know,' she was talking about her brother, that umm, his middle name was ummm, Laverne. It's common in our family that these men had this name ummm, Laverne and some pronounce it as Leverne and all that, but it's spelled the same way. So anyways, it's *first name* Laverne. She said, *imitating the voice of her mother* 'You know, Laverne told me that mother made some umm, potato rolls for him and he didn't even invite me over to get any!' And so anyways, when I was reading this, I was like, hearing what she was saying.

Me:
Mhmm.

***Gloria*:**
And I was thinking to myself, my mother never made potato rolls. You know, the potato makes the rolls ummm, rise and they're supposed to be real you know, and I said 'Really?' And she's like, 'Yea! Didn't even invite me over to get any!" And so, just, she was fussing…

Me:
Yeaaaaaa.

***Gloria*:** *continuing*
...over her brother and later, you know, my grandmother made more and ummm, at another point, and she told her too how she was complaining about that.

Me:
Mhmm.

***Gloria*:**
But, there's something about ummm, uhhh to me, making rolls and the smell of fresh bread and you know, all of that, that's very again, like, you know, triggering these wonderful ummm, memories and then, sometimes we say things and we know what they mean…

Me:
Uhmmm.

***Gloria*:** *continuing*
...and we don't really ummm, uhh, you know, it says like it means something different, but we understand. You know, she didn't want to, you know, even though she kind of poked out her mouth, 'No, I don't wanna know how to make no rolls,' you know, you kind of understand that's a hard thing to do…

Me:
Mmmmm.

***Gloria*:** *continuing*
...to pass on your legacy of a, like a recipe, 'cuz if anything, grandmother may not be around to make them anymore.

Not too long after, Brenda proceeds to re-interpret the granddaughter's behavior towards her grandmother. She mentions that in the beginning, when the grandmother calls her, she shows respect to her by saying, "Yes ma'am." But then, she becomes bold and indignant when she is asked to carry a legacy that seems too big for her to fill and too foreboding of what is to come.

Nevertheless, Giovanni ends the poem with the following lines: “and neither of them ever/said what they meant/and i guess nobody ever does.” Brenda, a genealogist of familial and communal histories highlights the fact that the avenue for understanding closes when loved ones die. The meaning-making process becomes that much more elusive. And so, “Bringing Sisters Together”[3] is an occasion to pool our knowledges and understandings of how we engage with Black youth, their families and the communities from which they come together. It is also an occasion to talk more about why we remain committed to doing so, and what we offer to the next generation so that they do not make the same assumptions the narrator of “Legacies” makes to conclude the poem.

The theme for the second sister circle, entitled, “Full Circle,” was inspired by the relationships I had fostered with each woman in the group. Linda was the first person to respond to my call for participants. What an experience to be in community with her again after having interviewed everyone who agreed to participate in my dissertation study. My work began with her and now that I was at the end of my journey, it was truly humbling to share with her how far I had come. As mentioned earlier, unbeknownst to me, Octavia and my own sister were friends in college, taking the same Psychology and Child and Family Studies courses. I was again closing this doctoral journey the way I began—my older sister forging the path for me to do work that mattered.

Reba, also known as Dr. Hodge, was someone I knew as an undergraduate student. What it meant to see her navigating the School of Education in the skin she was in, she will never fully know, but seeing her complete her doctoral degree and move forward in the pursuit of opening up the world to young people is nothing short of amazing. Linda, a powerhouse in the Syracuse

[3] For a better understanding of how I planned for each sister circle, please find a facilitation guide for Sister Circle #1: “Bringing Sisters Together” in Appendix C.

academic community and the community at large, was actually an administrator while we were all students at Syracuse University. And while neither of these three women knew each other prior to attending the sister circle, each understood how we were all connected in this larger struggle to realize education as a pathway towards liberation.

When asked if they had ever been to the Southside Communication Center, what it meant to be in that space, and what feelings were coming up for them, Reba was the first to respond with the following:

> **Reba**:
> Uhhh, I have been here before. I ummm...when I first came back to SU to get my PhD, I was here. Professor Haddix...Dr. Haddix had something here and I was here for that. But then, I was also here when I was a Vice Principal at Danforth, which is no longer Danforth. It's now Brighton Academy. Ummm, a lot of my students came here. Umm, oh! And then, Marcelle hosted Writing Our Lives here one year and I was—I did a presentation with a student ummm, here...with one of my Danforth kids here for Writing Our Lives. So, one of my kids actually lives right across the street [...] You know, the South Side is *pauses* I have a lot of thoughts about the South Side, how the South Side became the South Side of Syracuse. How the South Side has been woefully neglected. Ummm, *intentionally* and on purpose. And, I think about the schools on the South Side. Like, Brighton Academy, which was one of my toughest experiences. Ummm, not because of the kids, but because of what I saw happening to the kids and the families umm at Brighton, formerly Danforth. Then I think about my little school, which is on the South Side, Van Duyn, and how Van Duyn is situated, you don't know that it's there unless you are driving *onto* that street to get to Van Duyn. It's very hidden away, which I...I really love, you know, I think it nestles us in the community umm, there are houses around, but it kind of isolates us a little bit from ummm, a lot of the other stuff in the community. Ummm, I...you know, I just always think about the ways that spaces get occupied. Ummm, and how certain people always end up in certain spaces and how that can't be just by accident…

> **Octavia**:
> I agree 100%! [...] I say that because the South Side is home for me. I grew up on the South Side. I lived on Colvin, Midland, I lived on [...] so many streets on the South Side of Syracuse, so being here just takes me *back* to my childhood. Umm, but umm, it also makes me think about the kids that I work with because I...I was *them.* Like, I've experienced...like, the stories that I hear them share, ummm, some of the stuff they went through, I'm like, 'I know! I get it. You lived there? Oh, I lived in that house too. I know exactly what you talking 'bout. Oh that drive-by? Yup! I...I get it. Like, I've *experienced* a lot of that stuff here on the South Side. Ummm, but sitting *here* in this room, it's just kind of like, I have not—I don't want to say flashbacks, but memories [...] just hearing

what you're saying is bringing back memories that I've tried to run from because it's like, 'Ohhh yeaaaa. Like, you know, 'Yea you grew up on the South Side, but you can be *better*.' It's like, it's—the South Side is a bad thing. 'You can be *better* than the South Side and if you get out of the South Side, you from the South Side, you *made* it. And so like, coming here it's like, "Wow. Like, wow." I had that mindset about being on the South Side and that, kind of like, 'Oh, you look down upon it.' Like you said, it was *intentionally*. Like, they forget about us. And, it's just like, it's crazy. Umm, but just also being here, it's kind of like a safe place because it's like, when I grew up on the South Side, I don't remember *this* being here. Like you said, the Cafe Sankofa, I...I don't remember that like, having this stuff like, within the Black community [...] it's a lot of stories, it's a lot of like, history here for *me* on the South Side.

Reba:
Is it okay if I…? 'Cuz like, it's just connecting. Sorry Linda! So, it's just, I think about, like even though I'm not from the South Side of Syracuse, I'm from the South Bronx, right? Another place that has been forgotten about ummm [...] and even as a teacher, saying to my students [...] 'Don't you want to make it out of here?' Because that was what was said to me as a student, right? Like, you *had to leave* the Bronx so that you were seen as successful. And, umm, it actually, ummm, we talked, one of my—when I did my dissertation, we talked about that as a theme and how this idea of where you're from not being *enough* and not being good enough and...and how that...that sits on you, right? Like, that tells a story of *you* because where you're from isn't seen as good enough. And that there's always this idea that you have to *make it out* and so when Octavia said that, I think that just reminded me like, I remember having to really reflect on my teaching practice 'cuz I *remember* saying that to my kids because that's what people said to me [...]

Linda:
I have mixed feelings about being here. Ummm, when I was at SU, the last 9 years I was there, ummm, I created the South Side Initiative. I founded the South Side Community Coalition. So, this is how important we were to the University. I had one staff person. We rehabbed this house, picked the colors, got the furniture donated, everything. So this house…we had kids in the neighborhood come here after school, work on the computers, I see they're still the same old computers and the kids don't come anymore. We had tutors, we had Marcelle doing Writing Our Lives and Dark Girls. Ummm, I raised the funds and oversaw the construction, the food co-op, and that flopped. Sankofa Park behind umm, the library, there was something like $50,000 that [...] the State had given to politicians on the South Side and they *never* used it because they *never*—you know, to do something in the area 'cuz they never had a plan. So, we developed a plan, I had Sankofa Park done, we had focus groups and had a place we named Sankofa Soul District. Ummm,but there's a lot of *pain* around and it was really hard for me and Margie, ummm, because umm, I know we're being...we're being taped, but I'm gon' say this anyway, you wonder what the real intention of the University was and umm, we caught a lot of flack because everything we did and everybody we used was Black. The person that designed the park was a sister. The brother that oversaw—the person that oversaw it was a brother. The person that designed the food co-op was a brother. You know,

> everybody—and...and...the students that we had, graduate students, undergraduate students, *not all*, but the vast majority were Black and that was intentional and there was a lotta, you know, push back from the university and individuals at the university in executive positions because we weren't really using White students and I had—was resentful about having to explain to them that using White students encourages and...and...and almost uhhh, you know, kind of supports the notion that the students are superior and grown ass adults on the South Side are inferior and need kids' help. Umm, and so, ummm, it was—at one point I said it was the most difficult job I ever had, but the most rewarding, but I don't know if I really mean that. It was rewarding, but it was very and still is painful to come back…

Each response testifies to the nuances of coming "Full Circle." For Reba, she re-members her return to Syracuse and how she has had to engage in critical reflection alongside other Black women. Collaboratively, they worked through the significance of spaces and places and the rhetoric that becomes attached to spaces and places "woefully neglected [...] *intentionally* and on purpose." For Octavia, who grew up on the South Side, memories from her childhood came rushing in that she has tried to "run away from," but also uses to connect with her own students. For Linda, who, like, Reba and Octavia, has gone to school at Syracuse University, considers Syracuse to be home, and has worked within and beyond academia, there are so many "painful memories" and feelings of "resentment." Each participant peels back the bandage of time, ever conscious of how the scabs have formed. They make more real Alice Walker's assertion that "Healing begins where the wound was made."

The theme for the third sister circle was entitled, "Rights. *For Whom*? Justice. *For Whom*?" In this session, Talina, Ms. Eva, Asteir, and Sequoia's one-on-one interviews all spoke to this lingering question of: "For whom are we fighting for?" Educational justice, disability justice and reproductive justice connected so saliently with one another, especially given the fact that Asteir and Sequoia's activism around birthing rights function as the umbilical cord for Talina and Eva's work within and beyond schools. Prior to Talina's arrival, I asked Asteir,

Ms. Eva and Sequoia to think through the intersections between the work that each of us does.

Ms. Eva was the first to respond with the following:

> **Ms. Eva:**
> Well, immediately, I thought about the fact that I wish I had sat in this session with you all two weeks ago.
>
> **Me:**
> Mmmm.
>
> **Ms. Eva:**
> Because, just last week, we had a family engagement night for our families, and it was college and career night, but the information we had was...there were...there was a college—SU was there. It was career people, but it was other...also other resource information in the community because that whole empowerment, information is to support the families.
>
> **Me:**
> Mhmm.
>
> **Ms. Eva:**
> And, as an elementary school, we—all I see is mothers and babies and strollers and they're in that cycle of life. And so, it would've been good to have had you there to talk to the parents. Last Spring, the...there was a, umm, dialogue circle at Southwest Community Center and, as you all are speaking, it brought back to my mind, a woman that was at that circle who was a doula…
>
> **Asteir:**
> She's probably trained with us.
>
> **Ms. Eva:**
> ...and she had sent me an email because I told her at that time, we have to stay connected.

Although Ms. Eva had just met Sequoia and Asteir, already she was deliberate about fostering connections so that her school community could have access to and be empowered by the intellectual resources both women provided around community health and reproductive justice. During the last exercise of the night, we read Lucille Clifton's "why some people be mad at me sometimes" and discovered that the theme for the evening reinforced the power of Clifton's poetic declaration. An excerpt of how it was received can be found below:

Me:
I don't know if you all are familiar with Lucille Clifton [...] Lucille Clifton was a writer, she was a poet, a lot of people consider her to be like, an early—she created the early iterations of feminist poetry umm, and she has a lot of work that talks about Black women and their struggle and just the experiences of Black people in general. And this poem, umm, to me, it just speaks to everyone's fight that they have to fight. It looks different. Mine is different from Talina's, Talina's is different from Ms. Eva's, Asteir's is different from Sequoia. We all are coming together across generations, across ages, across like, just how we are in the world and, someone is always fighting us [...] but this title, the title of this poem is "why some people be mad at me sometimes" so, in this umm, I want you to think about this question: ummm, "why do some people...why are some people mad at you? Why...why some people be mad at YOU sometimes?"

Talina:
My God!

Asteir:
Should we have the petty response or the…

laughter

Me:
BOTH!! Because I think *both* give the full picture.

Sequoia:
It's so funny, I was thinking about this ummm, 'cuz I've been on this personal campaign of holding religious folks accountable for doing harm, and ummm it's so funny 'cuz I'm speaking about factual events, and people get more mad at me because I'm speaking about the events, than they're getting mad at why like, this horrible thing happened. And, for so long, I didn't speak up about it because I'm like, 'Ya'll gon' be mad at all the wrong reasons.' And I'm like—I'm at this point where I'm *comfortable* enough to be like, 'This is what you did' and people are still being affected by it and you've done *nothing* to atone for it, so now you gotta get this work [...] And so, I think that now, I acknowledge my growth, I...I acknowledge the ways my...my mindset and...and worldview has shifted and I'm like, we...we have to change because the old view was harmful. And I think a lot of people...people don't like being told that their belief system or their actions is harmful, but I can't care about how you feel about it, I need to care about reducing their harm and I think that, that's why people be mad at me.

After Sequoia's astute analysis on the difference between intent versus impact and how memory can function as a mechanism for holding "religious folks accountable for doing harm," and having already given a copy to everyone in the circle to read along, I invited Sequoia to read

Clifton's poem aloud to the group. Although it is only 5 lines long, after her reading, the room became impenetrably quiet. Audre Lorde reminds us in *Poetry Is Not a Luxury* (1985) that,

> Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives...The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us-the poet-whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand, the implementation of that freedom. However, experience has taught us that the action in the now is also always necessary. Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours?

Clifton's words, recited in the cadence of Sequoia's voice, touched a chord somewhere deep—so much so, that Talina softly says, "Mmmm. Well said!" Sequoia then responds with a definitive, "This is going on Facebook!" Asteir seconds that with, "Me too!" Talina comes back with, "You know my phone is under my thigh [...] inching [...]!" Laughter ensues from *everyone*. Asteir proclaims, "How many different places can I post this?!" "why people be mad at me sometimes" speaks to a part of the struggle we need to think more about: how our memories are being co-opted, erased, washed, and rinsed out because they are attached to truths many do not want to hear.

Thus, in light of the theme: "Rights. *For Whom*? Justice. *For Whom*?" and given Clifton's choice to re-member *her own* memories, Sequoia, Ms. Eva, Talina, and Asteir also feel empowered to make a conscious decision to continue asking the difficult questions and bringing to light the complexities of conjuring up the very memories that remind them of who *they* are, as opposed to the distorted images of who *everyone else* wants them to be.

The theme for the fourth and last sister circle, entitled, "In the Tradition of Black Women: Freedom and Liberation," enabled Tanaya, Ms. Vickie, Carol, Brandi and Ms. Debra to recognize how each woman in the room was following in *and* charting new pathways towards freedom and liberation through dance, within classrooms, and in community with others. What

connected each participant to the other in this session was a keen awareness of the needs of Black youth and their families throughout the Syracuse community. How each person went about assessing *and* meeting those needs is what brings each participant in harmony with the other.

To further magnify this point, I read aloud how each participant went about meeting the needs and how they poured into the lives of Black youth much in the same way someone poured life into them when they were younger or when they were in the process of figuring out their life's work. After this, I provided each participant with an index card and asked them to write down one thing they observed regarding the theme of "Meeting Needs." Once they were finished, I encouraged them to exchange their index card with the woman seated closest to them. Providing everyone with time to ruminate on each participants' meaning-making process allowed for richer engagement and discussion around the disposition one assumes when meeting the needs of Black youth and their families. Two of the underlying themes that came to the forefront were love and purpose. Below is a brief transcript of our conversation:

> **Carol:**
> This has been said many times, but I first heard it said by my father. He was very well read—the newspapers, into politics and stuff, and...and he used to be frustrated by the waste ummm...for like, people always wanting accolades for something and he used to say, 'Much could be accomplished if it doesn't matter who gets the credit.'
>
> **Ms. Vickie:**
> Mmmm. Just do the work.
>
> **Carol:**
> So, that was instilled in me. I'm not saying that sometimes...that I feel like [...] I don't expect anybody to say, 'Oh wow, you know, good job!' Ummm, most of the time I just do it because I just feel like, I'm supposed to be doing it. And, when I'm called to something else, I'll do that. But right now, I just can't seem to let it go and every time I think I'm gonna let it go, something else happens to [...] push me in.
>
> **Ms. Debra:**
> But you know what [Carol], you do...you do...you do want that uhhh acknowledgment, and so, I just...I just gotta tell you this, right? So, I call all my mentees little sisters, right? [...] So, I'm calling them little sisters, 'Little sister come here! I'm talking to you, come

here!' You know? And so, I heard another little sister say, '*Little sister*!' cuz she don't know her name.

Carol:
Uhhh.

Ms. Debra:
Little sister, can I get that pen on...next to you?' *in an amused, yet somewhat embarrassed whisper* 'Oh my goodness!' You know? So, you […] I smiled because she didn't know her name, *yet*...so that gives you credit too, right? That kind of lets you know that you did something and that we need to be mindful of the way we conduct ourselves.

Tanaya:
But it also gives you acknowledgment that they're paying attention to it and they're modeling that same behavior, right? And...but I wanna say too like, as someone who's leaving, like, or transitioning away from the city, right? I thought about like, how *long* I've been here, how *long* I've been working with youth and doing different things in the community 'cuz that's just how I've always been—about the community and I said, you know, this...you have to find that internal piece of accolades when something went right and something's going well. *That's* your acknowledgment. *That's* your award. That's… you know?

Ms. Vickie:
Yesssssss!

