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Lucie E. White

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RACED HISTORIES, MOTHER FRIENDSHIPS, AND THE POWER OF CARE: CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN IN PROJECT HEAD START

LUCIE E. WHITE*

INTRODUCTION

This Symposium marks the advent of a new feminist conversation about care. This is a moment that I welcome with a good deal of hope. Yet at the same time, it is a moment that I cannot help but witness with some despair. Why the mixed feelings?

I feel hope because a new conversation about care is finally happening, and there are reasons to think that it may cover new ground. Why? The first reason I feel hope is because a number of great new voices—fresh, creative, and critical voices—are getting involved in the care/work conversation. A decade of writing against the dangers of feminist “essentialism” brings us to this new, difficult, and exciting conversation. None of us can any longer claim to speak for *all* women, or, indeed, to use the term in an unreflective way. We have learned how to pick up on empty, “pink-ribboned” rhetoric, especially when it is trotted out to sidestep real conflict. Maybe all of this critical self-reflection can help move us beyond the place where first and second wave feminists got stuck on the care question, after almost two centuries of earnest deliberation.

The second reason I feel hope is that a half-century of gay social movement has finally caused rigid gender norms to begin losing their grip on our societal roles and sexual feelings. I include within the realm of “sexual” feelings those deeply embodied emotions that get aroused through acts of care. We have come to a moment in social and cultural history when we can finally get some critical perspective on the fears and desires that are aroused by caring and being cared for, regardless of whether it is done for love or pay. We can also begin to get some critical perspective on the gendered shaping of

* Louis A. Horvitz Professor of Law, Harvard Law School; B.A., Radcliffe College, 1971; J.D., Harvard Law School, 1981.

those care-linked feelings, even the ones that seem to well-up from inside our bodies in very powerful ways.

The third reason I feel hope is because global economic changes have made Fordist dogma about workplace organization seem outdated. No longer, it seems, do people who want to make a profit in the global market assume that they should organize their production in lock-step assembly lines, rather than learning teams. It is no longer universally assumed that the “ideal” worker should report to his job from nine-to-five for a lifetime, rather than moving between tasks and careers and continents as new opportunities arise. At the same time, however, we no longer assume that these newly contingent workers should all be paid a “family” wage.

These real shifts in the ways that we think about gender roles and workplace practices are not without their downsides. Nevertheless these shifts can open up some space for movement in our social arrangements for care.

Yet, at the same time that I feel hope, I also feel despair. Why? Because the new feminist conversation about care already seems drawn toward the old dichotomies of second wave feminist thought. It already seems mired in the either/or rut of modernist rationality. It is as though all of our new talk about care were just splinters of iron dancing around the poles of a hidden magnet.

This Article has a simple goal. It seeks to disrupt the polarized debate about care that is taking shape among feminist legal scholars. To do this, I step outside of the terrain on which that debate has been staked out, and into the domain of ethnographic contemplation. I seek to listen to a group of women who are not a part of our scholarly conversation. How are these women thinking and talking and acting around a theme that they name “care”? What I find there may not be entirely accounted for in the conceptual economy of care/work that our academic debates have configured. The value of ethnography in intellectual debate lies with its power to evoke regions of “unlikeness,” to borrow poet Jorie Graham’s phrase,¹ regions of thought and experience that do not fit neatly within the conceptual categories that we take for granted.

It will betray the spirit of this Article for me to state its “point” in a sentence. Yet, I will offer the following foreword to the text that follows. Among the women whose talk and practices I address in what follows, “care” connotes a *moral* practice, rather than an

1. JORIE GRAHAM, REGION OF UNLIKENESS 37 (1991).

economic equation. It connotes a moral practice, oriented toward the others, that comes forth when human *presence* rather than instrumental *action*, is called for. "Care," in these women's words, comes forth in the face of the kinds of misfortune or injustice that override our capacities for rational calculation. Care is a moral practice that engenders the power to change. I am reminded of Maria Lugones's classic essay on *Playfulness, "World" Traveling, and Loving Perception*.² I suggest that we look toward the life worlds of "other" women, without any pretense to "know" what we might meet there, in order to disrupt and rename our *own* positions in this emerging debate about care.

A. *Head Start's Law*

This Article is based on ethnographic research I conducted at a Project Head Start preschool in South Central Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Project Head Start is a popular and reputedly successful federally funded educational program for low-income children and families that President Lyndon Johnson launched in 1965 as part of his War on Poverty.³ In my research, I focused on women who were involved in Head Start classrooms on a daily basis, either as long-term low-wage workers or parent volunteers, and regarded that involvement as a significant force in their lives.

My goal was to listen to how these actively engaged women talked about their experience of volunteering or working in Head Start. I wanted to understand how these women made sense of the program's effects on the quality and course of their lives. As a scholar of social welfare law and policy, I was fascinated by the local moral and political worlds of Head Start centers. The program had first come to my attention in the early 1980s, when clients whom I was representing in a legal aid program in rural North Carolina repeatedly told me that Head Start was different than the other social programs in which they were enrolled. In contrast to other programs, Head Start was a place where they felt respected and cared for. I became intrigued by how any government program could gain such high regard among these women, who had little reason to place much trust in the state or its law.

2. Maria Lugones, *Playfulness, "World"–Traveling and Loving Perception*, in 2 *HYPATIA: A JOURNAL OF FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY* 3-19 (1987).

3. See generally SUSAN MUENCHOW & EDWARD ZIGLER, *HEAD START: THE INSIDE STORY OF AMERICA'S MOST SUCCESSFUL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENT* (1992).

Head Start centers are good examples of social institutions that would not exist but for a dense web of federal statutes and regulations.⁴ In a very real sense, then, Head Start's world is literally brought into being by law.⁵ As Jürgen Habermas reminds us, the rigid processes of modernist public law are not very good at creating lifeworlds.⁶ The law is much better at unraveling the intricate webs of human interaction that keep our social worlds together. What is it about Head Start's law, unlike that of many other social programs, that has made it into a place where some low-income women feel safe, cared for, and respected? I hoped to learn something important by trying to listen closely to what Head Start women chose to say. Ultimately, I wanted to understand how lawyers, whom I think of more as architects than social engineers, might work with their clients to design ground-level social spaces that people can safely inhabit, use, and act through to enhance their own potential to make a better world.

Head Start's legal blueprint is unusual among *child* welfare programs because of its explicit emphasis on the well-being and development of the *parents* of Head Start children.⁷ Its law privileges parents in several ways. Head Start centers are legally required to permit parents to come into their children's classrooms as observers or volunteers.⁸ Parents must be offered educational and enrichment activities, such as nutrition and literacy classes.⁹ They must be included, as elected representatives, in each Head Start center's governing policy council.¹⁰ And qualified parent volunteers must be given priority for staff positions.¹¹ Among these requirements, the rule that gives parent volunteers a preference for paid staff positions appears to be especially important in making Head Start a safe, caring space for parents and children who are going through hard times. This is because teachers who started out as parent volunteers seem to be especially likely to form intense mentoring relationships with

4. See Head Start Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 9831-9858 (1991); see also Head Start Policy Manual: The Parents, 45 C.F.R. § 1304 app.B (1993).

5. See *id.*

6. See generally 2 JÜRGEN HABERMAS, THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION: LIFEWORLD AND SYSTEM: A CRITIQUE OF FUNCTIONALIST REASON (Thomas McCarthy trans., Beacon Press 1987) (1981).

7. See 45 C.F.R. § 1304 app.B.

8. See *id.*

9. See *id.*

10. See *id.*

11. See *id.*

younger Head Start mothers. I heard many young Head Start women tell me how one of these former volunteers had really “been there” herself, and thus was able to listen with respect to the younger women’s problems.

Program-wide requirements, alone, do not ensure that such mentoring relationships will flourish in every Head Start center. Such relationships are more likely to take off in programs in which parent involvement is valued and supported beyond what the law minimally requires. The law gives each Head Start grantee great latitude to define its own priorities and custom-design its day-to-day practices.¹² Some local programs, like the Los Angeles Head Start that I studied, consider the development of *adults* a key objective. Such programs sometimes supplement their federal dollars with funds specifically targeted to adults’ well-being and needs.¹³ These programs are likely to draw and keep teachers with the life experience, therapeutic know-how, and long-term commitment it takes to sustain the kinds of close, cross-generational relationships that the Head Start women with whom I talked repeatedly linked with what they called “real” change.