The above transcript highlights a number of themes, namely, acknowledgment or the lack thereof, for efforts and labor, the importance of grounding our work in a collective vision, and knowing that your reward comes from acknowledging *within yourself* that the work that you do matters even if no one cares to verbalize that fact. For Carol, Ms. Debra, Brandi, Tanaya, and Ms. Vickie, "In the Tradition of Black Women: Freedom and Liberation," means "being caring and attentive," "planting seeds of greatness," "not settling for mediocrity," "Black history is important; culture is important" and "guidance and support." Each woman is working in that tradition, often without a thank you, or true appreciation for their commitment to the communities they serve. They teach us that the costs of freedom are high, and that the individual rewards are often subsumed in the midst of collective action and mobilization.

Negotiating Power

As the person conducting this research study and as the facilitator of each sister circle, I remained cognizant of the power I wielded when making decisions about what themes to center, what quotes to extract from one-on-one interviews, and what materials to use to engage participants in larger conversations. Rather than inform participants of who exactly would be present at the sister circle they had signed up for, I instead built in an element of wonder, and waited with them, to see who they would know, as well as how they would respond to each other. Take for example the sister circle with Reba, Octavia and Linda. None of these Black women knew each other and yet, we were all connected through Linda's activism and leadership as a former administrator at Syracuse University. Before everyone left, they hugged and I distinctly recall Linda saying to both Reba and Octavia, "I hope our paths cross again."

Reba, before she left, suggested that we have a sister circle with everyone who had participated in the study. While I acknowledged the power of such a suggestion, I also had to be realistic with myself about the very real struggle to just get clusters of women together for a couple of hours, much less all 14 participants! I would consider this to be a limitation of this work in that to have had all 14 participants reconvene would have been a remarkable experience for everyone involved.

Nevertheless, while I possessed the power to make such critical decisions, power was often negotiated as well. Take for example, the first sister circle with Brenda and Gloria. While constructing the outline for our conversation, I underscored Brenda and Gloria's sense of clarity of purpose and was thus intentional about including that in our conversation. Below is a brief transcript of the shift in our conversation upon sharing that point.

Me:
Something else that came up, as I looked at both conversations, was this relationship between faith and purpose. Kind of going back to this clarity that we spoke about.

Brenda and Gloria:
expressions of sheer amusement can be seen on both of their faces as I make this point

Brenda: *leaning over to Gloria and asking*
That she thinks we have?

Gloria: *erupting in laughter*
Mhmmm. Right!!!

Everyone:
laughing

Gloria:
Right, right, right! Can I talk about this clarity? I have not always known, you know, what I wanted to do, or how I should do it. You know, just some things kind of happened. Umm, especially with like, you know, raising my children.

Just when I thought I had things somewhat figured out, I was provided with yet another interpretation that challenged my initial understanding of their narratives. In this moment, rather than overexplain or exert my authority to shift the conversation, I listened as Gloria and Brenda schooled me on the value of transparency, vulnerability, and openness. Where I had to make an executive decision with Reba's suggestion, power was negotiated when what I thought to be true was challenged by Brenda and Gloria. Dillard (2006) asserts, "The researcher cannot actually engage in the research activity by studying or reading alone; He or she must experience the research, the searching again, in the company of others" (p. 81). Each sister circle afforded me an opportunity to do just that: "experience the research, the searching again, in the company of others."

The second sister circle, entitled, "Full Circle" was teeming with examples of how power is used to fight back, mediate conflict, and facilitate reconciliation. In this sister circle, Reba, responding to the question of why each of us in the circle needs the other, recounted a story of

two young fifth grade girls who were having issues with each other. In efforts to come to some sort of resolution, both Ms. Eva (principal of Van Duyn) and Reba, (vice principal of Van Duyn) brought them together and asked them reflective questions that promoted awareness, criticality, and sensitivity: “What do you see when you see her?” “What do you see when you look at each other?” Using their own relationship with each other as Black women, and their roles as leaders within the school, they modeled for these young Black girls their expectations for how they should treat one another. In this instance, power was given back to these young girls as Reba and Ms. Eva treated them as agents capable of making choices that edify, rather than destroy. Thus, not only was power negotiated amongst me, the researcher, but it was also negotiated amongst participants during sister circles and within their respective spheres of influence.

The theme for the third sister circle was the following: Rights. *For Whom?* Justice? *For Whom?* Although Sequoia was unable to stay, Asteir, Talina, Ms. Eva and I broke bread at what we transformed into our dinner table. We ate our Alto Cinco meals and continued conversing although we just had a whole session where we discussed themes such as identity, work, and how our lived experiences position us to do our work with integrity and passion. I distinctly recall a moment in our discussion where I brought up a point and was swiftly corrected by Ms. Eva. Her expansive knowledge of the school system within and beyond Syracuse rendered my point moot. At that moment, Ms. Eva was the facilitator, and I was an active listener trying to understand the nuances of supports for students with intellectual disabilities across race and class divides. There was no power struggle in this instance whatsoever. Rather, power was conceded and entrusted to both Ms. Eva and Talina as they shared and co-created with us new understandings of race, access, rights, and disability.

In the fourth and final sister circle, “In the Tradition of Black Women: Freedom and Liberation,” Ms. Debra, Carol, Ms. Vickie, Brandi, Tanaya and I laid out the legacies we tap into and extend with our own work. In this session, Tanaya became TT again, the nickname Ms. Vickie gave her when she was younger and *still* calls her. And when all was said and done, though everyone was well within their right to leave and head home, they waited for me to pack up, assisted with cleaning the area where we had our sister circle, and waited for Mariel, the South Side Communication Center Programs Coordinator, to arrive and close up. All the while, we spoke about our visions for our own development and dreams for the building up of the Syracuse community.

Though I had the power to interject and extend points made given my knowledge of each woman present, I thought it best to allow the conversation to flow in the direction each woman thought it should go in. It was not my place to spearhead dialogue about a community I was adopted into. Instead, I was more interested in engaging the different perspectives on what the landscape of Syracuse could be with the tearing down of I-81 and the building up of new possibilities.

Thus, engagement with women old enough to be my mother and young enough to be big sisters and homegirls has taught me that there is power in divesting myself of it. Furthermore, empowering others to reflect on their own lived experiences grants them richer insight into the whys of what they do as well as the whys of what makes them committed to whom they serve and labor for. Self is often understood through the work one engages in and is nourished by.

“That’s What Sisters Do”: Post Sister Circle Reflections

When I first began this work, I remember sitting in Professor Haddix’s office ironing out what the next couple of months would look like. A number of limitations made me nervous

about the entire process. Namely, I desired to meet participants where they were, but without a car and finite funds, I often wondered how realistic that would be. To these concerns, Professor Haddix looked at me with knowing eyes and simply said, “The community will take care of you.” In my naïveté, I received her statement with a hint of wariness. Not only did I not want to be a burden to anyone, but I also did not want to depend on anyone to do this work.

Fast forward to when the last sister circle ended, and Ms. Debra offered to drop me back home. During the drive, we talked mostly about her hopes for the future and I listened. When she pulled up into the driveway of my home, I thanked her—for who she was—for everything! To this, she said matter-of-factly, “That’s what sisters do.”

And after reviewing both audio and written reflexive memos recorded after each sister circle, I have a new understanding of and appreciation for Professor Haddix’s words. Below is an excerpt taken from an audio recorded memo of me trying to process what completing this portion of my dissertation study has taught me about working in and *with* community.

> “I don’t know, I feel like, tingles ‘cuz I’m just thinking about how I have been poured into and how each and every single one of [my participants] have invested in me throughout the course of my journey as a graduate student, even as an undergrad, transitioning into graduate school. And so I’m blessed and I’m humbled that they nurtured even me, right? Like, I am theirs. They tell me how proud they are, they encourage me. This process has not been easy, ummm, getting to this point, I’m very clear as to the type of scholarship that I want to put out, the type of work that I want to engage in, and, you know, they allow me to do this work. Ummm, they trust me, and I have a responsibility and like, I’m holding myself accountable.”

In the words of Ms. Debra, “That’s what sisters do.”

CHAPTER 5: HOW ARE BLACK WOMEN PREPARING TO BE CONDUCTORS ON THE MODERN-DAY UNDERGROUND RAILROAD?

Analyzing and Interpreting Her-Stories

"I trust the lens through which you see us."

~Talina

Her-stories are informed by the lived experiences of Black women whose radicalization have shaped *how* they interpret their lived experiences as well as the contexts that have shaped them. For this study, I engaged with 14 Black women whose backgrounds and stories differed tremendously. And although the language of academe refers to such information as data, I prefer to anchor this section with the affirmation and assertion of Talina Jones, who is more than a participant, but a sister, a friend, a mentor and someone who kept the question of "For Whom?" at the center of all of my efforts to flip the script and center Black women and their contributions to the field of education and the lives of Black youth and their families—"I trust the lens through which you see us."

As Dillard (2006) magnifies in her chapter entitled, "What Is It and Where Does It Live?: Toward Defining Spirit Within a Research and Teaching Paradigm," "Part of our responsibility as teachers and researchers is to engage in continual examination, reflection, and definition of who we are in our academic lives—and who we are becoming. This will give us insight into ways to create an academic life that serves and does not destroy" (p. 43). After meeting with Talina, and my newfound sister, Marissa, on June 26th, 2019, I went back to my apartment and documented my experience. Below is an excerpt:

Wednesday, June 26, 2019
Time: 4:39 p. m.
Setting: Second Room in my apartment - Work desk

I was brought to places and spaces today that reaffirmed why this work is so important. I felt burdened to tell my friend and sister scholar that although she was willing to be a participant in my study, I was hesitant to invite her in. It took me almost two months to find the right words to articulate why. But, sitting on the front steps of her house, watching the cars pass us by, feeling the breeze after the summer rain, and re-creating Brooklyn in Syracuse, I finally found the words to tell her that I am so very grateful and clear about what my responsibilities are when I have been blessed to receive a new telling of how Black women tap into their own lived experiences to support Black youth, their families, and communities. Though the heat of the summer day was palpable, nothing warmed me up more than to hear my friend say, "If I don't trust no one else, I trust the lens through which you see us." To this, my newfound sister declared, "I don't even know what ya'll talking about, but I'm tapping into that and I'm in agreement." How do I begin to honor the stories I have been told and do them justice?

The lens that Talina has put her trust in is the lens through which I have conducted this dissertation study. And whenever I needed perspective and clarity, I would return to the power of her words and remember that conducting research in ways "that serves and does not destroy" creates possibilities for those you are working in community with. It positions the work as life-giving as opposed to damage inducing. Thus, the following sections are my sincere attempts to answer the question that concludes the excerpted field note above: "How do I begin to honor the stories I have been told and do them justice?"

****

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries.

~Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" (1978)

Across one-on-one interviews, participants returned to and retrieved from the archives of memory, defining moments in both youth and adulthood, which shaped their understanding of community, activism, and advocacy. This production of meaning enabled each woman to exercise self-reflexivity and think critically about how their own lived experiences informs how they engage with Black youth, their families, and their communities within and beyond the

school environment. Rather than participate in the homogenization of Black women's lived experiences, my aim is to bring diverse her-stories into conversation with each other. To do so, I have incorporated story arcs from one-on-one interviews that are seminal to understanding the myriad ways in which participants construct, possess, and embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. In the literary realm, an arc points to the development of a narrative. Drawing inspiration from the structure and purpose of folklore and fables, my goal is to magnify what each participant teaches us about the following: 1). Identity Formation, 2). Foundational Schooling Experiences, 3). Transformational Experiences, 4). Purpose, 5). Labor, and 6). Liberation.

Identity Formation

Young, gifted, and black
How I long to know the truth
There are times when I look back
And I am haunted by my youth

~Nina Simone (1970)

According to Beverly Daniel Tatum, "The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am" (Daniel Tatum, 2000, p. 9). Thus, "Integrating one's past, present, and future into a cohesive, unified sense of self is a complex task that begins in adolescence and continues for a lifetime […] The salience of particular aspects of our identity varies at different moments in our lives. The process of integrating the component parts of our self-definition is indeed a lifelong journey" (Daniel Tatum, 2000, p. 10).

Daniel Tatum speaks to the complexities that underlie identity development. More specifically, for Brandi, Sequoia, Gloria, Asteir, and Linda, what informs their identity as Black

women are the core values instilled in them by their great-grandmothers, grandmothers, mothers, fathers, aunts, sisters and cousins.

Subsequently, each participant "looks back" on their experiences at home, across educational contexts, and within the community to produce meaning of how these experiences have molded who they are. In each respective narrative, you will see that "There are times [when] [participants] look back and [they are both] haunted by and indebted to [their] youth."

When asked who the Black women were in her life that prepared her to do the work that she currently does, Brandi mentions five women who have consistently *and* continue to teach her more about life and who she wants to be. In addition to naming her mother and younger sister, Brandi makes reference to her two aunts and how being attentive to how they lived their own lives, accomplished goals, and made significant mistakes along the way, has taught her lessons about the importance of setting boundaries, being transparent and being honest. While each woman in Brandi's life provides us with a multifaceted understanding of Blackness, womanhood, mothering, and reaching professional and personal milestones, it is the description that she gives of her mother, who also serves as the matriarch of the family, that I want to draw our attention to. An excerpt can be found below:

> So my mom has been someone who has always taught us to question everything. Ummm, even when that kinda backfired on her and I start[ed] questioning her and I'd be like, 'But you told me ask questions!' So, umm...but she's told us to do that because she wasn't raised that way and she wanted that for us. She wanted us to ask questions and not just, someone say something and we're just like, 'Okay!' You know? Yea, she wanted us to be critical. I know that now. She didn't say that. She wasn't like, 'I'm raising you to be a critical thinker!' But basically, that's what she did.

Teaching a Black girl to question is a revolutionary act. Often misinterpreted as mere defiance, to question is to challenge and disrupt zones of safety buttressed by White fragility, comfort and complacency. Thus, the mere act of asking a question has serious implications for a

Black girl in that it shakes the very foundation of systems predicated on 'Don't ask, don't tell." Venus Evans-Winters reminds us that, "As daughters, we are taught to think critically…[More importantly,] [d]aughtering demands that you think for yourself, and speak up for yourself and other people's daughters" (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 138). And while Brandi's mother was not raised to ask questions, she thought it essential to instill in her own daughters the importance of being critical. In fact, we can trace the power of critical inquiry back to the desire for literacy amongst those enslaved, as literacy was inextricably linked to liberation.

Furthermore, in the quote above, a mother is using her own lived experiences to create a new reality and experience for her children. And though critical was not the word used, as Brandi states, she recognizes now that this is what her mother encouraged her and her sister to be. As an educator, Brandi builds critical consciousness with her own students as a Social Studies teacher and does not underestimate their potential to grapple with challenging material because of their age, prior academic experience, or background. Therefore, the questions that emerge here are the following: What are we bequeathing to the next generation of learners who look like us? What from our own lives do we want to leave behind for Black youth as a roadmap to other ways of being in this world? What have we not learned that we want to entrust to our Black youth, as well as family and community members who play a key role in their identity formation?

Our identities—who we are, are constructed within and beyond the home environment. Even in the school setting, our sense of self is informed by our relationship with our peers, teachers, and school personnel. In the works of Rita Kohli and Daniel Solórzano (2012), we are reminded that even our very names and how they are pronounced *and* mispronounced has larger implications for how we view ourselves in relation to those with whom we engage on a daily basis. They state,

> As a baby, identity and self-concept are developed through a family’s repeated use of a child’s name. A child begins to understand who they are through their parents’ accent, intonation and pronunciation of their name. Additionally, names frequently carry cultural and family significance. Names can connect children to their ancestors, country of origin or ethnic group, and often have deep meaning or symbolism for parents and families. When a child goes to school and their name is mispronounced or changed, it can negate the thought, care and significance of the name, and thus the identity of the child. This happens for white and non-white children alike. However, the fact that this experience occurs within a context of historical and continued racism is what makes the negative impact of this experience so powerful for Students of Color. (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012, p. 445)

When asked to describe her schooling experiences, Sequoia situates her experiences within a context of Whiteness. Navigating within a predominantly White school district from kindergarten to high school, Sequoia knew that she was treated differently from her White counterparts but did not quite understand the political implications this knowledge would have on her radicalization as an undergraduate student at the University of Rochester. Not only did this radicalization usher in a new way of being in the world, but it also resulted in a massive shift in her critical consciousness. I contend that Sequoia’s response speaks to the ways in which schools function as sites for one’s socialization, racialization, and subsequent understanding of self. She declares,

> [...] I was just reading my...my yearbook and you know, they used to call me all these different names. Like, I—my name's Sequoia, but they called [me] Saquan, Sa-Quee Quee, Saqueesha, and in the moment I didn't think these-—I didn't know these things were like, racist, or I didn't think these were stereotypical. I'm just like, okay, got a whole bunch of nicknames. But, then you learn about how people, you know, joke about people's names and how they don't call them by their first names or they act like it's like, so hard to pronounce.

Thus, the question becomes: How are the identities of Black girls constructed in schooling spaces that are not affirming and are in fact, culturally disrespectful? (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012, p. 441). When juxtaposed with the advocacy of her mother, Ms. Vickie, her biological and fictive kin, and members of her community, this memory becomes a seminal factor, rather than

the sole factor in her identity development. In fact, during our one-on-one interview, Sequoia recounts how her grandmother's welcoming spirit for those who lived in the neighborhood, but were not her biological children, and her mother's community other mothering shaped her own love for children and people in general. In spite of the racial microaggressions experienced at school, Sequoia saw in those surrounding her, examples of who she herself wanted to be.

Similarly, Gloria, throughout the course of our one-on-one interview, recounted several instances that both informed and complicated her sense of self. When asked to describe some of the core values that have shaped her, Gloria recalls being immersed in community and knowing joy and laughter. Talking about her late mother, Gloria states,

> [...] she would host ummm, her friends and her—who, I all call my aunts who were just like her close friends...ummm, Po-Ke-No parties and they would play Po-Ke-No and so all of them...of my cousins, right? Fake cousins. I didn't really understand ummm, family, you know, who I was really related to for a while.

To this, I retorted, "Or maybe you did!" Following up, Gloria responds with, "Right! As community." I magnify this experience because it speaks to the ways in which identity develops in community. As she describes above, Gloria's mother hosted Po-Ke-No parties. A "combination of poker and keno (or lotto)," Pokeno requires skill and critical thinking (wikipedia.org/wiki/Pokeno). Two factors that are essential to earning money in this game are a high degree of vigilance and a keen understanding of probability. Gloria, now a mathematics educator, remembers the role her mother played in fostering a community of critical thinkers and uses these very memories to inform her own pedagogical decisions when engaging a classroom community of learners.

Nevertheless, it is the story that Gloria tells later, which problematizes positive affirmations of self within the home and leads to the internalization of anti-Blackness.