Yet even in programs that prioritize women’s well-being, there is no guarantee that any particular woman will get drawn into a sustained relationship that enables significant change. Researchers like Deborah Belle have identified some of the features of individual women’s life histories, like the absence of severe trauma or a positive relationship with a parent or caretaker, that increase the chance that these women will be open to such relationships.¹⁴ Yet, our most contextualized models of human development still leave much about the interplay between the person, her evolving relationships, and the social context unaccounted for. Sophia Bracy Harris, an Alabama childcare educator who has been awarded a Mac Arthur Fellowship for her work with low-income African American women, has written a book about the features of daycare settings that can enhance the well-being and human development of low-income women.¹⁵ She named that book *More Is Caught Than Taught* to emphasize that the process of change is ultimately embedded in the mystery that marks

12. *See id.*

13. For instance, the program that I studied partnered with a charitable organization, called OneVoice, to provide educational classes and other enrichment activities for parents.

14. *See LIVES IN STRESS: WOMEN AND DEPRESSION* (Deborah Belle ed., 1982).

15. *See A. JACK GUILLEBEAUX, MORE IS CAUGHT THAN TAUGHT: A GUIDE TO QUALITY CHILD CARE* (1998) (setting forth the practices of Sophia Bracy Harris and the Federation of Child Care Centers of Alabama).

our potential as living beings.¹⁶ The very best social policy can ultimately do no more than increase the chance that life-enhancing movement will take hold.

B. *The Talk of Head Start Women*

In my interviews with Head Start women, they told me many things about their lives in the program. The regular volunteers talked about their everyday frustrations with paid teachers, other volunteers, troubled parents, and the children. They told me about the despair they often felt, especially on their “blue” days, when faced with the endless tasks of caring—wiping up runny noses, tears, and vomit; scrubbing down floors after lunch; swabbing chewable toys with alcohol at least twice a week. They told me about the anger that they felt when, after a full week’s work, they got no paycheck at all. And they told me about the stress of keeping body and soul and budget together as single mothers in a world where welfare was ending.

At the same time that I heard this flow of trouble stories, I also heard a story of Head Start as a site of care and a place of change. In spite of their frustrations, Head Start women consistently described the program as a place where they felt acknowledged, respected, and competent. They told me how the program helped them to become stronger, more clearheaded, and more outspoken. They told me how these changes carried over into other settings, like their families, their children’s schools, their churches, and civic or community organizations. They told me how Head Start helped them make hard changes, like leaving an abusive partner, returning to school, or seeking a more challenging job.

The passion with which actively engaged women often describe Head Start is hard to convey without lapsing into what may sound like overblown rhetoric. Indeed, the 1993 Presidential Commission on Head Start Quality and Expansion began its Final Report¹⁷ by drawing on this rhetoric, which has been widely recognized among Head Start administrators and practitioners, but is rarely taken seriously by researchers.¹⁸ Thus, the preface to the commission’s report quotes a Head Start woman who testified that through her

16. *See id.*

17. U.S. DEP’T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVS., CREATING A 21ST CENTURY HEAD START: FINAL REPORT OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON HEAD START QUALITY AND EXPANSION (1993).

18. *See id.* at iii-iv.

involvement, “I learned to live again, not just survive.”¹⁹ The report then notes that many active Head Start parents have described such experiences, and observes that these parents’ own voices may “best tell the . . . story” of Head Start’s extraordinary impact on many women’s lives.²⁰

C. *The Texture of Change*

My efforts to document the ways that Head Start women experienced the program drew me into a world that was at once “real,” remembered, witnessed, and prayed for. The first metaphor I came up with to describe this world was that of a “fabric.” These women’s words about Head Start seemed to spin forth fabrics—were they also fabrications?—of care. Over the year, I was drawn into several women’s stories of close friendships with other Head Start women and with the children. I was drawn into stories about a kind of “change” that was slow, uncertain, haunted by loss, and embedded in everyday routines and relationships. I was drawn into a world in which women initially told me that it was Head Start’s magical “power” that accounted for their own capacities to change. Only gradually, over the course of my year of work with them, did these women set forth less easy stories, stories about how their own caring relationships were the force behind that change. One woman called these intense mentoring relationships “mother friendships.”²¹ Only gradually, as I became more bold with my own questions, did these women begin to lay out complex pictures of how Head Start, for all of its problems, gave them some resources, some rhetoric, a few good regulations, and—some ground—on which such relationships could arise and be sustained.²²

The second part of this Article traces the path of a “mother-friendship” between two women at Los Angeles’s Education and Training Institute (“ETI”) Head Start program²³ over the course of a year. The younger woman, whom I will refer to as E.M., is the

19. *Id.* at iv.

20. *Id.* at 7.

21. Interview with E.M., Los Angeles, Cal., Head Start Volunteer, at 23 (July 2, 1992) (transcript on file with author) [hereinafter Interview with E.M.].

22. See generally *id.*; Interview with J.G., Los Angeles, Cal., Head Start Teacher (Feb. 19, 1992) (transcript on file with author) [hereinafter Interview with J.G.].

23. “Education and Training Institute,” as well as the other names and certain identifying details that I use herein are fictitious. I have also edited portions of transcripts and field notes to make them more readable.

mother of Lavinia, a three-year old student at ETI's Church of the Redeemer Head Start site, and a regular parent volunteer in her daughter's classroom.²⁴ The older woman, J.G., is Lavinia's Head Start teacher, as well as the mother of three grown children who had attended ETI Head Start two decades before. In addition to the context and texture of the relationship itself, I focus on how E.M. understands this relationship to have helped her make important changes in her life.

This Article is comprised of eleven short texts, organized roughly chronologically. In Part I of this Article, I evoke the racial climate in South Central Los Angeles in the spring and summer of 1992, when J.G. and E.M. formed their relationship. In Part II, I move inside ETI's Head Start program, to look closely at the settings where E.M. and J.G. worked together. In Parts III through VII, I follow E.M.'s accounts of her life, her relationship with J.G., and her work in Head Start. In Parts VIII and IX, I draw from my conversations with J.G. to look at how the older woman links her relationship with E.M. and her work as a Head Start teacher to her people's history of struggle against Jim Crow segregation in Alabama, where she was raised. In Part X and XI, I turn to E.M.'s own work mentoring two troubled Head Start children. E.M. credits this caring work with giving her the power to make important changes in her life. I close with a reflection on how these women's notions of care differ from the notions we tend to use in our own scholarly conversations.

I. GETTING HOME IN TIME TO BATHE THE CHILDREN

It is one of those rare clear mornings in early June. At this time of year the smog usually does not clear until about noon, especially so close to the ocean.²⁵ Three white women, in their mid-thirties, dressed in suits, low heels, and light make-up, hover over a pile of papers at a heavy wooden table that almost fills the conference room of ETI Head Start's main office in Inglewood, one of several municipalities on the margins of South Central Los Angeles. The women are state employees, down from Sacramento for the day. They have just driven in from the airport in a blue-gray 1991 Legacy

24. See Interview with E.M., *supra* note 21, at 1-2.

25. The remaining parts of this Article include recollections from my experiences at the Head Start program and are not necessarily documented in my notes or interview transcripts. When possible, I cite to my notes or interview transcripts. However, uncited passages represent my undocumented recollections of events, perceptions, and opinions.

sedan, rented from Avis for the occasion. Their mission is to audit a grant that the ETI Head Start program gets from the state to buy food.

ETI Head Start traces its roots back to the early days of the War on Poverty. Several of the women who started it are still very much present in the program's day-to-day life, even though most of them are now retired from teaching or staff roles.²⁶ They describe how they started the program in a baseball field next to the Lincoln Terrace Housing Project in the summer of 1965. They got the program up and running before the promised summer money arrived from the federal government.²⁷ Their husbands and boyfriends made tables for them out of scrap lumber. They gathered old magazines for art and pots and pans for music from their own kitchens, and stored them at night in the ample trunk of one woman's 1960 Chevrolet.

The children would gather every morning for circle in the shade of a big eucalyptus tree. The women would sit with them, singing and laughing and clapping hands. Those women's mothers and aunts had brought them across the country in the years after World War II. They made the journey on trains and in Greyhound buses and family pickups, along circuitous paths that took them through St. Louis and Sacramento and Chicago, before coming to rest, among family, in the cool blue low rise public housing projects of Watts. They came from Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, looking for work and the ocean, and seeking to leave their white folks' dirty laundry behind.

The work that they made for themselves during that first summer of ETI's Head Start program was reassuring, exhausting, familiar work. It was also angry, defiant, determined work—this work of making home on foreign soil. Their mothers and grandmothers had been doing this work for as long as they could remember—schoolmarms, healers, sisters, daughters, and wives. Only the backdrop looked different—a pale blue, discolored slab of California-style public housing project concrete, rather than the dark pine slats of the farmer's cabins, the rural schoolrooms, the churches, where kids had been cared for before the “Great Society” came along.

By June of 1992, ETI's Head Start program spreads out over an eleven mile radius, from its central office in the working class enclave of Inglewood down into the largely Latino municipalities of South

26. See Interview with E.B., Z.S., & B.A., Los Angeles, Cal., Head Start Teachers (Feb. 20, 1993) (transcript on file with author) [hereinafter Interview with E.B., Z.S., & B.A.].

27. *Id.*

Gate and Huntington Park and then back east toward the program's original site at Lincoln Terrace.²⁸ To get from the administrative office in Inglewood over to Lincoln Terrace, you have to head seven miles due east on Century Boulevard, from where it begins at LAX and the ocean, to where it ends, abruptly, just over the boundary line between Los Angeles and Watts. You have to pass by blocks of once neat stucco bungalows, now laced with graffiti on the walls and wrought iron on the windows. You have to pass by the blackened frames of corner liquor stores, scorched and looted just a month before in an upheaval, insurrection—Some people called it a “postmodern food riot”²⁹ that played, to the people I talked to, like a spasm of displaced, dispersed graspings for justice. You have to pass by parks and community centers that had been built on the ash of an earlier—more focused—conflagration. You have to pass by the cemented play yard of a fenced in, flood-lit, twenty-four hour a day, security-guarded parochial school, and pawn shops, auto body shops, tacquerias, and Church's Fried Chicken, but not a single pharmacy or food store or laundromat. You have to go clear to the end of Century Boulevard, under the Harbor Freeway, over the Long Beach railroad track, beyond the point where the four lane urban boulevard becomes the pebbly trickle of an inner city street. Finally, if you go far enough, you will run literally head-on into the side yard of the Lincoln Terrace Head Start Center.

The three women who are auditing ETI's food accounts for the state have been instructed to do a few spot checks of ETI Head Start classrooms after they finish the paperwork. That way they can see first hand whether or not the money that the program has purportedly spent for lunches is in fact getting translated into good, hot, healthy food.

The three women finish working through the books at the main office at about 10:45 A.M. Lunch is served to the Head Start children at about 11:15 A.M. The program's associate director urges them to do their site visit at Lincoln Terrace and the other two ETI sites in Watts, because it is at those sites—rather than in the slightly better off neighborhoods of Inglewood, Huntington Park, or South Gate—that the hot lunches served at Head Start make the greatest difference. The three women seem uneasy when the director makes this

28. See Education and Training Institute, Education and Training Institute—Personnel Assignment/Site List 92-93 (Aug. 28, 1992) (unpublished document, on file with the author).

29. I recall that this quote was written by Los Angeles pundit Mike Davis but I am not sure of the exact source.

proposal. Mustering up all of their bland, bureaucratic tact, they explain that they would rather do their site visit at ETI's Inglewood Head Start Center, just a couple of blocks from the central office. With their late model rental car, and with all three of them white Visions of Reginald Denny, Crossroads, bright-eyed, fair-skinned, good-hearted intruders . . . stoned . . . flicker at the margins of their minds. With a plane to catch at five, and kids back home in Sacramento to feed, bathe and put to bed, they really should do their site visit somewhere closer at hand. Maybe another time they can go have lunch with the kids and their mothers at Lincoln Terrace and the Church of the Redeemer.

II. BLACK-EYED PEAS AND FUTURE LEADERS

I first met E.M. on a rainy morning in February of 1992, four months before the auditors came from Sacramento to check out the ETI program's meals. We were both attending an ETI-sponsored nutrition class for Head Start parents at South Central Los Angeles's Westside Community Center.

My field notes describe the encounter:

It is raining. Westside Community Center is a low-slung, warm toned, tasteful public building set inside an eight foot high wrought iron fence on a full block of dark green, richly shaded ground. It has a daycare center, a soul food cafe, lots of offices, and a large function room with a basketball court painted on the floor, a stage at one end, and a kitchen off to the side. Although the building's sleek facade is well maintained, the interior has the unmistakable mark of an aging public building. The nutrition class meets in the large function room with the basketball court painted on the floor. A woman from the University of California Agricultural Extension Service, Margaret, is teaching the class. It seems like she had been doing so for years. She conducts the class in a very "rote" way, relying very heavily on the handouts that the Extension Service provides. The women are remarkably patient: they seem both relaxed and bemused. The whole scene reminds me of a benign high school home economics class, where you really like the teacher, but recognize that she is a little out of it.

Margaret never gives us a chance to talk about our own issues—most of us think we have weight problems—or about the hassles of fitting all of our required daily nutrients into a McDonalds and doughnuts diet. Nonetheless, the women express a sense that the class is worthwhile. At the end of class, we sample a black-eyed pea salad that one of the women has prepared. Several women cannot eat the salad without salt, so they eat chips instead.

After the class, Jewel, a staff person from Westside, requires everyone, including me, to fill out an income eligibility form for the City of Los Angeles. She tells us to bring a Xeroxed piece of identification to attach to next week's form. She assures us that no one will check up on what we write down. Nevertheless, there is something very chilling to have such an intrusion follow on this very easygoing session. Jewel asks me several times to fill out the form, even after I mumble that, as a law professor, I don't think I am eligible for services under the City's poverty guidelines.

Among the women in attendance is E.M., who has brought her two-year-old son Peter, with her. Peter sat in her lap through the entire class. He was remarkably well-behaved.³⁰

After the nutrition class, E.M. bundled Peter into his rain gear and buckled him into the car seat of her late model Monte Carlo. The car had a broken right front window and a for-sale sign taped to the dashboard. She had decided she could not afford to keep it. She invited me to share the front seat with her. I left my aging Mazda in one of the ten parking spaces for Westside's staff, which was well within the perimeter of the building's iron fence.

The drive to the Church of the Redeemer did not take more than five minutes. You had to make a big circle around Westside's lawn, swing by the Martin Luther King Shopping Mall, and then go south for a few blocks down 103rd Street. The Head Start classroom was in a blue, prefabricated building adjacent to a small church. Its fenced-in play yard abutted a gravel parking lot, which was bounded by the "Blue Line," the recently constructed commuter rail line from Long Beach to downtown Los Angeles. Although the classroom was designed for twenty children, it currently served sixty-four African American and Latino children in two three-hour shifts. Inside, the telltale rug-paved, rectangular "circle" signaled that you were in a nationally certified center for the education of young children. One side of this circle was bounded by a blackboard that was bordered, both above and below, by parades of alphabet cards in bright block letters. The opposite side was bounded by a wide strip of mottled, gray-brown linoleum on which three knee-high rectangular children's tables were framed by tiny chairs.

By the time we arrived at the site, the children were already seated, six to a table, eating baked chicken, steamed carrots, cabbage, bread, and peaches for dessert. On entering the classroom, E.M. set her son, Peter, down on the rug so that she could load up two plates of food. One of the perks of volunteering in your child's Head Start

30. See Author's Field Notes in Los Angeles, Cal. (Feb. 11, 1992) (on file with author).

classroom, which E.M. did on a daily basis, was that the program would feed you and your younger children a hot meal. When he hit the carpet, Peter toddled straight for the table where his three-year-old sister Lavinia was eating and sat down beside her to join the meal. E.M., taking Peter's lead, brought their plates to Lavinia's table, sat down beside her children, and started her meal. I brought my own plate to the table and we began to talk.

Most of the children were silent. Some earnestly sawed away at their chicken with plastic spoons. Others traded fork for fingers, carefully wiping up afterwards on a napkin or a shirt. Their faces looked distant and deliberate, as their forks worked circles around the carrots, the chicken, and then the cabbage. A few ate quickly, announcing themselves as future leaders by the daunting way that they wielded their spoons. Most of the children were more cautious, however, laboring to get each morsel of cabbage, chicken, and carrot securely in their mouths. One or two of the children sat perfectly still amid this flurry of eating. Their fingers were quiet. Their eyes were dark pools. After the rest of the children had finished, their plates, though still full, were removed.

III. THINGS JUST GOT WORSE

E.M. came to Lavinia's Head Start classroom every day. She worked alongside the teachers and aides, engaging in the thousands of small, face-to-face interactions that produce care. My longest taped conversation with E.M. took place at the Westside Community Center on July 2, 1992.³¹ By this time, we had spent many hours together in Lavinia's classroom. The neighborhood was starting to rebuild after the Rodney King fires. My July 2, 1992, field notes describe the scene:

This morning I went to Westside to interview E.M. She arrived at 10:00, right on schedule. We went to the Center's preschool, which was closed for the summer. There, seated next to each other on a couch, we talked for about an hour and a half.