> And so, kindergarten, ummm, I remember having this one experience where ummm—and this is a Facebook friend now too, who was ummm, in kindergarten, ummm, *name of classmate.* And she was—I thought she was like the...the prettiest ummm girl that was in our ummm...our class. I mean, and she's *not*! She's really kind of homely looking [...] but she was light-skinned. And so, *I* didn't even know I had that in, you know, my mind, that you know, light-skinned and wavy hair, which I thought was pretty hair and all that. And so, I remember telling my mother, and she's like, 'Oh." I said, 'Oh, there's *name of classmate.* I was like, 'Isn't she pretty?' And my mother's like, looking, like [...] 'Ohhh!' I know she didn't wanna say anything about anybody's child, but that's what I thought. I thought that like...and I don't know where I got that from [...] because my mother is like, my complexion or darker. My ummm, uhhh father, is lighter than me and I remember starting to notice like, colorism...

According to Margaret Hunter, "Colorism is the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts [...] Colorism for Latinos and African Americans has its roots in European colonialism and slavery in the Americas. Both systems operated as forms of white domination that rewarded those who emulated whiteness culturally, ideologically, economically, and even aesthetically" (Hunter, 2007, pps. 237-238). At home, Gloria was affirmed. At school? She internalized subliminal messages about Eurocentric standards of beauty and attractiveness. And yet, it is when she enrolls into Dr. Janis Mayes' courses as an undergraduate student that connections to home become more salient and she is again affirmed in her identity as a darker-skinned Black woman.

Earlier on in our conversation, Gloria recalls how her grandmother, and literary icons nurtured her newfound sense of self. She recalls,

> Those who—and these are people who I don't know, they're like, literary figures who shaped me. Ummm, like, Maya Angelou. When I read *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* [...] and that was when I came *here*. [...] I credit Janis Mayes [...] in [the] African American Studies Department for showing me my*self*.

Although Gloria actually worked in the library in her community, literature that reflected who she was and ultimately, who she could be, were far beyond her reach. In fact, they were nonexistent on the bookshelves. However, taking courses with Dr. Mayes introduced Gloria to

texts by Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston—all of whom are Black women writers who offer other Black women like Gloria, mirrors to behold that they are “not tragically, colored.” In many ways, Gloria’s memory of Ramona runs parallel to the story Toni Morrison tells in *The Bluest Eye*, except the protagonist, Pecola, who is darker skinned, desires more than *just* blue eyes, but acceptance, escape, and freedom from trauma. In the end, she *literally* goes mad in pursuit of Whiteness.

Needless to say, Toni Morrison is holding up a flashlight to the racial project within the United States and the capital gained when one subscribes to White ideals of beauty. When exposed to texts and images that highlight the nuances and beauty inherent in Blackness, Gloria declares, “I credit Janis Mayes, in [the] African American Studies Department for showing me my*self*.” Gloria *saw herself* in college. Bombarded with images of Whiteness in kindergarten through high school, and struggling through Shakespearean texts, and other literary works such as *The Illiad*, it was in college that Gloria discovered that Margaret Walker was not the only Black woman or writer concerned with documenting the Black experience.

Furthermore, Gloria recalled taking another course with Dr. Mayes and reading Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Rather than keep what she was learning to herself, she states,

> And I was telling my parents, I said, ‘What is potlikker?’ and my parents said, ‘Oooo, you never heard—we ain’t hear anybody talk about that. That’s like the juice from the green’ and this and that. But it just like, brought us together and they were like, ‘Where you read that? They teaching you that up in Syracuse University?’ You know, all that kind of stuff. So, lots of different conversations and just *hearing* the language that I heard growing up and that being validated…

bell hooks avers in “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” (1989) “The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle”

(p. 16). I argue that connecting language with liberatory pedagogies enables Black youth and Black undergraduate students to see themselves and their lived experiences reflected in the curriculum and syllabi. This is especially important given the fact that Dr. Mayes, a Black woman, teaches courses such as, "Black Women Writers" at a Predominantly White institution.

Thus, her level of intentionality around who is invited to speak to students through the texts she chooses, is political. Ukpokodu (2016) reminds us that, "Teaching as a service is timeless, continuous, and invested. As a teacher, you are not just educating a child, one child, but an entire family, community, nation, and the world" (p. 97). Gloria's identity is nurtured in her home community, problematized in the K-12 setting, and "validated" in courses taught by Black women educators who understand that reading and analyzing texts are political acts one engages in to facilitate a critical consciousness. Consequently, in her own classroom, Gloria strives to show students that there are "hidden figures" who look like them—even in the field of Mathematics.

Like Gloria, Asteir also talks about being rooted in and shaped by "old Black Southern traditions." And while she only knew her for a short period of time, Asteir talks about her great grandmother and her role as a midwife. Interestingly enough, although an only child and not so much around "birth," Asteir later develops a penchant for providing care, support, and resources to individuals readying themselves to give birth. Nonetheless, she emphasizes the "familiness" of daily living and the respect she has developed for those early core values. She states,

> My mother's family is from Texas. And, we grew up going there every summer and, you know, just that—those traditions of like, seeing all your aunties and being surrounded by these strong women [...] and also, I had my grandmother, my dad's ummm...*sucks teeth before proceeding* my dad's mother. She was in Lexington. I grew up like, going to church with her every Sunday, me and my two cousins. Ummm, so, those are the things that really, I feel like even though when I was in college I really didn't claim them because I was—I—by that time I umm, I transitioned to Islam and was like, really

> rejecting some things, but I really think that those formative years were rooted in something very fundamental.

As mentioned above, later on in life, Asteir transitions to Islam—a sharp departure from the Christian context under which she lived and navigated for most of her youth. Interestingly enough, the very principles she once claimed, became the principles she later rejected. Thus, Asteir's narrative underscores the role and power religion wields in shaping *and* transforming one's identity. And although she alludes to feelings of disillusionment in the excerpt above, Asteir later provides more details on her trajectory to Islam during our sister circle. She states,

> You know, my introduction to Islam was through a very radical umm, Black Nationalist Movement. Like I...me, I started in the 5 Percent Nation, I went to the Nation of Islam; I was 19. And then, my husband's family was raised...he was raised in the Moorish Science Temple and so like, this notion of Blackness does not meet the definition of nationality. So, there's always this question around colorism. And so [...] I just think about the ways that we present and how it...it does impede us, but it also empowers us in different ways too.

While Asteir's Southern and Christian roots were "fundamental" to the formation of her identity during her adolescence, it is actually her introduction and transition to Islam that facilitates her politicization and radicalization around issues of identity, Blackness, and religiosity. Furthermore, although Asteir highlights the togetherness and connection, which define her early years, she also implies that there is a severing of sorts, between her and family members who still embraced what she later rejected. And while Asteir is responding specifically to the theme of identity within our sister circle, I think that her last sentence really captures the tensions that undergird Black women's identity development: "I just think about the ways that we present and how it...it does impede us, but it also empowers us in different ways too."

Linda, on the other hand, talks about the pivotal role her father played in her life before his passing. She states,

> [...] although my father had his own business and he worked *a lot* to support us, and my mom stayed home, we got a lot of [...] who we are, in terms of how we care for people from my father...I'll never forget this. I've said it often and I'll say it again. He used to tell us that the true test of one's character is how you treat people who can't do a thing for you or can't do a thing to you. That's the true test of your character.

During our one-on-one interview, Linda talked about her father's affectionate nature and how she received a lot of her values from him. Where many participants spoke more about their relationship with their mothers and how it influenced their academic and personal trajectories, Linda spoke warmly about a father-daughter dynamic that testifies to the critical role fathers play in the identity development of Black girls. She asserts, "From my father, we got this sense of 'You ain't better—nobody's better than you, but you're not better than nobody either." This narrative, which centers a consistently positive and loving relationship between a Black father and his Black daughter is especially important given the fact that several participants were raised in single-parent homes, and often without their biological father.

Now a grandmother herself, Linda talks about her father's impact on her own life and how she remains intentional about sharing stories with her grandson that demonstrate how he too can exercise masculinity sans toxicity. In "waiting for daddy to come home: black male parenting," bell hooks contends,

> Real dads have done the work of growing up, of emotional maturation. Real dads give love, that combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust. They are both born and made. When all black males learn that fatherhood is less about biological creation than about the capacity to nurture the spiritual and emotional growth of a child's life, then they will teach that lesson to the males who come after them. They will no longer need to run away from home and family to find themselves. They will do the work of self-discovery and self-recovery right where they are, beginning in that place where we all hunger for a fathering presence. (hooks, 2004, pps. 107-108)

The quote above underscores key character traits Linda developed as a result of a positive and affirming father-daughter relationship: a genuine love for Black people and a deep commitment to their advancement. Thus, through Brandi, Sequoia, Gloria, Asteir and Linda's narratives, we

observe how our upbringing, names, values, schooling experiences, geographic location, religion, and family dynamics all shape who we are and how we come to develop *and* re-define who we desire to become.

Foundational Schooling Experiences

For most of my participants, the irony is that in spite of the vivid memories of how disturbing their foundational schooling experiences were, many are actively involved in the educational system in some form or capacity. For those who work beyond the educational system, they still remain committed to the care of Black youth and their families throughout the Syracuse community. Thus, what should have been deterrents from entering the field of education and supporting Black youth and their families within and beyond the school setting, in fact, propelled them into it.

Take for example, Linda's narrative. When asked what school was like for her during our one-on-one interview, Linda states bluntly:

> So, I didn't like school. I never really did. Ummm, so in elementary school, like, where—in my neighborhood—so I went to an all Catholic school, but it was all Black 'cuz the neighborhood was all Black, right? So, ummm, you know, that was *okay*, but I grew to really dislike nuns. Like, I *really*—I couldn't—I *really* didn't like nuns, right? Ummm, and you know, had a couple of really bad experiences with them in terms of their violence against Black children, and I don't know, maybe they did it to White kids too, who knows, but I think they probably felt uhhh, as...as do other people that it's a—okay and easier to abuse or you know, uhhh, Black children.

As Linda recounted these memories of violence and abuse, I was immediately drawn to the paradox of institutions of learning whose mission and vision are anchored by religious principles. Rather than have these principles bolster the educational experiences of youth, they are instead used to justify mistreatment and perpetuate violence towards them.

Octavia, during our one-on-one interview, also talked about negative schooling experiences that resulted in extreme emotional and psychic turmoil. My question is this: How is it that as

early as *first grade*, Black youth are experiencing such violence? In many ways, Octavia's recollection of her foundational schooling experiences is in conversation with Linda's. Again, race is an underlying thread that brings these two memories in harmony with each other. Octavia recounts,

> So like, for example, elementary school, I went to three different schools and the reason was because when I was in kindergarten, first grade, ummmm, I was at a school called Roberts and there was some conflict with the teacher I had. I had a White teacher and I would get to school late—not—it wasn't my fault, but I would get to school late *emphasizes this point* like, almost every day and it was because the bus would pick me up late and I would get to school late, I had to get breakfast and so she would yell at me and like, I remember like, being there and I was really quiet, I was like, "Awww, yeaaaa, I don't know why you know'...and so I was like, very traumatized by it. I thought it was just like, 'Oh, she was just yelling. Like no! This is an older White lady yelling at me, I'm in first grade and my—and I would go home like, 'Mom, she yelled at me again 'cuz...because I was late.

Not only does Octavia begin with the fact that she went to *three* different schools, but she also mentions a number of factors that contributed to her lateness at the one school she was settled in at the time. Firstly, transportation was a major issue. Being at the mercy of whomever was picking her up, Octavia, had no control over what time she would get picked up for school. On top of this, eating breakfast, a seminal ingredient for a successful school day, was another reason she was often late. The point that I want to make here is that rather than communicate with her mother to assess what was making Octavia late and learn more about what could be done to offset the effect tardiness had on her academic performance or attendance for class instruction, this teacher projected her frustration onto Octavia, making *her* the conduit relaying what was going on in the classroom to her mother, instead of the teacher herself.

Octavia's age, race, and gender made her a perfect target for her teacher's wrath. Belittling and diminishing Octavia damaged her self-concept and took a toll on her mental and academic development. Notice the language used in her description: "Traumatized." Where Linda talks

about school as a site of abuse and racialized violence, Octavia positions school as a site of trauma. Instead of embracing Octavia and connecting with her mother, it was almost as if the White Mistress of old was punishing this little Black girl for both existing *and* having the nerve to want to learn *in spite of* the factors that brought her into the classroom environment at a late hour.

Octavia's mother, completely enraged by the treatment her daughter was receiving, went to the school and exchanged words with this teacher. This form of advocacy is what I want to center as her mother's actions challenge the presumption that Black parents or guardians care little for their children's well-being or the quality of their educational experiences. Furthermore, it goes *with* saying that despite the conversation Octavia's mother had with her White teacher, the mistreatment continued, and Octavia was eventually transferred to another school. Not only did this disruption impact her academics, but her relationship to and understanding of school was also bookmarked by this foundational schooling experience.

Sequoia tells another tale of her foundational schooling experiences. Navigating in the Jamesville-Dewitt School District, which was and still is predominantly White, Sequoia recalls loving her school and the opportunities afforded her but remains conscious of the different racialized and gender tropes she fell under as a young Black girl. She states,

> Umm, and so, it was one of those things that, which I...I love—like when I was in it, I loved my school district. I was...I was—I'm creating my own mascot and I would get dressed for games and I just loved like, just being that cheerleader. And I would do sports announcements and I did the morning announcements. So, in one way you feel good because like, you have all these opportunities, these leadership positions, but then you're like, 'These people that I care so much about and that I'm trying to help have a good spirit and a good experience, like on the flip side, [they're] being prejudice towards me.' And I—so, I feel like after I graduated high school and I went to college and I like, started learning what the—these dynamics are in the classroom, I realized like, 'Was it all just an illusion?' [...] 'Umm, and so it just—it was a...a process because, umm, it—you think that I...I...I—you think that I was popular because everyone like me, but then you realize 'I think I'm popular because I'm [the] source of entertainment for these people.

“Was it all just an illusion?” “...I’m popular because I’m [the] source of entertainment for these people.” “These people” being the White friends and educators that she thought cared about her and the many skills and talents she brought to the table. What do these realizations *do*? Sequoia goes on to talk about how she was rarely given a solo for school productions, although she loved to sing. Needless to say, it was when the school produced their own rendition of *The Wiz*, she was finally casted—but as Evillene— the Wicked Witch of the West. Not only are her intentions sinister, but she is framed as an ugly, power-hungry witch who wants to take from Dorothy, her silver slippers and reign. Why is Sequoia given the role of Evillene and not that of Glinda—The Good Witch of the South? Is it that her Blackness is associated with evil? She must certainly fit the part, right?

For Sequoia, school was a site where one was confined to a racialized script and thus had to perform the part assigned her, however racist, sexist, and culturally insensitive. Thus, what for many was a culturally responsive rendition of *The Wizard of Oz*, became a reminder of how White America co-opts and misconstrues Black content. And yet, beyond the school setting, Sequoia was a womanish Black girl who others viewed as a leader. During our one-on-one interview, she stated, “...I was only a year or two older than my...peers, but they calling me Aunty…‘cuz I was just making sure like, we all had to get through this.” The idea is not to set up a false dichotomy between school and life beyond school. Instead, the idea is to magnify the nuances of Sequoia’s identity formation.

Asteir, talks about her disdain for school, but love of reading during our one-on-one interview. Like Linda, although her family did not identify as Catholic, Asteir went to Catholic School from kindergarten through eighth grade. She recalls being one out of four Black families in the whole school and how that racialized experience shaped her memory of worship. She

states, "...And then, also like going to mass every Friday at 10 o'clock. Ummm, you didn't walk up with everyone else, so not only were you the little Black girl, but you're also not going up to mass." When asked what elementary school was like, Asteir states, "I thought it was hard." Words like "hard" and "confinement" were often used to characterize her schooling experiences. Referring to high school Asteir states, "[...] I always just couldn't wait to graduate. It wasn't until I got to college that I felt...I really felt like education was significant or necessary."

Although from elementary to high school Asteir did very well academically, notice that it is not until college that she perceives education as "significant" or "necessary." In fact, when asked if there was a moment that deepened her love of learning, she returns to a memory that brought her great joy *outside* of school.

> [...] when I was in elementary school, I went to this afterschool program, and it was right down the street from the school and it was umm...it was more diverse. It was like a daycare center and the teacher read Narnia to us [...] and it was just like, that book was so fascinating to me. I still remember like, being on the rug and listening to her and just taking it all in. And then, like, watching the movie with my kids [...] the fact that they could like, escape into this other world and then come back and it be okay? Like they actually went away and then they came back [...] It was just like, 'Wow! You know, you can actually run away with no repercussions.

What fascinated Asteir about C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* was "the closet." Furthermore, this idea that one could escape from the things that made life "hard" and "confining" and return whenever they wanted did not align with Asteir's reality. And yet, it is through these literary windows that Asteir develops a deeper love of learning.

Ms. Debra's schooling experiences speak to the ways in which tracking negatively impacts the academic trajectory of Black youth, specifically. She recounts,

> I went to Nottingham, I graduated from Nottingham. Ummm, but I graduated later than my graduating class 'cuz I got hit by a car going to the store and I was—I missed almost a year of school. Umm, but I rebound and, at Nottingham High School, I had some very good friends [...] I still have them. And, I end[ed] up applying for—I could only—did four...four schools. Ummm 'cuz I, my ummm, my curriculum? You know, my uhhh,

> curriculum was not—I don't know what they would have called it. My track! My track was not...had not prepared me to go to college. It prepared me to do vocational ed and that's what they did in...in the early...the late...in the 60s and the early 70s was gear people to go *said softly so only I could hear* Blacks, unless your parents said differently. Ummm, so my track was vocational ed, ummm, and when my friends said they were going to college, I was like, 'You going to college?' They said, 'Aren't you going to college?' I'm like, 'No. I don't know anything about college' and that was my 12th grade year. So, I went to the counselor. They said, 'Go to your counselor and get an application' [...] So I went there, and she says, 'Oh, no, we don't have you to go to college' and I said, 'Well, I wanna go.' She says, 'Well here, here's the application.'

Ms. Debra's high school experiences are marked by a car accident, which delayed her plans for graduation, inadequate preparation for college, and a curriculum that tracked her into vocational education. Kamilah Legette (2018) conducted a study where she interviewed "20 socioeconomically diverse 12 to 13 year old Black seventh graders" and the interviews "revealed that narratives about racial and academic identity vary by track placement" (p. 1311). From this study, Legette argues that "tracking might influence students' thoughts about their place and ability in the school context, shaping their academic identity. In addition, tracking might also shape their feelings about being Black and how they perceive Black people are regarded by others" (Legette, 2018, p. 1312).