I was struck by how she seemed to get more and more relaxed as we talked, so that she seemed able to express deep and complex feelings much more openly near the end of the interview. She always talked about her husband's violence indirectly, by saying "he got physical," rather than giving any detail. She said several times that Lavinia's teacher, J.G., could sense what she was going

31. See Interview with E.M., *supra* note 21.

through with her husband, without her ever having to put it in words. This seemed to be a quality that was very important for her.

At the point in the interview when E.M. tried to explain what was so “therapeutic” or satisfying for her about working every day in Lavinia’s Head Start classroom, she started to cry.³²

One of the first things that E.M. wanted me to understand was that, as a veteran client of government funded social programs, she did not come to Head Start with very great expectations.

E.M.: I’m on welfare, you know. . . . I was ashamed, because I had worked since 1977. Then I had to ask for help. . . . Those people up there are not nice. I don’t care for them. . . . They don’t care for us.

L.W.: How are they not nice?

E.M.: They treat you like dirt. They don’t even know you, and they treat you like dirt. The first day I applied, this woman had never met me. She didn’t know me. And she treated me like I was somebody on crack. . . . just like a nobody. . . . like I was nothing. And I don’t like being treated like that. . . . I didn’t feel like I should have been treated that way, or anybody else should be treated that way. . . . [T]hey don’t care. They just don’t care.³³

Yet from her first contact with Head Start, things seemed different.

E.M.: When I first took Lavinia [to Head Start], she cried for two or three days, which they all do. . . . I signed a paper saying that I would volunteer at certain times. But I had my small child Peter. . . . I thought that I would have to make arrangements for Peter to be taken care of while I go up there to volunteer. . . . I didn’t know that I could volunteer with him until a week and a half [later, when] I took him in one day and I saw another lady there with her smaller child. . . . And so I asked the site director, J.G., “Is she volunteering?” And she said, “Yeah.” And I told her, “Well, I didn’t know you could bring your smaller children.” She said, “Oh yeah. You can bring him. You just have to watch him. You have to take care of him, and otherwise you can come in and volunteer. There’s no problem there.”³⁴

J.G.’s voice had a quality of warmth that drew E.M. out of herself and into the classroom:

E.M.: So I went there the next day, and I have been going there every day since.³⁵

32. See Author’s Field Notes in Los Angeles, Cal. (July 2, 1992) (on file with author).

33. Interview with E.M., *supra* note 21, at 38.

34. *Id.* at 12.

35. *Id.* at 17.

E.M. thus joined a small group of mothers, grandmothers, aunts, older sisters, and friends of Head Start children who volunteered in ETI Head Start classrooms every day.³⁶

In my conversations with E.M. and the other regulars, I tried to understand their motivation. Echoing Head Start's official rhetoric, E.M. often told me that she worked in the classroom to improve her own parenting skills and thus to help her children. This "trickle down" theory for parent involvement seems to be the most common in Head Start policy literature: getting parents to volunteer in Head Start classrooms as a "back door" way for the state to improve the home environment of poor children. But a second reason that E.M. gave for her involvement did not fit so easily with this theory, or with her own expectations. It was more "selfish":

E.M.: I love kids, but after having three children you never dream that you'd want to be bothered with a class full of children. But I enjoyed it! . . . I was able to get away from home.³⁷

Most of the regular volunteers expressed similar feelings as I talked with them at length. For instance, M.P., a bus driver who was on temporary disability for job related stress, had this to say when I asked her why she volunteered in her child's Head Start classroom every day:

M.P.: A lot of parents don't really get involved in the program. But it really does me good; it really makes me feel good to be helping the children. It's really inspiring; you have to understand what it does to me.³⁸

As I came to know E.M. more intimately, she began to say more about what lay behind her own "selfish" motivations for classroom volunteering.

E.M.: My husband and I got married in 1983 . . . We moved to Seattle, Washington . . . in 1977. . . . We both worked when we left [for] Washington. I worked for General Telephone . . . in West Covina And he's been in the military for twelve [years]. He got out of the military, got into the Reserves, and . . . got a job at a state corrections facility, a prison. . . . We had our first child, and then we had our second, and our third. . . . At first we were pretty happy. We argued like

36. I include other primary caretakers because at the most socioeconomically stressed sites, like Lincoln Terrace and the Church of the Redeemer, as many as a quarter of the children's legal custodians were grandmothers, older sisters, foster parents, or others, rather than a biological parent.

37. Interview with E.M., *supra* note 21, at 13.

38. Interview with M.P., Los Angeles, Cal., Head Start Volunteer (Jan. 15, 1992) (transcript on file with author) [hereinafter Interview with M.P.].

everybody else and wouldn't speak for a couple of days, but basically we had a good marriage.³⁹

Then, in the recession of the 1980s, her husband lost his job. Over his wife's objection, he decided to move the family back to South Central Los Angeles, their childhood home.

The area had become more violent in the decade since they had left:

E.M.: There's a lot of shootings and stuff that go on over here, and gangs and all of that. I was kind of afraid when I first moved back, you know, . . . and I live here. I grew up here. . . . When we moved we had our house in bars, and it took me a while to get used to that. . . . And the sirens and the shootings and all of that.⁴⁰

Soon after they returned, things started to fall apart:

E.M.: [When] we moved here, I don't know what happened. The bottom just fell out. Things just started to change, and he treated us like a second family. . . . He just changed. He didn't want to work. . . . He wanted me to get on welfare, so I got on welfare. . . . He decided that he didn't want to work. Just like that. We had just had our last child.

L.W.: Why do you think he decided he didn't want to work anymore?

E.M.: I don't know. He's a complicated person . . . and confused. He has some emotional problems, and I think they stem from childhood, and he's also an alcoholic, and he doesn't want to believe that. . . . So he kind of decided he had enough with work. . . . And then he came back here and got with the same old crowd, and you know, when you leave and you come back, and the same people are doing the same things that they did when you left. . . . He just got in with the same crowd. . . . He wanted everyone to kind of take care of him. . . . The drinking got worse, a lot worse. He went in for one interview for something, for the post office, I believe. He scored high on the test, but they checked his background and he had had two arrest records since we've been there. . . . For disturbing the peace and drunk driving. . . . So they didn't hire him. And he felt like, well, I'm not going in for any more interviews. . . . He just wanted me to work, and he didn't want to work. And things just got bad.⁴¹

Gradually, her husband's stress began to turn to physical abuse.

E.M.: He got physical, . . . violent.⁴²

39. Interview with E.M., *supra* note 21, at 6.

40. *Id.* at 13.

41. *Id.*

42. *Id.*

E.M. came to Head Start for the first time during a period when her husband's increasing violence had begun to drive her into depression and withdrawal.

E.M.: I stayed home. I was always depressed. I was a really depressed person. I had lost, I had lost . . . I'm small. You know, my normal weight is about 115. And I had gone down to 98 pounds, you know, going through this. But my daughter got with Head Start and I started volunteering and um, the place really kind of saved me in a way.⁴³

IV. HELPING SPOON OUT GLOBS OF GLUE

The center of E.M.'s Head Start experience was her day-to-day work in Lavinia's classroom. In our July 2, 1992, interview, she found it hard to find words to describe the changes that she felt from that experience, because so much of what mattered most seemed very small. My field notes from a typical day, in October, are perhaps the best way to convey my own impressions of the scene:

This morning I went to the Church of the Redeemer. I arrived at about 10:00. J.G. was with the children in the play yard. The other two teachers were in the classroom, with the parent volunteers. B.T. [another parent] was cutting out newsprint and stapling it into individual copybooks for each child. E.M. was talking with the two other parent volunteers. I returned to the play yard to talk with J.G. She is very concerned about the shrinkage of primary health care facilities in the neighborhood, but has inexhaustible faith in Head Start, and seems confident that things will eventually improve. When we returned to the classroom, E.M. and I helped a table of kids cut and paste a construction paper Halloween scene. The shapes had all been cut out by parent volunteers. We helped the kids paste the shapes onto construction paper to make a scene of a haunted house, a ghost, a pumpkin, etc. E.M. and I helped spoon out globs of glue and make sure that the kids pasted the shapes appropriately on their pages.

After this exercise was completed, we lounged around on the rug while the kids helped serve up lunch. For lunch they had chicken, collard greens, cantaloupe (cut by B.T.), and cornbread. J.G. explained that it was a real southern meal.⁴⁴

In our conversations, E.M. gave her own perspective on this routine:

E.M.: We help with the activities. Like if they are doing coloring at the table, if they're doing cutting activities, [we] teach them how to cut with scissors . . . and their shapes and numbers and

43. *Id.*

44. Author's Field Notes in Los Angeles, Cal. (Oct. 20, 1992) (on file with author).

all kinds of things. We're broken up into groups. So there may be three or four tables of children. Half the class will go outside and play and the other group will stay in. Two teachers have to be outside . . . and two teachers have to be in the class. . . . So if there's two parents, one parent will go outside with the two teachers and one will stay in with the other two teachers. And so we help . . . the teachers at the table, helping the kids. . . . [W]e have song time. That's in the morning when they first get there. They have a light breakfast when they get there and then they play outside and [do indoor activities] at the same time and then they'll switch off. . . . And then they have games that they do or they'll talk about the animal sounds and we'll wash up and get ready for lunch. And they help with lunch. I help with lunch.⁴⁵

Preparing and sharing meals with the children was a central theme in E.M.'s account of her work:

E.M.: I help prepare and fix the plates. And the kids would come up to the tables and we fix the plates and they would set them on the table, and learn how to set the table. [O]ne parent is allowed to be served lunch, but if there's enough food to go around then the other parents and the children can get to have lunch too.

L.W.: Would you usually end up getting lunch?

E.M.: Yes, yes I would. Because I was usually there every day.

L.W.: And what about your little one?

E.M.: We would share a lunch. . . . The food was good, excellent. It was good. They had ham. They had baked chicken, macaroni and cheese, turkey, chicken, and dressing. Beef stroganoff, which I went home and duplicated the recipe. I tasted it, tried to find out what was in it. And I duplicated it. Pretty good! . . . They have tacos and burritos and enchiladas and greens and cabbage and Brussels sprouts, and—I love vegetables—and corn and all kinds of stuff. . . . And it's good food. It's good. I thought it was like cafeteria food, but it was good food.⁴⁶

V. SOMETIMES TRUTH HURTS

As she continued to talk about her day-to-day routine in the classroom, she began to tell me about her relationship with J.G.:

L.W.: Did you get close to any of the teachers over the year?

E.M.: Yes. I did. I got very close with J.G.

L.W.: Did you get close so you could actually talk to her?

45. Interview with E.M., *supra* note 21, at 18.

46. *Id.* at 19.

- E.M.: Yes . . . I got a little close with all of them, but J.G. was the one, she's the same age as my mother, so she was more like a mother-friend, so I really got close with her.
- L.W.: What kind of role would you say she played in your life over the year?
- E.M.: [S]he knew the problems that I was having, even before I came out and told her, because she's been through similar things, so she said she kind of had an idea. I think she saw that I needed a little help at the time. You know, if it was nothing but ah, not a shoulder to cry on, but just an ear, you know, and to tell me that things would be all right. Because, like I said, I was depressed when I got there. I really was. And I, um, I didn't have a lot of self-esteem. I still have a long way to go. In a lot of ways I just felt like my whole world had just come to an end. And so she just kind of talked to me, and let me know that things don't stay the same, and that, you know, people do survive, and you just have to basically be there for your children and yourself, you know. You just have to live for yourself and your children. You don't have any control over anybody else. . . . I can relate to her. . . . Besides that, me getting involved with the classroom was therapeutic. She kept me busy. I was always busy.
- L.W.: When would you find time to talk with her during the day?
- E.M.: When we were out in the yard. Or sometimes I would just hang around after class was over, until the next class started, and we talked, you know. Mainly when we were outside in the yard watching the children, we'd walk around, and we'd just talk. She was a big help.
- L.W.: What do you think it was about her that enabled you to do that?
- E.M.: She's not afraid to show feelings and emotions and she's not afraid to say, "I've been there" and "I know what it's like." And she's a very compassionate person and real warm. . . . And she's real honest.
- L.W.: Honest in what sense?
- E.M.: Just about everything. I mean, what she has to say, she doesn't bite her tongue, so I know she's going to tell me the truth. She'll just come out and say it, you know. And sometimes truth hurts, but you need the truth.
- L.W.: And you're saying truth about what she thought was going on with you?
- E.M.: Yeah, what she thought.
- L.W.: Thinking back on it, how would you say you approached her?
- E.M.: She approached me first, I believe.
- L.W.: And you think she perceived that something was going on?

- E.M.: Yeah. She could see. I don't know. I don't remember how we first started talking about it. I don't remember. All I know is it came up and. . . Well, she may not have really approached me, but she treated me like she knew. Some days I really didn't walk in with a long face or anything like that. I carried on my day and I was happy while I was there, but when it got time to go home I wouldn't want to go home. I'd kind of hang around. And so she might have picked up there too. . . . And then a couple of times I had to walk or catch the Blue Line, and I would call and tell her we would be late, because my husband had gotten mad and took the car or something like that, and she probably thought about that too.
- L.W.: And sort of put stuff together?
- E.M.: Yeah. I don't remember when we really started talking about it. I might have said something like, "I'm having problems." And she said something like, "Yes, I know. I already know you're having problems." Or she would just come over to me and just put her arm around me and tell me things are going to be all right without me saying anything.⁴⁷

VI. A PLACE TO GET MYSELF TOGETHER

After E.M. became a regular volunteer in the classroom, J.G. urged her to run for a position on the ETI Head Start's policy council.

- E.M.: I volunteered to be elected to run for secretary. [N]obody else was going to do it from our area. And somebody from our area has to run for something. So I said, "Well, I'll do it." I didn't expect for them to choose me. . . . I didn't know these women. This is my first year. I didn't run for chairperson, because I thought, "I'm not qualified to be a chairperson." You know, I mean, that's the way I think. . . . That's the way I was thinking. So I ran for secretary. And I got chosen! . . . I was really surprised.⁴⁸

Although E.M. had done clerical work for twelve years, serving as the secretary of the policy council took on a meaning that exceeded the scope of the duties she was required to perform. Her voice was playful as she told me how keeping the minutes for the policy council had helped turn her back from despair.

- E.M.: I had a job to do. I had duties. I had a format to follow. I had responsibilities, you know, that people were depending on me to do. I felt good. . . . You see, I'm good with paperwork. I'm good. And I got my notebooks together. And I got the plastic covers, the little covers for every paper, and I had categories set up, and I had it just perfect. My little notebook. Oh, I was

47. *Id.* at 28.

48. *Id.* at 56.

so proud of that notebook. I mean I had it together! So when I was there I conducted my little position like a professional. I thought I was somebody, so it was fun.⁴⁹

As my interview with E.M. continued, she became more and more focused on trying to convey her internal process of change:

E.M.: I was being assertive. I started being assertive. I started feeling like somebody again. And also, I think the reason that my husband started getting violent, which has been . . . we've been having problems since we moved here, but he really started getting violent within the last year, I think, because I started doing what I wanted to do. I used to [do] whatever he wanted me to do. But it worked ok before. It was all right. I was happy. He was happy, you know. And now it was like, if he told me to do something, and I didn't agree with it, I would question him about it or say, "Well, look, I don't know, I don't agree with that. I don't want to do that." And he didn't know how to handle that, so that's when he started. It was in stages. First he got verbal. Like the first time he ever called me out of my name . . . he just might as well have kicked me, because he had never called me out of my name. Then he got worse. Then he got really verbal. And then he got a little physical, and then he got really physical. He started getting really physical when he could not control me any more.

L.W.: And you're feeling like your experience at Head Start and your having responsibility was making you more assertive?

E.M.: I started to change too, because I wasn't the same little wife that would just follow his orders, which I did before. . . . But then he just started demanding impossible things out of me, things that I really didn't agree with at all. . . .

It wasn't like he would ask me, "Well, don't go out to party." It wasn't that type of thing. Because I don't party. . . . It was just like, he may have said, "Go do this. Go to the store and do this and do that." And I may have said, "Well, I have something else to do right now. You'll have to do it yourself." And that was like, "What? I told you." "Well, I don't care what you said. You can do it. If you want me to do it tomorrow, when I have free time I will do it, but I'm not going to do that right now." That's just an example of things, you know. And he just couldn't deal with it. . . . I'm still a little emotionally tied. I mean, I don't love him. I don't love him like a husband and wife. I care for him, because he's my children's father, and I thought I would never say this, because I loved him with a purple passion. I mean, I just, you know, but it, it just died. He just killed . . . each day he was being, you know. And so I finally . . . and that was the only way. I would have never moved. I would have taken abuse until I got

49. *Id.* at 57.

to that point. . . . It just finally got to the point where I did not love him any more and that was the day that I walked out. I couldn't see any reason staying taking that.