In Ms. Debra's case, friends from a track that focused on college readiness were the ones who counseled her and informed her that pursuing a higher education was possible. When she was informed of this possibility, Ms. Debra was in her *final year* of high school. The transition from secondary to higher education is often fraught with challenges, especially for youth who are considered the first in their immediate families to make this transition. Not only was Ms. Debra the oldest out of her siblings to even *consider* attending college, but she also lacked counsel from her counselor, who had limited her potential to a track. Furthermore, asking her parents for guidance was not really an option since their experiences with institutions of higher education were limited.

But notice how Ms. Debra points to the advocacy of Black parents who correspond with school personnel and renounce the very idea of their children being placed into the vocational education track. And while we are not sure of the racial background of her friends, what we do know is that for most Black high schoolers, especially during this time, college was rarely touted as an option, nor something they knew they could work towards. I should also mention that while some students may have preferred a more skills-based curriculum, the taking away of choice is what is most problematic in Ms. Debra's narrative. Lastly, Ms. Debra's advocacy and sense of agency is worth highlighting in this moment. Though she knew *nothing* about college, Ms. Debra understood that it was something worth pursuing since she was denied access to both information and counsel about it. And although she was told that she was not "put down to go to college," she declared, "But I wanna go." How often are the dreams of young Black youth snuffed out by low expectations, little to no resources, and no support? Her insistence is powerful—truly.

On the contrary, Tanaya re-members influential Black women teachers who she wanted to emulate. She states,

> [...] my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Harper. She's in this community as well. She's a Delta and she's ummm, Theresa Harper. She...she didn't even know it, but her standing in front of me in the fifth grade with her red lipstick on, you know, her lil' out—like, she was like the *woman*, you know what I mean? So I always thought, 'Oh, I have to be a teacher because I have to be as fly as, you know, Mrs. Harper. Ummm, she was just soooo amazing. I can't even tell you just like—and...and I don't even remember fifth grade, but I remember her.

Notice how Tanaya re-members her fifth-grade teacher. She describes her as a member of the Syracuse community. What does it mean for a teacher to live in the same community they teach in? What does seeing a teacher in the very spaces and places they call home do for a student? Furthermore, Tanaya references Mrs. Harper's affiliation with Delta Sigma Theta, Incorporated, "a sisterhood of predominantly Black, college educated women'" concerned with

the “development of its members and to public service with a primary focus on the Black community” (deltasigmatheta.org). Founded on January 13, 1913 by 22 collegiate women at Howard University, these women came together to “use their collective strength to promote academic excellence and to provide assistance to those in need” (deltasigmatheta.org).

Thus, Mrs. Harper comes from a legacy of women committed to academic excellence as well as meeting the needs of those across the Black community. As we move forward, we see Tanaya describe Mrs. Harper as “fly.” In the Black community, when someone uses the term “fly,” it means that they got it going on, that they have a way about them that is distinct, memorable, unforgettable! Wanting to be fly too, Tanaya purposed in her heart that she too would be a teacher like Mrs. Harper. Although Tanaya actually admits that she remembers nothing about the fifth grade, she vividly recalls what her teacher meant to her. How her own self-concept was established by having a teacher who was not only invested in the community she lived in but demanded excellence and did so with style.

Why is this important? In the examples provided above, participants frame school as a site where one’s promise is killed, their self-concept deflated, and their love for learning smothered. But here, Tanaya demonstrates how teachers can revolutionize learning environments by bringing all of who they are into the classroom setting and using it to enhance instruction. Offering up a quote by Maya Angelou in this moment speaks to the impact teachers can have on students navigating unjust and inequitable learning contexts. It reads as follows: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Linda felt mistreated, Octavia felt small, Sequoia felt disrespected, Asteir felt confined. Mrs. Debra felt counted out. And yet, what would it have meant for Linda, Octavia, Sequoia

and Asteir to have had teachers and guidance counselors like Mrs. Harper? The point that I want for us to take away is this: Who Black women are comes to bear on *how* they teach, *what* they teach, *why* they teach it, and *who* they center in the process. And yet, these foundational schooling experiences informed Linda's disposition as an administrator, Octavia's commitment as a counselor to making students feel empowered and cared for, Sequoia's activism around racism and injustice, Asteir's advocacy around reproductive justice and education, Ms. Debra's formation of a mentoring program that empowers young girls, and Tanaya's resolve to be a "fly" educator, just like Mrs. Harper.

Transformational Experiences

"To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become…?"

~Audre Lorde

Many of the Black women in this study discussed transformational experiences that have shaped their current outlook on education for liberation. These transformational experiences have occurred within and beyond the school setting. Some have even occurred beyond the geopolitical borders of the United States. Take for example, the experience Talina shares with me during our one-on-one interview. A sister, friend, mother, and community advocate, Talina re-members how the birth of her son Tahjee spurred her activism around disability justice and disability rights. When asked how she connects her own lived experiences to the struggles Black youth and their families within the Syracuse city face on a daily basis, Talina declares,

> Sooooo, I think I would be remiss if I didn't talk about uhhh, the fact that, you know, *my* experiences are one thing, but my experiences juxtaposed against my son's experiences in school are not the tipping point for me because without me having Tahjee, I don't think I would be as involved in community activism as I am now. He was the door. He was *the* life changing event, moment, person in my life who...for whom I view the lens...I view the world through a—was the first time I viewed the world through a different lens. Ummm, an additional lens, I will say. And so, when I think about me raising him young ummm, when he was younger as a baby, it was in East New York and

> we were there for a year and a half. Ummm, and our experiences with systems were based off the fact that ummm, I had not gotten married yet to his father, so I was experiencing it as a single mother with a child with an intellectual disability. Tahjee has Down Syndrome, and as a young *Black* boy, right, like with Down Syndrome. I name that because ummm, by 24, 25, given the experiences I talked about in school and having had that introduction to Black Feminist Thought, right? I'm already seeing the world through him like, 'Oh snap!' So, all of the things that gave me leverage at this point he doesn't have. Right? Having an intellectual disability, right? And, this idea that he would struggle with speaking, 'cuz all of the...the...lists—they give you of what he *wouldn't do* of what they *don't do* when you have Down Syndrome, ummm, put me in a position where I...I needed to think from an advocacy perspective.

Talina goes on to talk about this "fierceness that was produced" in her upon realizing that the very voice that she came to and used to articulate how she was experiencing the world, early prescribers of her son's diagnosis revealed he would not acquire or be able to nurture. For Talina, Tahjee embodied "*the* life changing event, moment, person in [her] life who...for whom [she] view[ed] the lens...[she] view[ed] the world through a—was the first time [she] viewed the world through a different lens." Through Tahjee and her experience of raising him, she developed a commitment for advocacy and for sharing with other families resources, tools, strategies, and training to be advocates for themselves, their own children and others. Her own matrilineal background, the teachings of Black Feminist Thought and the emphasis on how identity is constructed afforded Talina a blueprint for how she would see her son and the world he had to navigate as a Black man with an intellectual disability in a hostile political climate bent on exterminating "other" and "foreign" bodies and beings.

Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear's "Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality" (2010) "demonstrate how the omission of disability as a critical category in discussions of intersectionality has disastrous and sometimes deadly consequences for disabled people of color caught at the violent interstices of multiple differences" (p. 129). Drawing upon the Critical Race Theory framework, as well as narratives

that are situated historically and in the present-day, Erevelles and Minear "describe how individuals located perilously at the interstices of race, class, gender, *and* disability are constituted as non-citizens and (no)bodies by the very social institutions (legal, educational, and rehabilitational) that are designed to protect, nurture, and empower them" (Erevelles and Minear, 2010, p. 129).

Hence, the social construction of disability and the deficit-oriented perspectives that render those who are intellectually disabled voiceless and bereft of agency. Does Tahjee's life, experiences, and contributions to the world matter less because of his disability? On the contrary, Talina's narrative points to the ways in which Tahjee's existence propelled her into a life of advocacy and taught her that there is power in "different and additional lenses" through which to view the world and those socially constructed as "(no)bodies."

Where Talina centers the intersections between race, class, gender, dis/ability, and her experiences with systems due to her son's intellectual disability, Reba talks about the advocacy of her mother and how it inculcated in her a commitment to caring for youth whose challenging home situations comes to bear on their academic performance. When asked to describe where she and her family is from, Reba proceeded to talk about her trajectory from St. Thomas to New York City. She states,

> Ummmm, we kinda had a…*pauses for a few seconds* tumultuous kind of, ummmm, early start to our living. I left St. Thomas. My mom moved us when I was two years old. It was my mother who was a single mom, my two older brothers at the time were seven and five and then there was me. Ummmmm, and we moved to the Bronx, New York. During the time in the Bronx, things became a little bit hectic for my mom and ummm, we got sent back to St. Thomas to stay with my grandparents. Ummmm, we kinda did that a couple of times...this kind of back and forth between the islands and St. Thomas and then I think when I was about seven years old, we settled into the Bronx. Settled is a...kinda not a great word because that's when we experienced our bouts of homelessness, ummmmm, in which there were times we didn't have a place to live. We stayed sometimes ummm, with friends, so that would be considered kinda like McKinney-Vento. You're not on the street, but you don't have your own home. But there

> were also times when we *didn't* have friends, so we lived in the shelters. Ummm, when I was eight years old, *voice goes up a notch here* my mom had written a story about her experience and someone saw the story and read the story and helped her get our first apartment. And that's where I grew up—in that apartment—from the time I was eight years old to when I went away to college.

Later, Reba talks about being in the John Marshall Law Program at Adlai E. Stevenson High School. She states, "...I knew I wanted to be a lawyer because I wanted to be rich…'cuz I didn't wanna struggle like my mom struggled. I wanted to have a nice career where eviction notices weren't on the doors when I got home from school." Needless to say, even after securing housing, Reba and her family struggled to maintain. In her youth, she insightfully associated stability and security with wealth. Thus, embedded within this narrative is a constant state of precarity. Hence, Reba's familiarity with systems in place for those experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. As Reba makes clear, words like "settled" fail to account for the many instances by which she and her siblings were uprooted and shuffled between the Bronx and St. Thomas, her mother and her grandparents.

Having said this, it is also important to note that because St. Thomas is a U.S. territory, mobility between the Bronx and St. Thomas was not only possible, but more frequent. However, sandwiched between this narrative of constant struggle and precarity is the agency of Reba's mother and her desire to create a life for her children that superseded their current living situation. And, how about the courage it took to ask for support, especially when preconceived notions about single-parent households often impede opportunities for authentic connections between Black families and sites of learning?

By securing a place to live for her family, Reba's mother completely transformed her children's living *and* learning conditions. The constant back and forth between St. Thomas and the Bronx decreased and some semblance of structure was established. It is no wonder that Reba,

known as Dr. Hodge to her students, creates a homeplace for students in her role as Vice Principal of Van Duyn. Drawing upon her own lived experiences, Reba talks to youth, tries to understand what others condemn, and pays attention to details that seem minor.

In her adulthood, she is able to exercise a level of reflexivity that positions her mother as someone who "protected" her and placed expectations on her that differed from that of her older brothers. Thus, Reba's story makes me question how schools and community organizations can tap into the strength and knowledge of Black families—especially Black families who navigate systems designed to provide relief during hard times, and who recognize that there are factors in place that enable these systems to simultaneously aid *and* deny supports. I argue that tapping into that critical understanding has the power to create a basis for mobilizing others interested in struggling towards increased access, better services, and more resources for families in need of support.

For a number of participants, pursuing a higher education transformed their sense of self as well as their consciousness around issues of injustice. Higher education was also a pathway by which they gained access to critical theories as well as literature that would build their critical consciousness. And yet, for Brandi, higher education was both a vehicle for academic opportunity and development, and the catalyst for her eventual mental breakdown. This breakdown quite literally transformed her perspective on self-care, the dangers of meeting others' expectations of you at the expense of your own physical and mental well-being, and the graduate school process. She states,

> Sooo, I went through the grad school process and that was fine. Ummm, did the two years in the Masters in ummm, Pan African Studies and then it rolled in the doctoral program and did about 2, maybe 2 ½ years umm, in that, and that's when I...I got burnt out. And, really it's that, I realized that I never had a break from undergrad through like that second...second and a half year of [the] doctoral [program] I just—I went to school straight. My only break was the six months I worked as a social worker. Sooooo, I

> think *not* stepping back and like, figuring out my next steps and kind of just letting things roll and flow and I was like, 'Okay! Yes, yes, yes!' That had a huge effect. Soooo, I came into K-12 when I took a break from grad school because I said, 'You know what? I have this degree and my first love even wanting to go to school ummm, was to do education.' Ummm, to me it was something that I was naturally good at…

Brandi talks about feelings of regret for moving her and her son out of Colorado and to Syracuse. She also mentions the feelings of embarrassment—what would it mean to tell her professors, those who gave her this opportunity, that she could no longer continue her studies *and* be well—at the same time. Brandi had learned to keep pushing, to keep going and yet, it was almost too late before she pushed *herself* right off the proverbial cliff. This level of vulnerability and transparency enabled Brandi to re-claim her time and experience freedom from the pressure to please others or to perform at the expense of her health. As a result, she talks about how saying 'No' empowers people to be more in tune with self and what they are not willing to take on. This transformational experience literally hurled Brandi into the K-12 setting. In many ways, having an opportunity to teach connected her back to the things that were life-giving and joy-inducing.

Therefore, the intersections between education, mental health, and liberation are salient in Brandi's narrative. Embodying an ethic and pedagogy of liberation necessitates a return to what precipitated our own transformation, healing, and well-being. Brandi's experience was a life-changing one and attests to the pressures placed on Black women to perform even when doing so imperils their physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and psychological health.

In the narratives above, we observe the convergence of race, gender, dis/ability, class, socioeconomic status, and mental health. In the case of Ms. Debra and Brenda, however, we observe how age, dis/ability, and notions around retirement, render Black women "disposable"

and no longer of value. I argue that in so doing, Black women's *invaluable* contributions, lived experiences, and insights are also being disposed of.

Ms. Debra, in the process of transitioning into retirement and thinking ahead to life after a considerable number of years in academia, began questioning what she could *do*. Having a desire to work with youth, but unsure of what direction to take, she attends a workshop entitled, "You Can't Fail." It is at this point that her trajectory into Pretty Girls Rock, Simply Because They Have To commences. Below is an excerpt of Ms. Debra chronicling her orbit into mentorship:

> My co-worker—I was transitioning. Transitioning health-wise, family-wise, empty-nester, all of that and I wanted to find something to do. So I was talking to a colleague at my—I'm a retired college administrator from Onondaga Community College and I was involved in a lot of special projects. But mostly, employment and training specialist. Evaluations and that kind of thing. So, get back on track Debra—so, I was talking to a coworker and I was like, 'I don't know what to do.' So, she said, 'Uhhh, I know something you can do.' No! Back-up. I attended a...a workshop that says, 'You can't fail.' And I was telling her about the workshop that said, 'You can't fail.' In one of the workshops was talking about mentoring and I was like, 'Yea, maybe I'll mentor, go to Dunbar Center, and, or Southwest Community Center and mentor.' I was like, 'No, no, I don't wanna do that.' And I didn't—I knew I wanted to work with youth. I—'cuz I wanted—I—certification, I'm a teacher, but I never taught. I went right straight in administration umm, at that time, I felt like, I didn't get the respect as a person teaching. Ummm…I...I umm, I subbed and you know, was around a lot of teachers, but they all seemed to have it *going on* and I...and I didn't feel like I *belonged* at that particular time. Ummm, but I found my way—after 34 years ummm, as Coordinator Advocate at the college in the special projects program. I was fine. Umm, so my friend at work said, ummm, 'Debra, I know something you can do.' And I was like, 'What can I do?' She said, 'There's this program called Pretty Girls Rock and you would be great for it. They're looking for mentors. I was like, 'mentor? Girls?' I said, 'I raised two boys, I don't know anything about girls—*like that*.' She said [...] 'You always put together our staff development. You always coordinating stuff for Black History Month, Women's History Month.' You know, 'cuz I just like talking to people, especially if they—I hear things that are different from what I know. It just intrigues me.

So, a number of things are happening in this passage that I would like to parse out. Here is a Black woman within the Syracuse community, who has *grown up here*, *gone to school here*, *worked here* and is now preparing for life after retirement. Firstly, the institutional memory she possesses is retiring *with* her. Secondly, there is a desire to engage youth *within* the very same

community she navigated as an adolescent and teenager. The knowledge she has acquired and the resources she now has access to given her former position at Onondaga Community College makes her an asset and a *human* resource for youth *also* making a transition, but to higher education institutions, as well as the job force.

And yet, it is Ms. Debra's co-worker who recognizes the value of her organizational and administrative skills and challenges her to consider going outside of her comfort zone and participating in a mentorship program, with a target audience she has little to no experience with. How often do we tap into the experience and expertise of those who are no longer working, but are still actively engaged in the community? And, how often do we frame retirees as still being capable of offering something old, something borrowed, and something new to the next generation of leaders? In many ways, Ms. Debra's retirement was an occasion to welcome new possibilities for service and public engagement.

In Brenda's narrative, she talks about how her disability and subsequent retirement served as a platform for community engagement and her eventual transition to New York. By attending The National Conference on Volunteering and Serving, Brenda was encouraged *and* felt empowered to effect change beyond Georgia. She states,

> As an adult, I worked in the court system for...I think thirteen years and then I became disabled and they retired me and for a long time, I wasn't able to do many things. I was mobility challenged and...all that. So I started ummm...some—when I started feeling that I was living in Georgia and I—they had Hands on Atlanta…this volunteer organization and we—my sister and I, she was disabled also had—we attended The National Conference on Volunteering and Serving and we heard John Lewis speak talking bout, *imitating his deep voice* 'don't give up *the house*!' Like, take care, like, your community, like, 'don't give up whatever it is, like stay the course.' And there was…who was it? Was it Hillary Clinton?—all these big wiggy people were there talking to us about the importance of volunteering and service.

Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley (2019) reminds us that,

> Historically, Black people have been valued for their utility, particularly in a former slave economy. For this reason, the stakes for identifying as disabled, or acknowledging a compromised relationship to labor and the ability to generate capital, is often not a viable option for most Black people [...] We must recalibrate our expectations such that Black people are valuable beyond their ability to be productive to the State. (p. 27)

Given Brenda's narrative, such a critique has a number of implications, of which I will now direct our attention to.