L.W.: So it sounds like Head Start for you was at the same time a place where you had opportunities to . . .

E.M.: to get myself together . . .

L.W.: and also a support as the change was happening?

E.M.: Ah, oh yeah. Yeah. A big support. Yeah.⁵⁰

VII. CIRCLES OF CHANGE

The first time I talked to E.M. about Head Start, she spoke about its impact in language that I found vague, "pumped up," and familiar. She told me that Head Start had saved her life. As I heard a more detailed account of her involvement in the program, I gained a new respect for the spiritual rhetoric that she and other Head Start women have so often turned to in an effort to find words for their experience. For the transformation that E.M. experienced through Head Start was multidimensional in both its dynamics and its effects. Attempting to describe that experience in analytical language cannot do it justice.

In terms of effects, we might begin with the notion that E.M.'s "identity" is not something that is stable across different relationships. Rather, she has many potential "identities," which come in and out of focus as she interacts with different people in different social domains. With respect to Head Start's "effects" on E.M., then, we might say that several of these potential identities experienced significant change.

Thus, we might see E.M. as a victim of intimate violence. From this perspective, the change was straightforward: a woman who was subject to physical and verbal abuse finally gained the self-confidence to leave a violent, but emotionally entangling relationship. We might also see E.M. as a person with diagnosable psychiatric disorders. Her involvement in Head Start alleviated symptoms of severe depression, anorexia, and suicidal ideation. She was also a woman in extreme psychological distress. Her work in Head Start helped her repair an eroded sense of self-esteem, and strengthened her capacity to assert her needs and desires. From an employment perspective, she was a woman with substantial job experience, but limited marketable job skills and limited vocational confidence. Her work in the classroom

50. *Id.* at 62.

and on the policy council helped her back on her feet. She got a chance to brush up on old job skills in a supportive setting, as well as an opportunity to learn new ones. The satisfaction she found in the classroom led her to formulate new and more challenging vocational ambitions. Finally, when E.M. enrolled her daughter in Head Start, she was a woman in spiritual turmoil. Her involvement in Head Start helped her come through that crisis. Particularly through her work in the classroom, E.M. recovered a sense of moral agency.

As I worked with E.M. over the year, I slowly gained an understanding of the process through which these multiple changes took place. E.M. was deeply involved in three critical relationships over her year in of working in her daughter's Head Start program. I think that the momentum for change came from within each relationship, as well as through the interplay among them. These relationships were both settings for intense, trusting conversation and a focus for self-reflection. Through that reflection, the moral significance of each relationship was enhanced. It was as though E.M. turned the work that she was doing in the classroom into a mirror, or a map, of her own path of change.

The first of these relationships was between E.M. and the informal community of other parent volunteers. Through these relationships, E.M. found a place to get basic social support around the day-to-day stresses of her life. These relationships also initiated E.M. into Head Start's parent culture. By working side-by-side with other parents, E.M. learned the routines of the Head Start classroom—how to keep peace on the playground, how to get the kids to settle down before circle, how to tell when a child needed to make an emergency trip to the bathroom, how full to fill their milk cups to cut down on spills. By gossiping with these other women on the play yard, E.M. learned the secrets of the Head Start social setting. For example, she learned which parents were having affairs with local community organizers, which teachers were the hardest to work with, and which field administrators had the most clout in the central office when you wanted to get a “real” Head Start job. And by taking part in official parent involvement events with those other women—from nutrition classes to diversity awareness days to policy council meetings—E.M. learned the special language that Head Start women use and the stories that they tell to convince themselves and each other that they are indeed being changed.

In much the same way that other change-oriented social settings have been recognized to work, the Head Start parent community

initiated E.M. into Head Start's narrative culture. Through these connections, E.M. was shown and told what kind of life changes to expect from the program; she was encouraged to look for those changes in herself; and she was taught the stories, images, and rituals through which to testify to those changes, thus confirming that they were "real" indeed.

Thus described, the informal Head Start parent community has an almost cult-like quality. It is easy to imagine a vulnerable woman connecting herself to such a community in a passive, indeed, almost addictive way. It is easy to imagine someone reciting the boilerplate rhetoric that Head Start has "saved" her, and thereby assuring herself that "real" change has magically taken place. Based on my research in Head Start programs, it appears that some of the most vocal "boosters" among Head Start parents have learned to "talk the talk" of personal transformation, but have not found their way to the intensive personal relationships that went along with these public practices in order to enable and sustain changes in a woman's life course, over time. E.M. found such relational anchors in her "mother-friendship" with J.G. and her "therapeutic" relationship with two Head Start children. It was through these relationships that she felt herself able to move beyond an easy insistence that change had happened *to* her, and into the more difficult moral space in which change is not so certain and, therefore, perhaps, a little more possible.

VIII. YOU EITHER WORKED IN THE LAUNDRY OR YOU WORKED IN THE HOUSES

I had my most extended conversation with J.G. on an afternoon in mid-June 1992, a few weeks before my long conversation with E.M. at the Westside Community Center. The second shift of children had just gone home. Two weeks remained in the regular academic year. J.G. had just learned that the emergency funds that had been promised from the federal government to keep the program open for six weeks during the summer would not be coming through.

J.G.: I'm from Birmingham, Alabama. I have two brothers and I have no sisters. My father died when I was a year old, and I was raised by my mother, a single parent.⁵¹

Coal and iron is the state of Alabama. That's where the money comes in, is coal. My grandfather worked at a place that's called Flatop, Alabama. It's one of them little coal

51. Interview with J.G., *supra* note 22, at 1.

mining towns. He was a coal miner and a gambler, and my grandmother [Grandma Alice] was born in Montgomery, Alabama . . . and she had only one child, which was my mother. She was working in the laundries, because that was the only jobs back then. You either worked in a laundry or you worked in the houses . . . in housekeeping. There was no other jobs for you to do back there. And so my mother had worked in the laundry also, and then my mother . . . took sick, and then she became a domestic worker. . . . She was a domestic worker and I became a babysitter. . . . I was the type of babysitter that, like for summers, when people would go out of town, I would travel with them to take care of their children.⁵²

J.G.'s mother had one family in particular for whom she worked, the Tutweilers. Her mother had a house on the Tutweiler property where she lived with J.G. and her other children during the week:

J.G.: [W]e were all raised up together because my mom had to keep all of us together. . . . My mother would stay there. . . . The house wasn't that far. It was in the community. I worked with these people the whole [time] I was in school, baby-sitting and helping, and my mother did the cooking, . . . and she was responsible for the children.⁵³

The most important figures in J.G.'s childhood were her mother and her Grandma Alice, a midwife and healer:

J.G.: Grandma Alice! [A]ll I can remember, she was Cherokee Indian. She was ninety percent Cherokee Indian. She was a reddish color, with straight hair, and she said her father was black, and her mother was Cherokee Indian. It's all I can remember. . . .⁵⁴

She was a doctor in a sense of speaking. She took care of the little kids when they were sick. If someone needed to talk to somebody, if you had a problem, you could go and say, "Well, I'm going to talk to Grandma." My grandma would sit on the porch and the kids would sit around her feet and she would talk to us. If a child would get hurt or something, she would come. She would always tell us that her mother was an Indian, Cherokee Indian, and that she had healing powers. . . . [S]he told us that she had been blessed with these healing powers. And she would go to the yard and get these weeds, and make this medicine out of these things. Not store bought medicine. . . . She believed in herbs and vinegar and garlic and stuff like that. She was a midwife also, and she would deliver the babies. Most of the little children in the neighborhood,

52. *Id.* at 2.

53. *Id.*

54. *Id.* at 4.

even the white, she had delivered a lot of the kids. So they looked upon her as Grandma Alice.

J.G. learned a hard but critical lesson from Grandma Alice:

J.G.: Growing up as a child, I think my love of children and people grew from . . . my grandmother having a lot of love for everybody. And as children we had so many children around us, all children. We had so much love. We were very poor people, but we had something that money couldn't buy. We had a lot of love. . . . That's one thing nobody can take from you. And that seems to work in my everyday life now too.⁵⁵

From childhood, J.G. wanted to spend her life doing the kind of work that she learned from her mother and Grandma Alice. She called this type of work "being the mother."⁵⁶ It might have been called care work. Or, in more familiar language, it might have been called domestic service.