Bailey and Mobley historicize labor. Moreover, they foreground race to accentuate the ways in which the labor of Black people has been used and exploited to advance the capitalist agenda. Although Brenda recognized that she was disabled and no longer able to contribute like she was once able to, she *and* her disabled sister made it their business to do what they could to effect change within and beyond Georgia. At this national conference, Brenda talks about the late John Lewis prompting them to "stay the course." As she stated above, "[A]ll these big wiggy people were there talking to [them] about the importance of volunteering and service." Rather than assuming a savior complex towards the communities they intended to serve, they extended their knowledge and resources instead.

In turn, Brenda and her sister disrupted presumptions of incompetence on account of their race, dis/ability, and gender. In many ways, Brenda undoubtedly embodies her father's mantra that, "You can qualify for anything!" This same mantra, when coupled with her lived experiences, attest to the power of working across difference. Brenda's race, class, gender, and dis/ability afforded her insights that rendered her an asset beyond what she was required to produce for the State when she was able-bodied. I started this section talking about the birth of Talina's son Tahjee and ended with Brenda's narrative of life beyond retirement to demonstrate the multiplicity of experiences that transform how Black women navigate the world,

struggle for the liberation of all, and use their lived experiences as a platform to engage issues of injustice.

Before I transition to the next chapter, it is vital that I return to the question that anchors this one: How are Black women preparing to be conductors on the Modern-day Underground Railroad? In this moment, I want to foreground a quote by Sequoia, the youngest of all the Black women invited to participate in this dissertation study. "...I was only a year or two older than my...peers, but they calling me Aunty…'cuz I was just making sure like, we all had to get through this." And despite being the same age as her peers, they considered Sequoia to be a leader. Her mantra: "[…] we all ha[ve] to get through this." In Chapter 1, the section entitled: "Why Syracuse?" begins with a declaration by Frances Ellen Harper. "[…] unless we except Syracuse, there was no free soil." In other words, Syracuse was a place where one could walk about the land—freely. Their right to freedom—defended. Fast forward to the 21st century where Sequoia is navigating eroded "free soil." *Still*, her conviction that "[…] we all ha[ve] to get through this" is rooted in an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. Getting *through* is political. In the narratives above, participants recall instances where "[…] the very social institutions […] designed to protect, nurture, and empower them" left them feeling vulnerable, neglected, and disempowered (Erevelles, and Minear, 2010, p. 129).

And while no one framed themselves as conductors per se, we can certainly take notice of how Brandi's mother *prepared* her to be a critical thinker. This preparation equipped her with the tools to get Black youth *through* an educational system that has the capacity to both nourish *and* starve Black bodies. We can certainly take notice of Gloria's introduction to other Black women in college who affirmed her and others who looked like her. Now, Gloria nurtures a positive self-concept in her own students. Black youth getting *through whole* is essential. Therefore, in the

tradition of Black women who got others *through* to freedom in the past, I offer to you these narratives of resistance.

I argue that these her-stories position participants as conductors on the Modern-day Underground Railroad. Not only do they frame participants as critical and conscious, but when brought into conversation with each other, each her-story illuminates the importance of actively dismantling the systems, which render freedom—and especially education as the practice of freedom—inaccessible and unattainable. Thus, getting Black youth and their families *through* to freedom requires one to possess an ethic and pedagogy of liberation as well as a burden to restore that which has since eroded. These her-stories demonstrate that perhaps, we can *still* "[…] except Syracuse."

CHAPTER 6: WHAT DOES THE EMBODIMENT OF AN ETHIC AND PEDAGOGY OF LIBERATION LOOK LIKE FOR BLACK WOMEN IN SYRACUSE, NEW YORK?

Purpose

Is my living in vain?
Is my giving in vain?
Is my praying in vain?
Is my fasting in vain?

~The Clark Sisters

"My living is not in vain."

~Carol (Dance Theater of Syracuse on Westcott, One-on-One Interview)

Purposefully beginning this section with the refrain found in The Clark Sisters' gospel song, "Is My Living In Vain?" has enabled me to situate questions Black women have long been posing within a larger sociohistorical context. Made popular in the world of R&B by the all Black woman group, Xscape, in the early 90s, it is clear that the message of this song resonates and transcends both genres and epochs. Consequently, given what was shared during one-on-one interviews, participants in this study are no exception. They too have experienced moments where they question if their living is in vain, if their giving is in vain, if their praying is in vain, and if their fasting is in vain.

When asked how her two core values of family and faith translates to her work with high school students, Octavia, a Student Assistance Counselor at Henninger High School, states the following:

> [...] God has placed me here on this earth to do this type of work. I feel that, you know, I can't see myself being like a teacher, or a doctor, or anything else [...] so the role I'm in now, the things that I'm doing now, it's like something God said, "Octavia, this is what I want you to do. This is what you're supposed to be doing right now. It may not be forever, but right now [...] And like, when I go to work, I look *forward* to being there. I look *forward* to...to seeing—like, I get super hyped to see the kids at my school [...]

Throughout our one-on-one interview, Octavia often attributed her deep sense of purpose, along with her steadfast resolve to connect with Black youth on a deeper level, to her spirituality. She also talked about the cultural mismatch that frequently occurs between well-meaning White counselors and Black youth, adding that such a mismatch can inhibit Black students from being "vulnerable" and "upfront" with counselors. Responding to how she connects her own lived experiences to the struggles her students face on a daily basis, Octavia states, "I just kind of put myself in their shoes and it also helps me to be more real." Thus, what I found to be very powerful about Octavia's narrative is that she couches her efforts to engage Black youth in this language of generational struggle and generational trauma. She asserts,

> I'm trying to show you that this is a generational thing. Your momma did this, yo', you know, yo' cousin did this, yo' grandma did this and, you know, so it's like, I can see like some of my experiences and things that I've learned over the years and I can help apply it to their life. 'Cuz like, okay, 'I went through this, I'm not telling you what to do, but I'm just showing, tryna open your eyes so you could see like, what is the reason behind all this trauma, etc. or what you're going through and how you can prevent this from continuing or what can you do differently.

Having said this, a number of things are happening in these excerpts. For one, given her spiritual convictions, Octavia recognizes that she has been appointed to do a work that is altogether daunting, yet deeply important. Secondly, she "looks forward" to this work as it enables Black youth to be more "vulnerable and upfront" in ways that are often not encouraged by counselors who are insensitive to and unaware of the challenges they face within *and* beyond the school setting. Thus, the genuine connection Octavia has with Black youth, as well as her awareness of the struggles they face outside of school, should compel many White counselors to reevaluate how they engage with Black youth and their families around mental health. Nevertheless, as we move onto the excerpt found below, consider the following question

with me: How critical is the sharing of tools and resources when there are students like the young Black man Octavia speaks so vividly about below?

> [...] I did an internship at Blodgett, it was called West Side Academy. I don't think it's called that anymore, but there was one kid and he saw—he said—like, he did not see anything past being in a gang. That's all he saw. His dad was in a gang, his grandfather's in a gang. Like, that's all he saw.

What windows are we giving to our Black youth who yearn for something different? Something more than what they are used to and/or familiar with? In Andrea D. Domingue and Stephanie Y. Evans' "Concluding Thoughts: Black Women Educators, Healing History, and Developing a Sustainable Social Justice Practice, they maintain that, "Black women's survival means we claim our right to grow. Black women's sustainable struggle means we cultivate regeneration of mind, body, and spirit in ourselves and others" (Domingue and Evans, 2019, p. 350).

Drawing upon the work of Anna Julia Cooper (1892) to discuss the value of regeneration, Domingue and Evans speak to the centrality of Black women's lived experiences in fostering richer visions for future generations struggling towards a more just and liberatory world. In her address to the convocation of colored clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church at Washington D.C. 1886, Anna Julia Cooper contends,

> True progress is never made by spasms. Real progress is growth. It must begin in the seed. Then, 'first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear...' The race is just twenty-one years removed from the conception and experience of a chattel, just at the age of ruddy manhood. It is well enough to pause a moment for retrospection, and prospection. We look back, not to become inflated with conceit because of the depths from which we have arisen, but that we may learn wisdom from experience. We look within that we may gather together once more our forces, and, by improved and more practical methods, address ourselves to the tasks before us [...] (Cooper, 1892, p. 26)

Octavia, in her efforts to magnify generational patterns, which inform our perspectives, ways of being, and ways of knowing, is offering to her students a different lens through which to

view life, their current circumstances and their future selves. Through her engagement with Black youth, Octavia recognizes that regeneration requires tools for healing. In many ways, she is following in the tradition of Cooper and in solidarity with Black women who are claiming their right to grow and encouraging the next generation to do the same.

On the contrary, Brenda spoke about the importance of volunteering and service. In fact, she emphasized the point that while she "selfishly" attended workshops, seminars, and trainings that were mainly of interest to her, she soon realized that her purpose was to be present and to share with others that which she had learned. Brenda states,

> I think people should think about volunteering for things they wanna know more about or things that they love [...] A lot of times I'll go to a workshop or a training or something and I'm like, 'Why am I here?' But then I—*next day*, somebody asks me a question that I would have no way of knowing had I not been in that room. So, sometimes, you're sent to be a conduit or a[n] information-bearer because, I mean, some stuff I would have *no* earthly way of knowing and in my mind I think...I was there for them. They...they couldn't have got off work, they couldn't have had—and I wouldn't have known that. So we have to go places we feel like, 'Why am I going there?' [...] You *walking* from somewhere—so you might have went, 'Oh, I'm gonna go support my friend' or at some point *I'm going to have to do this, so I want to go see what that is like so that I'm more prepared*. But blessings came to you based on that [...] It's amazing—I *never* planned on coming back to Syracuse. When I was in Georgia *just as comfortable* as I wanted to be, living in a little-bitty town, outside of Atlanta, 40 minutes, one traffic light, 3,000 people and I was at the most peace—on earth. So, to come back *here*, and dive in…

In the response above, Brenda poses a question that gets to the heart of this section: "Why am I here?" In other words, what is my purpose? Thus, the question for us to consider is the following: What lessons can we take away from Brenda's assertion that "sometimes, you're sent to be a conduit or a[n] information-bearer?" Remembering those who cannot be present across different places and spaces compels Brenda to show up. Her purpose is pass onto others what she herself has learned so that they too can be empowered. Oftentimes, there is a debate about the role comfort plays in the learning process. Brenda, was rather *comfortable.* Brenda, was at the *most* peace. And yet, she literally thrust herself into a place of *discomfort* and used *every*

opportunity to scale the learning edge. Growth happens there and so does the construction and production of new knowledge. Learning precipitates discomfort. Rather than shy away from it, Brenda embraces it because she knows that that knowledge can be recycled, and remixed when shared with others.

And so, what does access look like specifically for Black youth who *desire* to be in spaces and places but cannot afford to be there or are not welcomed? Carol provides a nuanced response to this question. During our one-on-one interview, I asked her "What has working with Black youth taught you about yourself?

> You know, maybe it's just helped me fulfill my ministry on this earth. I really, you know, people would ask me, you know, 'What's your purpose?' Umm, while I'm in Central, New York, I think I'm supposed to be doing this. I'm supposed to be helping to nurture the creative child specifically. I think I'm supposed to be doing that.

For Carol, nurturing the "creative child" is priceless, full of purpose—the blessings manifold. Carol, conscious of place, uses that consciousness to "fulfill [her] ministry [here] on this earth." With complex histories of genocide and divestment, abolition and resistance, "written in[to] the very land" of Syracuse, what does it mean for Black women to serve as "conduits or information-bearers" for Black youth and their families who have been forced to leave their homeplaces? (LaRoche, 2014, p. 157). What does it mean to "nurture th[is] creative child?"

Syracuse has a history of being a resettlement site for refugees from all over the globe. Marnie Eisenstadt writes in "Trump policies stop the flow of refugees to Syracuse, once a resettlement magnet," that, "In 2014, Onondaga County settled more refugees, per capita, than any other county in New York state. And it settled refugees at the third-highest rate in the nation." Given her own positionality, how does Ms. Vickie work through this reality? In the excerpt below, I argue that Ms. Vickie embodies a pedagogy of liberation by foregrounding cross-cultural understanding and sensitivity, as well as mutual respect. Well-known and beloved

throughout the Syracuse community, Ms. Vickie recalls her experiences with Somali-Bantu refugee youth.

> Actually, one of my youth in the community that I work with, umm, I had an opportunity to work with ummm, some refugee, ummm, young people, so, I met one young kid from Somalia ummm, on the bus, he went to H.W. Smith high school...I mean middle school, high? I guess elementary. And so, I...I built a relationship with him [...] and I met his parents and from that I met over a hundred kids and they wanted me to be their soccer mom/soccer coach. So I spent an entire summer with these kids. Like, I had babies crossing the street to find me. I was like, 'I can't do babies, but I—you know, it was so...I...never in a million years that I would think from one kid, that I would go to a hundred kids in 24 hours. I had a hundred kids on the field. I said, 'Okay, now I don't know about being no...I don't know about no coach, but I could be a soccer mom! Ya'll could teach me how to be your coach.' So, they taught me how to be their coach and ummm, you know, I taught them, you know, about having respect and about hygiene and about how to ummm, attain academic excellence and I respected their faith 'cuz they were Muslim, you know, at the end of Ramadan, when Ramadan was over, I did a…a cookout, you know? Because I...I *really* respected their ummm, commitment and diligence and showing up to that field every day in the heat. No matter rain, sleet, whatever ummm, to do soccer. So that was...that was my gift back to them.

Not only does Ms. Vickie seize the opportunity to connect with this young man while riding the bus, but she also understands that developing a relationship with his parents is also of the utmost importance. In so doing, Ms. Vickie is communicating that she is interested in him and the members from his community who are integral to his development. In Wyletta Gamble-Lomax's *The Lived Experience of African American Women Mentors: What it Means to Guide as Community Pedagogues* (2016), she thinks through bell hooks' discussion "about belonging in relation to people and places she has encountered over the course of her life and how this connects with the feeling of home" (Gamble-Lomax; 2016, p. 28). Expounding on this idea, Gamble-Lomax contends that, "This sense of belonging is about a safe space where hurts are not ignored and joys are celebrated. This context of belonging cannot be confined to one group of people or one particular place" (Gamble-Lomax; 2016, p. 28). In the excerpt above, Ms. Vickie goes beyond her own comfort zone to create a new space wherein she and her newfound

soccer team learn more about each another, where they come from, and how they came to be in Syracuse—together.

According to Roy and Roxas (2011),

> In addition to the instrumental challenges of relocation, refugee families are often evaluated based on their ability to adapt quickly (or not) to schools and communities. Rather than taking into account the varying levels of experience with U.S. norms, immigrants and refugees who assimilate more quickly are often viewed as more valuable or productive members of a school or community. This framework reinforces deficit notions that lay the groundwork for discriminatory practices in schools for some refugee students and their families. (p. 522-523)

Respecting and honoring their religious, cultural, and ethnic differences enabled Ms. Vickie and the Somali-Bantu youth she mentored to engage across difference and foster a community where no one was excluded, but instead, welcomed and imbued with a deep sense of—belonging. Later on in the interview, Ms. Vickie states,

> Just being able to impact a child's life [...] when the one kid that I met ummm, when he told me what he had to do to come to America as a refugee kid, like, I cried for a whole *week*. And, here we are in America and we're afforded these opportunities that we don't seize as a, you know, Americans or Black Americans, and these kids went through so much just to get here and actually they were being umm, harassed by Black Americans 'cuz where they live, that wasn't by choice, that's where they, you know, they had to move. So, basically, I was there to make sure nobody didn't bother—that was—I didn't know my bigger picture was, I was there for protecting them, you know? And, as long as I was on that field, nobody bothered them 'cuz I wouldn't have...*makes a face to show that she means business* you mess with my kids if you want.

I argue that Ms. Vickie served as an interlocutor or a go-between, if you will. As an established and respected member of the Syracuse community, she used her privileged status to "protect" and support youth marginalized due to what is often misinformed and distorted perceptions of refugees from Continental Africa. Whenever she talks about the Somali-Bantu youth she fostered a relationship with, Ms. Vickie refers to them as "my youth," thus evoking feelings of responsibility for and commitment to these young people.

Furthermore, there was a profound level of reflexivity exercised by Ms. Vickie. Her emotional response and subsequent commentary on the disunity of the Black community attests to the internal work done to develop a deeper understanding of self in relation to others. This experience was so monumental that Sequoia herself recalls this memory during our one-on-one interview as an example of how her mother engages in community other mothering for the most vulnerable members of the Syracuse community. And yet, to Ms. Vickie, this scenario is simply a testament to her life's purpose. As a mentor, soccer coach, and other mother to youth from another mother(land), she avows, "I was there for protecting them, you know?"

Conversely, confessing that she does not think about herself a lot, Carol's responses illustrate that her ability to see *herself* in the youth she engages at Dance Theater of Syracuse is what enables her to answer, with confidence, the question Brenda poses above: "Why am I here?" For instance, during the latter half of our one-on-one interview, I asked Carol the following question: "Do you find that the successes confirm for you that this is the work that you need to be doing? What confirms like, this is where I need to be—for you?"

> Wooo. It's not only—so for example, there's a little girl here, right now. Ummm, she takes the bus here. This year—we've had others that take the bus here. Her family can't get her here. So—and we've set it at a time they get out of school, they come here […] Ummm, her father one day picked her up on a bicycle and they live on the North Side [...] yea. *That* confirms to me like, if not for me, who? Who's gonna? *And that girl shows up! She shows up! Every—That's* why I do this. She's 10. We don't know what her possibility is. But nobody's taking her in without the ability to pay. *But she wants it*. That's why I do this. 'Cuz I was that kid. When my parents couldn't afford to send me and I had my nose peeled on the 4A bus passing the dance studios and the girls walking in and wanting to be in there and couldn't.

Underpinning Carol's responses are a commitment to increasing access, nurturing the creative potential of Black youth, as well as connecting her own memories of longing to that of students who as a result of financial barriers, and transportation constraints, are unable to afford classes at the Dance Theater of Syracuse. In the midst of high-stakes testing, standardization, and

a heavy focus on STEM related subjects, Carol is *literally* carving out a space for Black youth to *be the subjects,* to develop self-awareness, and to connect their love of dance to the discipline they require to achieve academic excellence. This young girl took the bus to dance class and her father picked her up on a bicycle. If that is not commitment, I have no idea what is. Thus, what is important here is that Carol reciprocates that commitment by honoring the dedication of the father and fostering a place where his daughter can dance *freely*.

Where Carol talks about her life's work as a "ministry," Octavia talks about her life's work as a "calling." Brenda acknowledges that there can be no "earthly" explanation for why she is often *exactly* where she needs to be to receive and *be* a blessing to others. And, Ms. Vickie understands that her active presence in the lives of young people rendered vulnerable on account of their refugee status is a form of "protection." Something else that I find to be extremely powerful about Octavia, Brenda, Ms. Vickie, and Carol's narratives is that they understand their current line of work as necessary, but temporal.