J.G.: I've wanted to work with people, children, for the simple reason, when I was coming up as a young girl in the South, young kids were given a responsibility, in somewhat an adult capacity. My mom took very ill when I was very young, and I had to take over like I was the mother of the house. And so I gained this responsibility of . . . being the mother and things like this. So I always said that when I get to be grown I was going to be a social worker and I was going to work with children and older people.⁵⁷

Life for J.G. in Alabama in the 1950s was not all harmony:

J.G.: [T]here was white kids and there was black kids. . . . I knew you were different. I just knew you was just lighter, and your hair may have been a little bit different . . . and there were a lot of little Jewish kids. . . . But by my mother working around children, and we living in the same house, my mother never did allow us to be name calling.⁵⁸

As soon as she finished high school, J.G. married a brother of one of her favorite high school teachers.⁵⁹ A year later, she had her first baby, a daughter.⁶⁰ Then, in 1963, she and her baby boarded a train to join her husband in Los Angeles.

J.G.: Someone told my husband to come to California, because this was the land of milk and honey. And he came out here and had to sleep in the mission. . . . He got here and there was no job. . . . So he calls me and says, "Come to California baby. I

55. *Id.* at 5.

56. *Id.* at 1.

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.* at 6.

59. *See id.* at 19.

60. *See id.* at 35.

can't live without you." My mother says you have to go wherever your husband is. You're married now. If he's in a tent, you got to sleep in that tent. So I grab my baby and gets on the train and I come to California.⁶¹

When she arrived, her husband was sleeping in an apartment with no lights and no furniture.

J.G.: I came from a family where we didn't have everything. And I made the best of it. I got in and did what I had seen my momma do. If we had a little vegetables or something, we shared them among each other. I got candles and I used them for lights. I went to the market and got a fifty-pound bag of ice, and put it in the sink, and wrapped it up with rag and put my baby's milk on it. . . . Because I had learned to live with less, and be happy, and go to bed and count my blessings and be content with it. And I stayed on , and the first paycheck he got working at Bullocks in the restaurant, we got the lights turned on, . . . and we got our first chicken. . . . We didn't have anything to cook it in. I went to the second-hand store and bought pots and pans, so that we could have some things to cook, and I cooked them their first meal. We had no furniture. I went in this furniture store they'd just burned in Compton . . . I said, you know, we're trying. One dollar we gave the man, and we got three rooms of furniture. . . . I wasn't working because I had the little baby. . . . So I called my mother, and I asked my mother if I saved up enough money, a bus ticket, would she come and stay with me until I could try to find me a job.⁶²

Soon after J.G. came to Los Angeles, the first Watts riot swept through her neighborhood.⁶³ When I talked with her, the memories, recently reawakened by television images of the Rodney King fires, still burned in her mind.

During the first decade that she was in Los Angeles, she had a history of increasingly unskilled jobs in the Southern California industrial corridor. Then she got a stable job:

J.G.: I knew I had to work hard to get enough money for my family to survive. And I kept saying, "I got to make enough money." I worked hard. I said, "If you get my foot in the door they are going to let me work on. I'll mop the floors, I'll clean the toilets, I'll wash the windows. There's nothing that I won't—within rights—that I won't do to earn a living. Because you always got to start at the bottom and go to the top". And I

61. *Id.* at 24.

62. *Id.* at 24-25.

63. *See id.* at 27.

worked myself up to be supervisor. I worked for that company for fifteen years.⁶⁴

However, the job required her to commute between one and two hours each way to work. After her son was badly injured by a distant relative who was caring for her children while she worked, she quit and began drawing from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (“AFDC”). Just like most of the women I talked with, J.G. had nothing good to say about AFDC. She told me they treat you like dogs.⁶⁵

Eventually J.G. enrolled her youngest child in Head Start. Like E.M. two decades later, she got hooked on the daily ritual of volunteering in her child’s Head Start classroom. After three years as a parent volunteer, she was hired as a teacher in the program. From the outset, she regarded one of the most important features of her job as a Head Start teacher to be her work with parents. She credits two figures, her child’s first Head Start teacher and her own Grandma Alice, with teaching her how to work effectively with Head Start parents.⁶⁶

IX. I BROUGHT YOU HERE AND I’LL TAKE YOU AWAY

When I asked J.G. to tell me more about what she had learned from Grandma Alice, her voice changed. She stopped chatting with me in the easygoing way that had made me feel like her sister, and began to chant like an old woman in mourning. She spoke the words through her body—through her eyes and her hands and her breathing—as much as her voice. What follows are excerpts from what she told me:

J.G.: I was in Birmingham on the same street when they threw the bomb in the church and burned up the little girl. . . . I couldn’t, you know, I couldn’t understand. I knew there was a lot of prejudice and a lot of things was going on. Plus I knew a lot of people who was KKK members. I knew them . . . from my mother . . . from my grandmother. . . . My grandmother knew them all.

And [Grandma Alice] told us about the time when they came to our house when we were little to burn our house. And they had burned a cross in front of our door. And my grandmother had told us that they had came.

64. *Id.* at 27.

65. Interview with E.M., *supra* note 21, at 62-63.

66. *See* Interview with J.G., *supra* note 22, at 5.

I must have been a baby. And when the guys all came and the guy that came up and had burned the cross and he was making my granddaddy and everybody come out of the house, and my grandmother got up out of the bed, and came to the door with the ax in her hand. . . . And when she came to the door the guy who was in the front, he says, "Oh, my God. No. No. Do you know who that is?"

And she walked up and she says, "And I know every one of you." She delivered the majority of them.

And he says, oh, he says, "Ooh, oh, Granny. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Oh Granny, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

And she said, and she, you know, she's an old lady, and she says, "And then I'm going to tan your hide."

And these were grown men. But she just . . . she was . . . my grandmother was that kind of person. She wasn't afraid of anybody. Any color. Because she said, "Every one of you, I brought you here, and I'll take you away." She said, "Every one of you. I gave you life, and I'll take your life away from you."

But she was that type, until the day she died. My grandmother was that way. And when, the day of her funeral, the whole front of the church . . . there was more whites in the church than there was black. Because she had, she was that kind of a lady. She had love and compassion and justice for everybody.⁶⁷

E.M. never told me that J.G. had shared this childhood story with her on their walks in the Church of the Redeemer's play yard. Yet, E.M. told me how J.G. taught her and other Head Start women, by her example as well as her words, how to face up to the people in South Central Los Angeles who threatened their dignity and also sometimes their lives.

X. MY THING WAS TO BREAK THIS BARRIER

In addition to her friendships with the other Head Start volunteers and J.G., her daughter's teacher, the third relationship that helped enable E.M. to make changes was with two Head Start children. Early on in our interview, E.M. described her work with these children as "therapeutic."⁶⁸

67. *Id.* at 12.

68. Interview with E.M., *supra* note 21, at 25.

Near the end of the interview, I asked her why she had used that word.

E.M.: Because . . . in every class there's some children that are not too receptive. Or children that are problem children. Like there was these two, sister and brother. Well, the brother was really having problems at home and at school since he was a little kid. . . . He was kind of bad.⁶⁹

She went on to describe a process of working with this boy that mirrored the work of listening that J.G. was doing with her. She engaged him in activities. She gave him the chance to talk to her. She tried to let him know that she was trying to understand.

E.M.: But you had to understand why. So, my thing was to get to be friends with them and break this barrier, and try to, you know, um . . . I can't even think of the word, just . . . just to see him, to see if he can act like the other kids. Not to be so disturbed at school. Or behave . . . it's hard to explain. But we became really good friends . . . Every morning, he would say good morning to me, and he would want to know what you know. He'd tell me my earrings were pretty, or what I have on is pretty, and he would just touch my face, touch my hair. And that, that was so rewarding, because here's this kid that everybody said was bad, and he would do all sorts of things for attention . . . that would get on your nerves. I wanted to see if I could bring him out of that . . . not completely, but while he was there . . . have him act not so wild . . .⁷⁰

The second Head Start child that E.M. worked with was a young Latina girl:

E.M.: And then there was this other little girl that came in, her father committed suicide in front of them. In front of the children.

And she came and she cried everyday. You couldn't get her to walk. You'd have to walk her. You couldn't get her to color. You'd have to take a crayon, put it in her hand, hold her hand. You couldn't get her to eat. You would have to feed her. Open her mouth, put the food in it. She just would not respond to anything.

And that was my mission. I was going to help that little girl. I was going to be her friend. And I was going to see if she would start coloring by herself, if she would eat.

When I would come in everyday, when the kids would play, she wouldn't play. But I would take her by the hand and we'd walk around the playground. Just walk. And I'd just talk to her and just point out different things, and just walk. She'd never say anything, but she would walk with me.