Thus, they are prepared to take on new roles, answer new callings and begin new ministries should their convictions about their purpose shift and/or change altogether. Connecting the spiritual with the political enables each participant to articulate *why* they are committed to Black youth and their families across the Syracuse community both within and beyond the school setting. This is how they embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation.

Labor

"Prove you are a woman!" a man demanded once while she was speaking. Sojourner ripped her blouse open to the waist. Shocked, people turned their eyes away. But it was the heckler's shame, she said, not hers, that she must so prove herself."

~ *Many Thousand Gone: African Americans from Slavery to Freedom*

"Isabella, Sojourner," by Virginia Hamilton

“Who will revere the Black woman?” “Who will glorify and proclaim her beautiful image?” At the bedrock of each one-on-one interview and sister circle are the questions Abbey Lincoln demands answers to. Lincoln’s questions evoke memories of displacement, disrespect, dehumanization, and outright disdain for the Black woman, despite all that she gives of *herself*.

> We are the women who dwell in the hell-hole ghettos all over the land. We are the women whose bodies are sacrificed, as living cadavers, to experimental surgery in the white man’s hospitals for the sake of white medicine...We are the women who are lusted after, sneered at, leered at, hissed at, yelled at, grabbed at, tracked down by white degenerates in our own pitiable, poverty-stricken, and prideless neighborhoods [...] whose suffering and patience is too long and enduring to be believed. (Lincoln, 1970, p. 84)

Thus, starting this section with Sojourner Truth’s act of open defiance positions each narrative as a direct response to the conditions under which many Black women are expected to labor and struggle. For Ms. Eva, currently the Principal of Van Duyn Elementary School, the frustration is two-fold. Not only is she attempting to facilitate lasting change, but she is also leading from the premise that there are also teachers within the community who, although not licensed, possess new knowledge and insights to offer those who are.

During our one-on-one interview, Ms. Eva stated, “We have to know people. We have to know their spirit. We have to be able to embrace people in such a way that there’s trust, there’s love, there’s mutual respect, and when we do that, *then* we can begin to make the changes we need to make.” This standpoint is in alignment with Omiunota Nelly Ukpokodu’s *you can’t teach us if you don’t know us and care about us*: *Becoming An Ubuntu, Responsive and Responsible Urban Teacher.* Ukpokodu contends, “*Ubuntu* competence is one’s recognition of his or her humanity and others’ humanity. It is one’s ability and willingness to accept, affirm, and dignify self and to accord full humanity to others” (Ukpokodu, 2016, p. 44). As the leader of

Van Duyn, Ms. Eva taps into her own memories of schooling and daily endeavors to construct a learning and teaching environment predicated on "trust, love, and mutual respect."

However, it is during our sister circle where Ms. Eva likens her frustrations to that of Sojourner Truth's when she is told to "prove" that she is indeed a woman deserving of the same luxuries and regard unquestionably *and* naturally accorded to White women. The raw emotion displayed was palpable—"Mhmms" released in solidarity, the only sounds breaking the silence. She declared,

> As painful as I think the discussion we started having earlier, that you have this identity that you walk with every day and you value it, and other people don't value it, and, you can't understand why. So, before you came Talina, I was talking about the difficulty of being a Black principal in a community—in a Black community where the children look like me and my own children, and look like my husband, and there's no value to that by the very people I serve. And, *that's painful*. You know, where she's saying she can barely sleep here and umm, you just—you're doing everything you can, but you can't figure out what to do. **Like, what would—what do you all want me to take off of *myself* to give to you to show you the value and the worth of what I'm bringing to you everyday. I don't have more to give and I've said this repeatedly these past few months to the folks even downtown, like, what do you all want from people—*more*. To show you that we can be successful. I mean, I don't—that's my current crossroad. I'm ready to give this up now and say somebody else can take it.**

First, Ms. Eva brings Talina into the discussion and provides a context for her "current crossroad." She then talks about the challenges of being a Black principal in a Black community and feeling that she has *already proven* her commitment to constructing an educational environment that is empowering, life-giving, and just. And yet, within the very community she serves, Ms. Eva feels like all that she offers is never enough. The difference between the experience of Sojourner Truth and Ms. Eva is that Truth was asked to prove her humanity and woman-ness to White folks. Here, the pain comes from having to prove it to those within her own community.

Who will revere the Black woman?

Earlier in our sister circle, Ms. Eva talked about questioning what she *knows* and searching for understanding to reconcile her commitment to providing quality educational experiences for Black youth and their families, with the blatant disregard she feels for her service, efforts, and dedication. She laments,

> I don't understand how to help a community, so let's hope I don't cry. I don't understand how to help my community where the Principal is Black, the Vice Principal is Black, the school psychologist is Black, the pre-K teacher, first grade, second grade, two in third grade, two in fourth grade. Your child could go through Van Duyn pre-K to 5 and have a Black teacher every step of the way, except right now in fifth grade. The research says 1 Black teacher and you're likely to be successful. We have *all* of these people. The whole cafeteria staff, so your food, you're served food, you're cared for in the cafeteria space. *All* people of color. Yet, children and parents do not receive us in that loving manner in which every day we go to this school and that's starting to really wear on me.

I want to first acknowledge the psychic and emotional toll Ms. Eva is under. Not only has she internalized the messages communicated to her by those whom she serves, but she also recognizes how much it is wearing on her very being. "I don't understand how to help a community," "Let's hope I don't cry," "children and parents do not receive us in that loving manner," "...that's starting to really wear on me." These are all expressions that magnify the intensity of Ms. Eva's "current crossroad." While I maintain that Ms. Eva is operating in the tradition of Black women leaders committed to education for liberation, I also recognize that the resistance she faces is not from without, but from within. From Ms. Eva's narrative, we can observe how "respect, love, and trust" are built, earned, and exchanged over time, as opposed to being formed overnight. And yet, what Ms. Eva is calling for is at the very crux of the struggle for education as the practice of freedom: solidarity, and community-building amongst the families of the students she serves.

Linda, in our one-on-one interview, chronicles her tenure at Syracuse University and describes the ways in which her lived experiences informed how she navigated within and beyond academe.

> So, I started working on the South Side, umm, and what prepared me *proceeds to laugh* I thought, and...and still do to some extent is the fact that ummm, I just...my whole life was Black people. Like, I grew up in a Black neighborhood, everybody was Black, you know, so I felt like, there was *no* discomfort *at all* [...]And so, I think what prepared me umm, was one, how I grew up in an all Black neighborhood. My whole life was Black. Umm, two, that umm, I...there was a umm, because...because of that, there was like a real comfort. I almost felt like I...like I'm *home* in a sense. But, it was very different than I expected. So, ummm, I was actually seen as an outsider, you know, because they weren't seeing me as 'Oh, there's this sister and you know, she's coming,' you know, 'we gonna all work together' and this, that, and the other. It was like, '*Oh*, who does she think she is?

Coming from Harlem and being immersed in spaces predominated by Black people, Linda was quite assured in her understanding of the nuances of the Black experience. In fact, being amongst Black people felt like *home* regardless of where she was geographically. However, how Linda was received gives a different dimension to the expressions of frustration Ms. Eva articulated above. "*Oh*, who does she think she is?" Interestingly enough, Linda intimates later on that her light-skinned complexion played a major role in how she was received amongst members of the Black community.

Though this concept of skin privilege was not brought up in relation to Ms. Eva's "current crossroad," it is important to note that Ms. Eva, Liberian born, possesses light blue eyes and very fair skin. Where Linda was a leader within a higher education institution, Ms. Eva is currently the principal of an elementary school. Moreover, prior to serving in this capacity, Ms. Eva has assumed a number of roles across several higher education contexts. Thus, both women are highly qualified and also possess a wealth of experience working with diverse populations.

Furthermore, they both remain committed to increasing access to Black youth, their families, and the communities from which they come.

Linda, in the excerpt above, talks about this comfort that she feels being amongst Black people. In fact, she feels like she's at "*home*." There is familiarity and a genuine sense of connectedness. By fostering an atmosphere where students engage with school personnel who look like them *and* care about their academic, social, and personal well-being, Ms. Eva is demonstrating that home can be re-created, re-defined, and reflected even within the school setting. Knowing the pangs of exclusion, cultural insensitivity, and racialized microaggressions, Ms. Eva daily taps into her own lived experiences to acknowledge and honor the cultural capital and strength of the families whose students attend the elementary school she is the leader of.

Nevertheless, both Linda and Ms. Eva struggled in their respective leadership positions. Could it be that colorism and prejudice are the underlying forces that shaped and continue to shape engagement with Black families and Black youth? Could it be that skin privilege, class, and severe mistrust of members representing academic institutions further exacerbated how members within the Syracuse community received Linda? I think this is a rather complex issue and more research would need to be conducted to further unpack these theories. In light of the current discussion on labor, leadership, and colorism, I conclude this section with the two questions Lincoln posed earlier: "Who will revere the Black woman?" "Who will glorify and proclaim her beautiful image—" no matter how light or how dark? The struggle continues.

Beyond Survival: Liberation

[...] my mom, she would always be like, ‘people are just trying to survive.’ Everybody’s in survival mode and if you like, have had so many negative experiences with a system, people, they project that…

~Sequoia (Sister Circle #3 Pt. 2)

Freedom? Whatchu mean freedom?

~Octavia (One-on-One interview)

I wish I knew how
It would feel to be free
I wish I could break
All the chains holding me

~Nina Simone (1967)

In Melina Abdullah’s “Womanist Mothering: Loving and Raising the Revolution,” she foregrounds legacies of resistance across the African Diaspora and attests to the very real struggle of Black mothers surviving amidst capture, genocide, and enslavement. Here, I amplify the voices of my participants and the songs of freedom sung by the late Nina Simone, to underscore the complexities of survival, this perpetual longing to be free, and the possibilities that come from moving beyond the truth that we have survived and towards this idea that our living has meaning, power, and purpose for generations coming into the knowledge of where we have been, how we got to be here, and where we are trying to go. Often, it is the failure to connect with one’s past that makes efforts to move forward meaning*less*. Thus,

> The history of African people in White-dominated societies has always been a story of resistance. From the very moment of contact, even before our arrival on American shores, Black people have rebelled, and Black mothers have done so in some very distinctive ways: from our unwillingness to submit to capture and enslavement by throwing our children and ourselves overboard in the Middle Passage, to the establishment of Maroon communities in the Caribbean and Latin America, to taking up arms under slave revolts and escapes. Rather than inhibiting rebellion, motherhood has strengthened our resolve, for our resistance was not for our survival alone, but for the legacy that our children would inherit. In birthing children, we have always understood that we are also birthing

> hope, birthing possibility, birthing the promise of revolution. Womanist praxis grows out of and stands firmly entrenched in this position of resistance. (Abdullah, 2012, p. 58)

Given this sociohistorical framing of resistance and struggle, once again, I center the research questions that anchor this dissertation study: How are Black women *still* serving as conductors on the Underground Railroad? How do Black women tap into their own lived experiences to strengthen their work and relationships with Black youth, their families, and communities? How can the narratives of Black women come to bear on how we operationalize education as the practice of freedom? The Black women in this study embody hope, possibility, and promise and also embody that same hope, possibility and promise of our ancestors. Survival is not some trifle.

Brenda, during our one-on-one interview often associated love with action and accountability. After describing her relationship with her parents and their ongoing commitment to providing a sense of structure, community, and "normalcy" for youth who were away from home, she avows, "And I know I was loved." Connected to this knowing is a deep gratitude for experiencing love in tangible ways. Later on, when asked to talk about the Black women in her life who have influenced her to do the work she engages in on a daily basis, she states,

> Okay. The Black women in my life. I come from a *longgggggg* line of Black women who have done things—inside and outside of my family. If I start with my mother.
> My mother—quiet. Stable. Just comforting. I think she had healing hands.

Though Brenda starts with her mother, she transitions to the women "outside of [her] family who instilled within her a sense of initiative, creativity and seriousness." She reveals,

> But I was a—I grew up in the church and I grew up at the YWCA. Their afterschool programs and we had strong women there like Mrs. Jean Upthegrove. Mrs. Upthegrove was the wife of St. Palms Baptist Church, the minister, Franklin Upthegrove in Utica and he—it was like the biggest Black church there. She taught us how to fundraise, how to do arts and crafts, how to pursue different educational goals. She took us to youth conferences. And she taught us *not* to take nonsense.

After talking about Mrs. Upthegrove and the "excellent role models" who came in the form of "homemakers, businesswomen, [and] educators," Brenda deduces: "we knew we were loved." I want to pause here and draw your attention to the layers of Brenda's responses. When speaking about her relationship with her parents, Brenda talks about *knowing* that she was loved in *how* her father and mother showed their love to her and others who were in need. Then, she transitions to talking about the Black women in her life, beyond her immediate family, whose influence has informed her own leadership style and commitments to the community. Formerly known as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), this organization, currently known as YWCA USA, was once an organization that was predominantly White. For a number of years, there were only a handful of Black women who gained admission into the YWCA. Considering the fact that Black women like Mrs. Upthegrove were once denied admission into the YWCA—an organization whose current mission is to "eliminate racism and empower women"—I maintain that her presence alone served as a form of disruption (ywca.org).

Using her Christian ideals to govern *how* she loved young people like Brenda, one can observe how navigating within the YWCA organization may have compelled Mrs. Upthegrove to teach youth how "*not* to take nonsense." Cultivating financial literacy, creative potential, and academic excellence were tangible ways Mrs. Upthegrove and women like her demonstrated their love for Black youth. By connecting these layers to the passage extracted from Abdullah's text, we can observe the nuances of resistance in light of educating for liberation and building a critical consciousness amongst Black youth and their families. Brenda's delineation of "love in action" does not end there. She proceeds to talk about accountability in the village of women who raised her. This level of discipline was rooted in an ethic of care and love as opposed to violence. "You *better* not be doing something, and Mrs. Carol see you or Mrs. Upthegrove or...it

got home before you!" That something appears to be *anything* that went against the standard you were taught to strive towards.

More importantly, there was a level of communication between those in the home and those beyond the home that fostered continuity across spheres of influence. Brenda pauses before she continues:

> I don't know that we have that nowadays. That accountability [...] Because… has it been groomed? I don't think that we don't know how to make it work because a lot of times if you approach someone about their child, or if a student teacher...ehhhhhhh, it's a whole different ballgame [...] And I don't know how we get that back to strengthen our neighborhoods and strengthen our communication and *love one another*.

Here is where I want to stop. What does "love in action" look like today for Black youth, their families, and the communities from which they come? How do Black youth know they are *loved*? How does Brenda's "Awareness of the need to speak, to give voice to the varied dimensions of [her own] li[f]e... begin the process of education for critical consciousness" (hooks, 1989, p. 13). How does it come to bear on how we promote education for liberation *with* and *out of* a deep love for Black youth, their families and the communities from which they come?

When asked to describe some of the core values that have shaped who she is today, Ms. Vickie talks about being around her grandmother and describes her as a "very good listener, very compassionate, very loving." Additionally, she discusses learning how to "Just show [...] love, genuine love for a person's *life*." This core value becomes especially salient during our sister circle when Ms. Vickie talks about Black lives mattering. She declares, "Black women's lives matter. Black little girls lives matter, which I'm *very* distraught in my spirit at the alarming rate that Black little girls are being murdered in this country. That's...that's really bothering my spirit." Ms. Vickie underscores this unease that she feels deep within her spirit when she thinks

about the lives of little Black girls being cut so short. Like Sequoia, Ms. Vickie cries for Black girls.

From Ms. Vickie, we learn that having "genuine love for a person's *life*" requires one to question and be deeply unsettled by the callous disposability of Black bodies. In an interview between Judith Butler and George Yancy (2015), Butler responds to a question about the messages being communicated to members of the Black community given the senseless killings of unarmed Black people. Butler contends,

> Perhaps we can think about the phrase "black lives matter." What is implied by this statement, a statement that should be obviously true, but apparently is not? If black lives do not matter, then they are not really regarded as lives, since a life is supposed to matter. So what we see is that some lives matter more than others, that some lives matter so much that they need to be protected at all costs, and that other lives matter less, or not at all...The callous killing of Tamir Rice and the abandonment of his body on the street is an astonishing example of the police murdering someone considered disposable and fundamentally ungrievable.

And while Butler uses the example of Tamir Rice to drive home this idea that Black lives mattering run contrary to the treatment of Black bodies, I argue that this commentary is connected to Ms. Vickie's lesson that while having love for *all* lives matter, it is essential to acknowledge that some lives, specifically Black lives, are rendered value*less*. Added to this, are the thoughts Reba shared with Linda, Octavia, and I during our sister circle. She talked about the release of Cyntoia Brown, a Black woman who at age 16 was a victim of child sex trafficking and "was tried as an adult and sentenced to life in prison for the murder of a man who bought her for sex" (Wingfield-Smith, 2019, p. 85). I bring up Reba's discussion of Cyntoia Brown simply because it came on the heels of her grieving her mentor's passing *and* receiving news that one of her students was having a difficult time in school. When she returned to Syracuse, Reba was adamant about having a heart-to-heart with this student and talked about how many vehemently disagreed with her strategies. Instead, many are of the opinion that:She needs harsh punishment,

she needs you to yell at her, she needs you to distance yourself from her and I just can't because I don't feel like that's what she needs." She goes on to add,

> [...] I saw Cyntoia Brown on the Tamron Hall show and she was talking about how she ended up being trafficked in the first place and how she felt like she just didn't have a voice and how the school stripped her of her voice and how the school took her—threw her away. She was like, 'Behaviors that I couldn't even understand why I was doing those behaviors, I was being punished for them [...] and, she's like the same complexion as the little girl in my class—in my school. So I'm like, thinking about it and I'm seeing her and I'm like, 'This can't be your life, right? *This* cannot be what happens to you so I called her down and I was like, "*You* gotta tell me what you need. 'Cuz I don't know if I'm what you need. And, I tell her like, I'm trying to be to you what Andrea was to me, right? And then, she started crying and then, I started tearing up […]

Reba, known as Dr. Hodge to her students, was open, transparent, and vulnerable with this little Black girl. She talked with her and asked her what she needed so that she could have that "big life" Ms. Eva, the Principal, wants all her students to experience. In addition, Dr. Hodge cried with her and showed her that she is willing to step aside so that someone who can better meet her needs can support her. Ultimately, she connects her own lived experiences of being mentored to her unwavering commitment to students others desire to see broken down and made to feel worthless. Valuing the lives of Black youth and their stories are essential, and the value of dialogue here is equally important as Black women are "pouring out" and "pouring into" the very youth they see themselves and others they care about in.

Similarly, Tanaya talks about mentorship and how her grandmother and great-grandmothers counseled her, listened to her, spoke with her. In fact, engaging in dialogue intergenerationally aligns with the Ethiopian concept of Jegna. Through the relationship fostered amongst her grandmother and great-grandmother, Tanaya shares why this form of mentorship is integral to one's growth and development.

> So I recently, umm...learned this concept of Jegna. J.E---J.E.G.N.A. It's ummm, a Swahili word, and umm—or Ethiopian concept of what is deemed now like, in contemporary world of mentorship. And so, as Jegna, ummm, you have the people who

> from your past, which would be like your elders, ummm, the people in your contemporary circle who are like your peers, and then your future. And so, what I would say to you in that manner is that in my past, like, definitely both my grandmother and my great-grandmother were very influential into...in my life because they ummm, they just helped me. You know what I mean? Like, they talked to me about life. And I mean like, I don't even—I can't even remember. I just—I feel their presence, you know, like, as women that I would definitely wanna be like, right?

By returning to the knowledge preserved in the annals of cultural and communal memory, Tanaya is conscious of how her own dialogic experiences with her great-grandmother and grandmother align with the concept of Jegna. These elders took an interest in her and thought that sitting her down and talking with her about life was of the utmost importance. That she remembers nothing about these conversations specifically is not really important. Rather, the fact that she remembers help coming in the form of dialogue is what is most significant. Our survival matters. Our resistance matters. Our nurturing of future generations matter. Our dialogue matters. Through the often tough and difficult conversations, shared and new understandings emerge and a new appreciation for life occurs.

For this dissertation study, the idea was not to be prescriptive. Rather, the goal was to connect the efforts of Harriet Tubman, and other Black women getting Black youth and their families *through*, to this notion of an ethic and pedagogy of liberation that is wholly embodied by Black women throughout the Syracuse community. What was it that Harriet was struggling towards? And, what is it that Brenda, Linda, Carol, Sequoia, Ms. Vickie, Octavia, Brandi, Talina, Reba, Ms. Debra, Ms. Eva, Asteir, and Tanaya *continue* to struggle towards? What are they telling us through the her-stories they share? What are they demanding through their educational and community activism?

Talina's response is actually where I want to leave this section. I believe that she and Frances Ellen Harper are speaking the same language, despite living in different and

unprecedented times. Needless to say, what lies beyond the other side of survival is the realization of education as the practice of freedom, be it within classroom spaces, throughout the community, and most definitely in homes. What kind of education do we want to impart to the next generation of Black youth? What was on Harriet Tubman's mind when she survived the chill of the night, crossed the treacherous waters, and carried others to freedom? What does she teach us today about the Underground Railroad *still* in operation in Syracuse, New York? Talina helps us work through the power of knowing and using that knowledge to ask new questions and envision new possibilities.

> You know, it's one of those things, right? When...when I talk about umm, in the...in the midst of it all, like people *been* here. So yea, you could have—we can have the conversation about 81 coming down and the 15th Ward being demolished, but they're… they're children being raised underneath the highway. That is...that is...that is *not* what we want for them, but at the same time, people raised kids and generations of kids afterwards and sent them to school and did...and did what they could with what they...with what they had. And are now being a part of a conversation where they get to talk about their lived experiences and have an opportunity to change it again, right? Ummm, the conditions in which *pauses briefly* freedom seekers traveled...going through—I drove through 81 and Pennsylvania to Baltimore to D.C., right? Essentially that path that you come up through the South, you cut into Pennsylvania, you cut into Central New York. It is the quickest path to Canada. We were on a backroad and all I could think about as I'm looking at the...the...the uncut pavements and...and the uncut trees and all of that good stuff as this little winding road is going through is, '*Damn*! That's what they were running through. That's what they was hiding in. Those were touched by our ancestors. Those were *touched* by our ancestors and I mean, the *steep, rocky wood-filled death* that would await—whether you got free or went back.' That could've happened along the way, and yet, you keep moving. You see people here and if...and if you wouldn't know any better, you would say to yourself, 'How do people...how do people continue to survive in such a segregated city?

'How do people [...] continue to survive in such a segregated city?" Furthermore, how do Black women navigate this segregated city and chart new paths forward for Black youth and their families within and beyond the school setting? The narratives above illustrate the myriad ways in which Black women throughout the Syracuse community embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. Depictions of love in action, assuming responsibility for those others

would rather "throw away," and critical intergenerational dialogue with Black youth abound. Thus, by tapping into the her-stories of old, we are provided with much needed tools to map out new ways of living and being that goes beyond survival. Take flight: Freedom and liberation awaits.

CHAPTER 7: CHARTING NEW PATHWAYS FORWARD: WHAT I HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN, WHAT I HAVE LEARNED, AND WHAT I WISH TO SHARE

In this dissertation, I argued that Black women who tap into their lived experiences and consequently undergo a radical transformation in terms of their critical consciousness and understanding of *how* systems of oppression impede the freedom of youth, their families and their communities, embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation. After reflecting on the dynamics of each sister circle and the lessons learned, I contend that each sister circle was a powerful testament to the possibilities engendered when Black women come together intergenerationally to speak about their lived experiences. Furthermore, I posit that each sister circle functioned as a homeplace for Black women to come to and even re-configure so that their needs could be met.

In bell hooks' "Homeplace (a site of resistance)," she acknowledges the interlocking systems of oppression that sequestered women to the domestic sphere. hooks states,

> Historically, black women have resisted white supremacist domination by working to establish homeplace. It does not matter that sexism assigned them this role. It is more important that they took this conventional role and expanded it to include caring for one another, for children, for black men, in ways that elevated our spirits, that kept us from despair, that taught some of us to be revolutionaries able to struggle for freedom. (hooks, 1990, p. 385)

Thus, homeplaces were sites where one's humanity was honored, one's spirit was lifted, and one's agency was exercised. hooks goes on to assert that, "This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe

place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination" (hooks, 1990, p. 384).

Rather than reinscribe preexisting ideologies concerning a woman's "place," I instead want to suggest that the revolutionary underpinnings of homeplace functions as a springboard for understanding its evolutionary capacity to meet the needs of Black women *today* who embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation for Black youth and their families within and beyond the school setting.

hooks' conclusion is thus an invitation that I have accepted. She declares,

> When black women renew our political commitment to homeplace, we can address the needs and concerns of young black women who are groping for structures of meaning that will further their growth, young women who are struggling for self-definition. Together, black women can renew our commitment to black liberation struggle, sharing insights and awareness, sharing feminist thinking and feminist vision, building solidarity. With this foundation, we can regain lost perspective, give life new meaning. We can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole. (hooks, 1990, p. 389)

The above excerpt functions as a point of departure for my next point in that what made each sister circle a homeplace was not necessarily my classifying it as such, but rather, affirmation from participants regarding the impact of engaging in the sister circle experience. This affirmation bolstered connections between "Bringing Sisters Together" into a circle where vulnerability is welcomed and community built, trust is offered *and* expected, power is exercised and surrendered, and strength is exchanged for confessions of weakness, and the subsequent construction of a space that restores and empowers.

For instance, in efforts to include myself in the final exercise and model expectations, I proceeded to answer the prompt given to participants. Below is a transcript of what was shared.

Me:
And so, I'm just gonna do a check-in and that's gonna be our time together. And with the check-in, it's just gonna be one word for how you're feeling right now. Ummm, I can start. Hmm. Full.

Silence

Reba:
Introspective?

Me: *softly*
Okay.

Octavia: *said matter-of-factly*
Relieved.

Me:
Mhmm.

Linda:
Content.

Being in a place where there is space to feel full, exercise introspection, experience relief and be content has the power to transform one's understanding of their purpose as well as help to clarify for themselves, *with others*, why they are committed to the personal, intellectual, spiritual, social, and emotional growth of Black youth and their families.

Many Black women are very clear about the contexts under which they live, work and dare to thrive. It is through this understanding that they may realize the Aboriginal activists group, Queensland 1970s charge: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But, if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then come and let us work together." This charge reminds us that there is room to engage in coalitionary work, but no space for co-optation, or agendas that subsume the original purpose of coming together in the name of struggle.

In this moment, I pause to consider and build upon Venus Evans-Winters' (2009) text. Not only does she point out the limitations of teachers who "have not needed to view liberation as a

vehicle toward liberation," but she also provides suggestions for how teachers who do not share the same racial, cultural, and educational struggles as their students can become allies (p. 150). She states, "By building meaningful relationships with students and community members, sharpening students' basic skills, and exposing students to alternative ways of experiencing the social world, teachers become allies in the struggle" (Evans-Winters, 2009, p. 149).

For Octavia, she felt the most encouraged in school when a White student teacher told her she was special, when she felt that no one saw her or cared about her or her life outside of school. Recognizing her promise was what Octavia needed most. That memory has jolted me to think about the ways in which the lives of the Black women in this study can underscore how we can tangibly "raise expectations for other people's children" (Delpit, 2012).

Nevertheless, there were several issues that arose in this study that I hope to explore further and see more scholarship on. These include: herstories of trauma and how that comes to bear on how Black women engage with youth who are experiencing traumatic life experiences; herstories of Black women in leadership positions who can pass for White but claim and assert Blackness and how that impacts their relationship with Black youth and their families; the role on-going sister circles play in the lives of Black women working to promote education as the practice of freedom. Simply put, what kinds of emotional supports and resources are needed to assist Black women in their work with Black youth and their families; how can schools tap into *and not co-opt* the work of Black women to better engage Black youth and their families?

In Joan Davis Ratteray's essay entitled, "The Search For Access And Content In The Education of African-Americans," she concludes with the following:

> Now is the time to identify in a scholarly fashion the strengths of African-American teachers and learners and to use those strengths in building a new curriculum. This curriculum should have valid, theoretically based assumptions about African-Americans and the purpose of education, as well as a clear vision of the specific elements needed in

> that curriculum [...] We must be prepared to document the sources of our assumption and ground them firmly in history, languages, cultural traditions, and other aspects of the African and African-American heritage" (Ratteray, 1994, p. 138)

The issue here is that *now* is *still* the time "to identify in a scholarly fashion the strengths of African-American teachers and learners and [...] use those strengths in the building of a new curriculum." The Black women in this dissertation study embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation that teaches us about the core elements that should be at the very foundation of *any* effort to revolutionize the spaces and places where Black youth are taught and nurtured, and their families reside.

Conclusion

Carried on the tradition.
Carried a strong tradition.
Carried a proud tradition.
Carried a Black tradition.
Carry it on.

"The Tradition," Assata Shakur

Bettina L. Love makes a critical point about the shortcomings of educational research. She maintains that "Education research is crowded with studies that acknowledge dark children's pain, but never the source of their pain, the legacy that pain has left, or how that pain can be healed" (Love, 2019, p. 13). While Love focuses on teachers in this next point, I argue that it brings us back to the ways in which Black women tap into their own lived experiences to create spaces and places for Black youth and their families they themselves were often denied access to. Returning to Love's point, "Teachers who say they are deeply concerned about social justice or that they "love all children" but cannot say the words "Black Lives Matter" have no real understanding of what social justice is and what it truly means to love, find joy, and appreciate their students and their students' culture" (Love, 2019, p. 13).

Given Love's abovementioned points, and, as an educator and researcher myself, I am drawn to Crystal T. Laura's "Intimate Inquiry: Love as "Data" in Qualitative Research Research" (2013). In it, Laura is in dialogue with Love's position. She asserts that while love is often dismissed within social science research, when used as the lens through which research is conducted, it has the power to revolutionize how we perceive qualitative inquiry. Laura states, "When qualitative researchers study people who we love, it means we test methodological boundaries, flip the script on method and technique, we fundamentally challenge what counts as data" (Laura, 2013, p. 1).

However, it was during a conversation with Professor Bryant that I began thinking more deeply about the implications of retaining language that diminishes the humanity of participants and communities we engage when conducting research. The questions that emerged from this conversation are as follows: Are stories *data*? Are the tears that I watched fall from the eyes of participants *data*? Is the frustration expressed *data?* Why was it that Professor Bryant cringed when I talked about the copious amounts of *data* derived from doing this work?

I think that Laura's point, Professor Bryant's dissent, and my inquiries are reconcilable. In fact, what I derive from Laura's point is that when *love* is at the crux of the work that we do, what we learn, and gain *transcends* the social scientific measures and rhetoric put in place to explain *what* we do and *how* we do it. And because love is often erased from community engagement efforts and sites of learning, Laura tries to get us thinking more critically about how we think about the stories and human beings we engage with when conducting qualitative research.

Thus, connected to this idea is Laura's assertion that, "Taking love seriously in social research means that the process and product of scholarship has real consequences for the lives of

three-dimensional human beings [...] love acts are driven by the notion that every human being deserves to live fully and freely in the world, and that each of us is an expert on the qualities of our own experiences" (Laura, 2013, p. 3). Throughout this research process, I chose to use language that humanized participants.

This dissertation study has been a labor of love precisely because my own life and lived experiences are so tightly wound around the research questions I posed, the exercises prepared for each sister circle, and the way in which I framed each section of this study. At the bedrock of this work is love and though this work will not reside exclusively in academia, it is my sincere hope that whoever reads it, will understand the power of love when engaging in research *with* and *for* historically marginalized communities.

I believe that the concluding paragraphs of this dissertation are simply the genesis of new revelations about Black women epistemologies and how they inform the continuation of the Underground Railroad for Black youth, their families, and their communities struggling to get *and* be free. In the work of Domingue and Evans (2019) we are reminded that

> Black women's survival has always been, and will continue to be, a struggle. When we have the courage and audacity to love, respect, and care for ourselves as individuals and as a group, we embody Anna Julia Cooper's notions of regeneration—looking back for wisdom, looking inward for strength, and looking forward for hope...Our quest for social justice is grounded in claims of self-love, self-respect, and self-care. We state our desire for inner peace even as we demand human rights […] [And] "[w]hile struggle is necessary, suffering is not. So, we bring joy, creativity, health, and wellness to the struggle. (Domingue and Evans, 2019, pps. 350-351)

I repeat: "While struggle is necessary, suffering is not. So, we bring joy, creativity, health, and wellness to the struggle." Each participant in this study brings to the struggle what they desire to pass on to future generations.

Linda brings the importance of meditation and self-reflection.

Brenda brings local genealogies of struggle.

Carol brings self-awareness and discipline.

Sequoia brings passion around social justice.

Tanaya brings healing and critical inquiry.

Ms. Debra brings sisterhood across difference.

Asteir brings sensitivity and inclusive practices.

Dr. Hodge brings advocacy and dedication.

Talina brings authenticity and love for the community.

Ms. Vickie brings faith and an ethic of risk.

Ms. Eva brings perspective and care.

Octavia brings hope and new ways of being.

Brandi brings high expectations and rest.

Gloria brings joy for learning.

And I bring their her-stories and mine to you.

What will you *do* with this knowledge? More importantly, what do *you* bring to the struggle for education as the practice of freedom?

****

Before I move forward, permit me to articulate how my work speaks to the current moment we are in as a nation. Across educational contexts, schools have closed, making distance and online learning a new norm. In efforts to "flatten the curve," many are now quarantined and sheltered in place. What used to be bustling streets teeming with people are now empty and deserted. And while the wearing of masks has become a new wardrobe staple for some, Professor Mayes reminds us of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem: Black folks have *always* worn *the* mask to survive.

And while New York City has become the epicenter of this growing Coronavirus Disease, I want to draw your attention to the reality that Black women are *still* on the frontlines working to ensure that babies are being born, young minds are being developed, families are being supported, mental health is promoted, and learning is *still* taking place. I tell you this because I know that my participants are still making moves to embody an ethic and pedagogy of liberation even as they shelter in place.

Ms. Debra is working with the girls of Poised, Gifted, and Ready Foundation, Inc. to construct masks for families, Ms. Vickie is ensuring that the homeless have care packages and food to eat, Gloria, Brandi, Ms. Eva, and Dr. Hodge are working to ensure that teachers and students are supported as they facilitate learning through online platforms, and Octavia is connecting with students whose mental health may be deteriorating during these unprecedented times. Black women are still committed to supporting Black youth and their families at such a time as this. And as I look at the picture my mother's co-worker snapped of her when she finally returned to work, what I see is my own reflection. And though my life's work does not require me to wear green scrubs and scrub hats, gloves, masks, or face shields, I am reminded that like my mother, the Black women in this study are *essential*. For without them, how would we survive?

won’t you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

~Lucille Clifton, “won’t you celebrate with me” (1993)

EPILOGUE

During the course of the fourth sister circle entitled, "In the Tradition of Black Women: Freedom and Liberation," the late and beloved Valerie Mae Flanagan and jack~e~grace were remembered fondly by other participants. After reading aloud excerpts from one-on-one interviews, everyone proceeded to write down and share their observations of how each participant met the needs of Black youth and their families within and beyond the school setting. Once we debriefed, I then recounted a recent conversation I had with my friend, Terrance. Describing the trajectory of my research, we paused for a considerable amount of time to discuss how thankless the work of Black women often is, and how their labor is often taken for granted, or framed as "Because you are the expert and we believe you know how to do this work best, we'll just pile on the responsibilities until you collapse, burn-out, or just die from exhaustion."

> After relaying the takeaways from this conversation, Carol calmly said the following: "This has been said many times, but I first heard it said by my father. He was very well-read—the newspapers, into politics and stuff and he used to be frustrated by […] people always wanting accolades for something and he used to say, 'Much could be accomplished if it doesn't matter who gets the credit.'

Affirming this, Ms. Vickie responded with, "Just do the work." Soon after, she felt compelled to share a story about receiving an award at work for her service—service that she deems necessary for the advancement of both Black youth and their families. She states,

> This is an experience I had umm, a year ago umm, at my job […] I work for the county health department, I was there two years. Soooo, I was selected—going back to not looking, I was selected ummm, the Martin Luther King Jr., ummm, how can I call it?—employee recognition award, and I was nominated from the department I worked in and the department where I was collaborating—where I was a doula under that umbrella and you know what was strange? When they…when they, ummm, when the person […] she worked under ummm Joan Mahoney, can't think of her name. When they were reading about *me*, I'm like […] because on…on the side where I work, I was the only Black female first of all, you know, and, but the work…the work that I was doing, I was—I was about impacting the community. And I was like, 'that's interesting.' And then to see how it impacted my father—my father cried […] when they were reading. And so, I wasn't looking for *anything* and…and one of my dear friends who's not here with us

> anymore, umm, I know some of you…you may know Valerie Flanagan, but she won the award a year before me and nobody in my department *acknowledged,* now they—I was recommended, you know, nobody acknowledged this, you know, right? After I won it, they didn't acknowledge it, you know? And so Valerie, so sweet, she was such a big sister. I came back, she had a balloon, she gave me a candle, and this was at my desk. She said, 'Don't worry about it' […] But it seems like that torch, you know? That torch was being passed.

Valerie Mae Flanagan, 61, (aka Ms. Val) was born in Syracuse and graduated from Corcoran High School. Attending Syracuse University before she passed, I had the privilege of meeting her and beholding for myself, the light she emanated and has since left behind. As for jack~e~grace, before she retired to be with her family down south, I had the opportunity of meeting her at the Soulful Saturday Sistas book club. It was there that I first spoke with jack~e~grace about the tireless efforts and exhaustion of Black women. Much later, I came to understand the profound impact she had on the Syracuse community.

But before I continue, it is essential to trace these divine encounters back to both Tamar J. Smithers, and my friend from undergrad, Helina, as she was the one who referred me to Tamar my junior year at Syracuse University. Working under Tamar's leadership has enabled me to experience life beyond the Hill and really clarify the importance of engaging with women both within *and* beyond the school setting, as she was involved in the lives of so many young people and loved them—deeply.

While there are many Black women throughout the Syracuse community who have worked with Black youth and their families within and beyond the school setting to foster education as the practice of freedom, I talk about these three women specifically as their lives have touched many. As for me personally, they have all impacted my life and trajectory in ways that words will never truly convey.

Thus, the questions that have emerged as a result of re-membering Ms. Val, jack~e~grace, and Tamar J. Smithers are the following: What happens when Black women pass, or when they relocate to other spaces and places? What is it that they leave behind? How do we remember them and their legacies?

Valerie Flanagan aka Ms. Val

I remember the first writing workshop I facilitated within the African American Studies Department. After walking into the main seminar room, I proceeded to load my presentation onto the screen and gather materials for our session. Not too long after, in walked an older Black woman. Poised—with a salt and pepper high top, and warm, yet penetrating eyes. Asking what she preferred to be called, she said with a pleasant smile, “Ms. Val.”

In our small group, we engaged with writers and Black women such as Alice Walker and bell hooks, who both talk candidly about the complexities and joys of the writing process. It was imperative that we remained in conversation with writers who looked like us and talked about the nuances of the Black experience. What I remember most about Ms. Val was that despite being the oldest woman in the room, she was open to hearing new perspectives about writing and shared her take-aways with the entire room of people before she kindly thanked me for facilitating the session. Without her even knowing, Ms. Val held a special place in my heart. Her humility and willingness to learn struck me as I reflected on both the session, as well as areas of concern that arose for each person present. Attentive and very engaged, Ms. Val never once made me feel like I had nothing to offer because I was younger than her. As she learned from me, I learned from her.

Not too long after this experience, I received the news that the same Ms. Val who sat listening attentively to my explanation of the beauty of writing had passed. And although our

session was about two hours, we had developed our own community and Ms. Val was a key member in its construction. I was *devastated*. What is it that Ms. Val left behind worth sharing with you all? That reminds us of the power of learning with *and* from one another? Even when others render you invisible, it is of the utmost importance to remember, acknowledge, and embrace those in the struggle *with* you. This is the fuel many Black women require when doing the work no one else cares to do or wants to do but needs doing all the same.

jack~e~grace

After my presentation for the Public Humanities Fellowship in the Spring of 2019, I overheard Evan and Howard re-member jack~e~grace Academy. With their memories, they altered the landscape of the Westcott Street I have grown familiar with into a site teeming with Black and Brown youth achieving academic excellence because that was the expectation, rather than the exception. I watched as Howard's eyes lit up and Evan helped to fill in gaps where Howard's story had missing pieces. Though I first met jack~e~grace at a Soulful Saturday Sistas book club meeting, what I remember most was her emphasis on rest, self-care, and stillness.

We talked about the idea that as Black women we are taught to work, and then work harder, and still *harder*. However, we are learning that there must be time to recoup, to rest, to recover. More specifically, we are now learning that *it is okay* to recoup, to rest, to recover. jack~e~grace had an aura about her. Personable, vibrant, thoughtful, contemplative. These are the adjectives that I associated with her the very first time we met, which would be the last time as she has since retired to Tennessee. Her grandbabies are there and so is her new life post-retirement. Who can forget jack~e~grace? A bold red lip. A ready smile. And always ready to give a word to the wise.

Tamar J. Smithers

I was an undergrad when I first met Tamar. We were both from New York City and we clicked—immediately. At the time, I served as the Education Intern and reported directly to her. The Community Folk Art Center was run exclusively by Black women from across the African Diaspora and the Creative Arts Academy program was *thriving*. Before Black girl magic was even a thing, I saw Black girls taking space to exercise creativity, use their voices to speak back, and their bodies to convey messages about the beauty of Blackness. This is where I learned that life existed beyond “the Hill.” Connecting with that life gave me *life*.

During the summer of 2018, Tamar and I connected once more when I served as a Co-Facilitator for the 2018 Summer Arts and Culture Camp. Her love for the children *and* their families was evident. She disciplined with love, told them how much she enjoyed their presence, and encouraged them to exercise reflexivity about what they had learned and how it built on their ever-expanding repertoire of knowledge. In fact, the last week of camp brought a deep bittersweetness. Fast forward to the implementation of my Public Humanities Fellowship project. Without Tamar’s diligence before she left to assume the role of Director of Education and Public Programs for the National Museum of African American Music (NMAAM), I *know* that my project would have stayed right on the ground. When asked what she had learned throughout the planning of our 2-day retreat for former participants of the 2018 Summer Arts and Culture Camp, she stated simply, “This is my life’s purpose.”

Ms. Val, jack~e~grace, Tamar: You are gone, but definitely *not* forgotten.

APPENDIX A.

Overview of participants' names and work/service with Black youth and their families

Name of Participant	Work/Service with Black youth and their families within the Syracuse community
Linda	Former Administrator, Syracuse University
Brenda	Executive Director, Focusing Our Resources for Comm. Enlightenment
Carol	Director, Dance Theater of Syracuse
Sequoia	Community Activist, Founder of Doula4AQueen, Aspiring Nurse Midwife
Tanaya	Former Assistant Director, Science Technology Entry Program
Asteir	Nurse Coach, Co-Director of Village Birth International
Ms. Debra	Founder, Poised, Gifted, and Ready Foundation, Inc.
Ms. Eva	Principal, Van Duyn Elementary School
Reba	Vice Principal, Van Duyn Elementary School
Talina	Disability Rights Advocate for Families of Color
Ms. Vickie	Doula, Community Othermother
Octavia	Student Assistance Counselor, Henninger High School
Brandi	Social Studies Teacher, Frazer K-8 School
Gloria	Mathematics Teacher, Frazer K-8 School

APPENDIX B.

Title of Sister Circle	Participants Included	Rationale for Sister Circle Arrangement
Sister Circle #1 “Bringing Sisters Together”	Brenda and Gloria	The themes that bind both participants together are “Mothers and Memories,” “Love in Action,” and “Faith and Purpose.” Interestingly enough, although Brenda and Gloria are not related biologically, both share similar family histories. Magnifying this point during our sister circle enabled us to observe just how much of an influence family history has on our life’s work as Black women.
Sister Circle #2 “Full Circle”	Linda, Octavia, and Reba	What connects Linda, Octavia, and Reba together is the fact that they are all graduates of Syracuse University (SU). Reba and Octavia actually attended SU under the leadership of Linda—a fact which underscores the labor of Black women who are committed to preparing the way for future generations of Black women to lead. Thus, academic and professional connections as well as personal ties to the city of Syracuse, accentuates why each participant remains committed to Black youth and their families within and beyond the school setting.
Sister Circle #3 “Rights. *For Whom?* Justice. *For Whom?*”	Ms. Eva, Sequoia, Talina, and Asteir	Based on what was shared during one-on-one interviews, I found that what connected Ms. Eva, Sequoia, Talina, and Asteir to one another was their commitment to rights and justice, be it on the educational level, with respect to disability and accessibility, or in regards to reproductive rights and justice. The work of these women has serious implications for future generations of Black youth and their families within the Syracuse community.
Sister Circle #4 “In the Tradition of Black Women: Freedom and Liberation”	Ms. Debra, Ms. Vickie, Carol, Brandi, and Tanaya	What binds everyone in this group together are the thoughtful and creative ways in which they meet the needs of Black youth, and their families within the Syracuse community. Using Black women they know and respect as models for how they support Black youth and their families, Ms. Debra, Ms. Vickie, Carol, Brandi, and Tanaya follow “In the Tradition of Black Women” who are living *and* Black women who are no longer with us.

APPENDIX C.

Facilitation guide for Sister Circle #1: “Bringing Sisters Together”

Sister Circle #1: “Bringing Sisters Together”

The theme for tonight comes from a conversation I had with Brenda as I began preparing for our sister circle this evening. I thought it only fitting since sisters coming together and bringing other sisters along is not a new concept or idea. The idea of circling around each other and supporting one another in spite of…because of…due to…has always been something that has been central to the preservation of the Black community.

Throughout this process, I have tried to be very intentional about the spaces in which we meet with one another. As you both know, the Community Folk Art Center has a longstanding history within the Syracuse community and the South Side Communication Center, in many ways is no different in that. So, after speaking with Professor Haddix, I decided that the South Side Communication Center would be another way to center this work in the heart of the community.

I want to reiterate how grateful I am to you both for your ongoing investment in me and this work and I am so excited to share with you what I have learned since we spoke last. But before we begin, I’d like you both to introduce yourselves and think about the following question: Why do we need each other? In other words, Gloria, why do you need Brenda, and Brenda, why do you need Gloria?

wait for their responses

Debrief Session:

Introduction: How this process has worked to date has been nothing short of amazing. Each group of women are connected in ways that they may not even know or realize. Overlapping themes exists so much so that I often wondered: How can two people with two very different genealogies be so similar? What are the ties that bind us? So, I’ve broken our time here together in three different sections. These sections are inspired by the themes that bind both you and Gloria’s interviews together. **Mothers and Memories, Love in Action, Faith and Purpose**. But before we get into these three themes, I want to pose the following question to you both since for Brenda, a few months have passed since we had our one-on-one interview as opposed to Gloria and I who met less than a month ago. So, I want you both to go back to our one-on-one interview and think about something that is still resonating with you.

- What have you taken away from our one-on-one interview that is still resonating with you?

wait for their responses

Something that still resonates with me is the clarity of purpose that you both possess. There is no question as to what you were put on earth to do. Any thoughts on that observation before we move forward?

The first theme that was a pillar of both interviews was *Mothers and Memories:*

Brenda, in our one-on-one interview, when asked about some of the Black women that have shaped you into the woman you are today and that have prepared you to do this work: You mentioned your mother. You said, and I quote, "My mother---quiet. Stable. Just comforting. I think she had healing hands…it seemed like a kind word or just a laying of a hand could heal all wounds, whether it's a broken heart, a skinned knee, or something more serious."

Gloria, in our one-on-one interview, when asked the same question, you also mentioned your mother. You said, and I quote: "I was never sure what I wanted to do as a career. But I always knew that I wanted to be like my mother 'cuz I thought she was like the best mother…just very kind and loving."

What I find profound about both interviews is that both of your mothers were either orphaned and/or lost their own mothers at such a tender age. You both had such beautiful exemplars and memories of Black women charting a path for you all even when they didn't have that for themselves. **How do we make sense of that, do you think?**

What are you *still* learning from your mother that you hope to share with Black youth, their families, and the community?

wait for responses

Another salient overlapping theme was "Love in Action."

Gloria, you talk about taking your roles seriously. On a couple of occasions, you mentioned how important it is to you to be able to support and take care of your children, your godchildren, your nieces and nephews, your students. It is of the utmost importance. What I thought was so powerful about that is that when you talked about your mother, you mentioned how she cared for you all like you were the number one priority in her life. Yet, she had so many children that she loved and nurtured beyond her own.

Brenda, you talked about your mother having a "GAZILLION fake children." Lol. How "She always did things that were caring for people." You also talked about other Black women in your life like Mrs. Upthegrove" and how you knew you were loved.

In both narratives, there is an emphasis on love *in* action. This idea that loving requires sacrifice, care, concern, etc.

How do you both use this concept in your own work? But then also, how do you differentiate so that those with whom you work know individually that they are loved despite you having a deep love for *all*.

wait for responses

I always marvel at my mother because she has a way of loving all of us individually and collectively and I can never be jealous for how she loves my sisters. She is very much aware that we all require something different.

The final overlapping theme that I'd like to share with you all this evening is: Faith and Purpose.

Brenda, the burning question that drives your sense of purpose is: "How do we preserve *us*? For Gloria, she talks about coming back to what felt natural: mothering. Caring for young people. Teaching young people. What it means *and* looks like to serve and make your community stronger appears to be grounded by your faith and religious convictions.

- **How do you see this translating to the work that you engage in on a daily basis?**

wait for responses

I'd like to conclude with a poem by Nikki Giovanni entitled, "Legacies." Gloria, can you please read it for us?"

- **As we think about everything that we discussed tonight, and the work that we do with Black youth, their families and their communities, what kernels of wisdom can we take away from this poem?**

wait for responses

Close sister circle

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EDUCATION

PhD Cultural Foundations of Education (2020, Spring)
Syracuse University
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Cultural Foundations of Education

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English Education
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CERTIFICATIONS

Future Professoriate Program (FPP) Certificate of University Teaching (2018)
New York State Certified English Language Arts 7-12 (2017)

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Black Women, Liberatory Education, and School-Family-Community Partnerships

RELEVANT GRADUATE COURSES IN STATISTICS AND METHODOLOGY

EDU 815: Advanced Qual II (2017)
EDU 810: Advanced Qual I (2016)
EDU 603: Introduction to Qualitative Research (2016)
EDU 647: Statistical Thinking and Application (2016)

RESEARCH AND ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

Education Intern, Community Folk Art Center
Spring 2019 – Summer 2019 Syracuse, New York
Assisted with the planning and organization of the 47th Annual Teen Art Showcase, Served as liaison between Syracuse City School District administrators, teachers and the staff at the Community Folk Art Center, Developed orientation packets in consultation with the Administrative Specialist for student workers employed through the 2019 SU/CNY Summer

Youth Mentoring/Employment Program, Aided the Creative Arts Camp Coordinator with the schedule for the 2019 Summer Arts and Culture Camp.

Camp Facilitator, 2019 Winter Arts and Culture Camp, Community Folk Art Center
Winter 2019 Syracuse, New York
Fostered a dialogic space for middle school students to produce meaning of the film *Selma;* Co-taught with other facilitators during spoken word and creative writing workshops; Served as a chaperone for field trips and enrichment activities beyond the Community Folk Art Center; Spearheaded lunch preparation and distribution efforts; Engaged in debriefing sessions with staff to discuss areas of improvement and areas of strength.

Public Humanities Fellow, Humanities New York
Fall 2018 - Spring 2019 New York, New York
Working in partnership with the Community Folk Art Center in Syracuse New York, I planned and executed a 2-day retreat where returning participants of the 2018 Summer Arts and Culture Camp, parents/guardians and former camp facilitators reflected on their experiences and the program's impact. The aim of this retreat was to assess the effect programming has had on the academic and personal development of Black youth within and beyond the formal school setting, and use responses from youth, parents and facilitators to drive future planning and programming.

Facilitator, African American Studies/Pan African Studies, Syracuse University
Spring 2018 Syracuse, NY
Serving as the facilitator for three workshops designed for both undergraduate and graduate students, the objective for each session was to engage students in critical conversations about the power language wields, as well as the art and function of writing. The workshop geared towards master's students specifically, was focused on how to prepare for doctoral studies. Sharing lessons learned along the way about how to navigate new intellectual and professional communities was also central to this discussion.

Teaching Mentor, The Graduate School, Syracuse University
Fall 2017 – Present Syracuse, NY
Assist in Teaching Assistant (TA) Orientation programming; Plan and lead workshops throughout the academic year that promote teaching assistants' academic and professional development; Interview and select candidates for the next cohort of Teaching Mentors.

Teaching Assistant, The School of Education, Syracuse University
Fall 2016 – Spring 2018 Syracuse, NY
Facilitated class discussions with undergraduate and graduate students majoring in Education and/or Education related fields; Fostered a learning environment that welcomed critical thinking and inquiry; Reviewed and graded assigned papers.

Writing Consultant, Office of Supportive Services, Syracuse University
Fall 2014 – Spring 2015 Syracuse, NY
Worked with academic counselors to identify and better support students struggling academically; Scheduled and managed appointments with students who needed writing support;

Maintained spreadsheets to keep a record of students who came in for writing consultations; Served as a mentor to students across academic programs.

RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Gonzalez A.M., Burgess, T., **Bell, C.J.,** *"Liberty and Justice for Us: Using Dialogue to Center the Lives of Youth of Color."* Panelist. 16th Annual Globalization, Diversity, and Education Conference. February 27 - 28, 2020. Washington State University.
Williams, A., Soljour, K., **Bell, C.J**., "*Doing our work:" Critical Community Engagement within Academic Institutions*. Panelist. 2019 National Association of African American Studies Annual Conference. February 11 - 16, 2019. Dallas, Texas.

Bell, C.J., (2019). Songs caged birds sing: Letters between brothers and sisters. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*: (Black Lives Matter Special Edition).
Bell, C.J. *High-Stakes Testing, Standardization, and Globalization.* Guest Lecturer. EDU 310/610: The American School. April 9, 2017. Syracuse University. Syracuse, NY.

Veitch, H., Roquemore, K., Parson, B., **Bell, C.J.** *Lest We Forget: Engaging Memories of Displacement at the Crossroads of Race and Disability.* Panelist. 2017 American Educational Studies Association Annual Conference. November 1 2017 - November 5, 2017. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Bell, C.J. *Pain Beyond the Classroom*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4s-UvraiLA. Speaker. TEDxYouth@ClintonSquare. February 16, 2017. Syracuse, NY
Rodriguez, D. & **Bell, C.J.** *Disrupting Whiteness: Voice, Silence and Everything in Between*. Panelist. American Educational Research Association Annual Conference. April 8 - April 12, 2016. Washington, D.C.

RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS AND/OR MEMBERSHIPS

Member, American Educational Studies Association
Fall 2017 – Present

Member, American Educational Research Association
Fall 2015 – Present

Member, Phi Beta Delta
Spring 2015 – Present