69. *Id.* at 62-63.

70. *Id.*

And after that she would, when she'd leave, her mother would pick her up, I'd wave to her. She'd wave or she'd smile. And then the crayons, finally instead of me getting the crayon, picking the color for her, because I would ask her what color do you want. She would not respond. She wouldn't even look. But, after a while, I would ask her what color do you want. She would tell me. Then I would get it. Put it in her hand and we would color together.

Well now, I ask her, what crayon do you want. She would say blue and get it herself and start drawing.

I mean, anybody could have done that. I didn't do anything that anyone couldn't have done, but it was just that was something at the time that I needed to do as well as needed to help her do, because it helped me too. It made me feel so good.

L.W.: Tell me how was working with these two kids therapeutic for you?

E.M.: That, that I was able to help somebody, because I, you know, the past few years it seemed like I couldn't help anybody. I couldn't help myself . . . I didn't think too much of myself [so] I couldn't help anybody. Let alone myself or my kids. I was just there.

I went to this school, and these kids are having problems. I'm having problems. I'm working with them and they're making some effort, I mean some progress. And at the same time I am too, because I'm being like pumped up in a way, but it's a good pump up, because.

You know, you get nothing out of it other than a smile. I'm not getting paid for this, . . . for making it a challenge for me to go after a certain child and work with them. But I am getting paid in another way. I really get choked up thinking about it. It's just so rewarding. Well . . . I'm sorry . . . [She starts to cry.]⁷¹

In our conversations over the year, E.M. told me how working with these children gave her some hope that she could make changes in her own life. If these two children could overcome the violence that had overwhelmed their lives, then surely E.M. could face her own predicament. Her work with the children helped her regain a sense of her capacity for moral agency, even in the face of world shattering violence. The gradual responsiveness of these children to her efforts at connection gave E.M. living proof that she had, or could bring forth from herself, what it took—the creativity, the patience, and the sheer, groundless hope—to be an effective agent of change.

71. *Id.* at 63-64.

The fascinating thing about her experience is that through her work with these children, she was able to bootstrap the kind of foundational self-confidence that both motivated and enabled her to change her own circumstances.

Finally, her work with the children gave her a new perspective on social loyalties and cultural conflicts that had blocked her motivation to seek change in her own life. The self-confidence that she gained through her work with the little girl helped her find the power to stand up to her husband, even as his violence escalated in response to her newfound assertiveness. At the same time, her painstaking work of reclaiming the voice of the little girl gave her a new sense of self-respect as she felt her own voice gain strength, even in the face of violence. Thus, she was eventually able to *feel*, as well as know, that she no longer loved her abusive husband, and thus she was able to walk away.

Her relationship with the little boy may have been even more critical in enabling her to leave her husband. That relationship focused on two related strategies. Like so many other low-income African American boys, this little boy had already been labeled as "bad," even by the teachers and parents who were seeking to nurture him. And like so many children who are so labeled, his own behavior had already begun to shape itself, Pygmalion-like, to fit that expectation. Her first strategy was to assure this young boy, through her body, that she would not accept the pervasive societal assumption that he was destined for violence. Her second strategy was to respond to his impulsive energy with playfulness and creativity, rather than the rejection that might have read that energy as a precursor of violence. By using these two methods daily for a year, she was able to bring forth palpable changes in this boy's self-concept and behavior. She was able to help redeem this young boy from the fate of her husband, in which the line between personal moral failure and societal injustice could not be drawn.

By working with the young African American boy, E.M. gradually found it possible to walk away from her husband. Because she identified herself so deeply with the African American community, it was not possible for E.M. to leave her husband without feeling a sense of betrayal. Even at the height of her husband's violence, E.M. felt a blood loyalty toward him that seemed to run deeper than her own safety. She saw him as a man whose life chances were eventually ruined by the shadow that remained, in the suburbs of Portland as much as in the streets of Watts, from our country's

history of slavery. Yet, through the hope that came from her work with this little boy, she gradually became able to feel, condemn, and finally resist her husband's violation of her body, even in the face of that truth.

E.M.'s relationship with these two children bears a striking similarity to J.G.'s relationship with her. In the texture and flow of the interaction, these relationships—one a “mother-friendship” between two women and the second a pair of “therapeutic” relationships between the younger woman and two children—mirror one another. The dance of these two very different relationships leaves similar traces over the course of time. This congruence is particularly apparent if we compare J.G.'s work with E.M., with E.M.'s work with the little girl.

XI. THE POWER OF CARE

In our interview, E.M. described the method and course of her work with the little girl with remarkable precision.⁷² Both she and J.G. gave me accounts of the relationship between the two women. Both relationships were anchored in mutual presence. E.M. spent her first few months with the little girl simply *being there* in the young girl's presence, walking with her on the playground, sitting with her on the rug and at the table. J.G. made herself present to E.M. by small, unobtrusive actions, like greeting her by name every morning and inviting her son Peter to stay with her while she volunteered. These gestures made E.M. feel both welcomed and *recognized* as an individual, without feeling pressured either to disclose her “needs” or to perform any tasks. In both relationships, walking together on the playground without exchanging words became a way to deepen the sense of safety that comes from mutual presence, while getting to know the rhythms of the other's body. E.M.'s embodied knowledge of the little girl's movement was something that she drew upon as she began to coax the child into more sustained interaction. In the relationship between E.M. and J.G., their walks were a way for the older woman to sense that the younger was in trouble, and for E.M. to realize that J.G. knew what she was going through, without words having to pass between them.

With this foundation of trust, the relationships could deepen. As the bond between E.M. and the child began to grow, E.M. enticed the

72. See generally Interview with E.M., *supra* note 21.

child into games of give and take in which she could gently mirror the little girl's actions. Through that play, E.M. received those halting gestures as the girl's desire for language. And, thus, she encouraged the child to feel that she had the capacity to say more. In her work with E.M., J.G. looked for ways to hint—through a joke or a hug or a word—that she, too, had “been there,” and therefore might be someone that E.M. could talk with about troubles at home. J.G. also noticed and praised the subtle features of E.M.'s work in the classroom that showed that the younger woman had not entirely forgotten her past competencies, and that pointed toward skills that she could develop in the future. And finally, as their relationship strengthened, J.G. began to use her irreverent humor to cajole E.M. to take risks—like running for the policy council—that might help her regain her self-confidence.

Through months of gentle, but rock-solid presence, J.G. and E.M. each learned how to move into the other person's world of pain. At the same time, each woman cast a third eye for paths of growth that the other might take from the safe place they had made together. These relationships evoke the freeze-frame photographic records that the most culturally-sensitive attachment theorists have made of the rhythms of empathy and distance between an infant and the worlds of people who take part in her care.⁷³ Moving to a very different social universe, these relationships evoke successful support programs for low-income women. Mary Belenky, for instance, who founded the Listening Partners program for low-income women in Vermont,⁷⁴ describes the crux of her program, as well as others that prove successful with low-income women, as offering long-term mentoring relationships for individual women in a context of intensive and political social analysis, problem-solving, vocational coaching and peer group support.⁷⁵

Through her conversations with J.G., E.M. came to understand her relationship with the two children as something more than a developmental intervention. She also came to see this work as a spiritual project, with meaning that reached farther than the four

73. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy is one of a number of scholars who are engaged in such work. See, e.g., SARAH BLAFFER HRDY, *MOTHER NATURE: A HISTORY OF MOTHERS, INFANTS, AND NATURAL SELECTION* (1999). Such theorists pose critical questions about the relationships between caring practices, normative orders, and human development, building on the work of theorists like L. Vygotsky and D.W. Winnicott.

74. See MARY FIELD BELENKY ET AL., *A TRADITION WHICH HAS NO NAME: NURTURING THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLE, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES* (1997).

75. See *id.*

walls of the Church of the Redeemer's Head Start classroom. E.M.'s yearlong dialogue with J.G. enabled the younger woman to understand her day-to-day work with these children as redemptive labor, the labor that looks toward a hope, perhaps ultimately unfounded, that wrong can be redressed in ways that even the wrongdoer can come to accept and understand. Another Head Start woman called this the work of "learning to live again, not just survive."⁷⁶ Martin Luther King spoke of this moral labor as that of moving beyond the chain of hate toward "beloved community."⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

As I read back over my interviews with J.G. and E.M., I am struck by how what they mean by care cannot be contained by our image of a "pink bow." Their notion of care does not create a "haven" of domestic tranquility in an otherwise heartless world. But neither can their notion of care be pared down to the idea of "reproductive labor." Their notion of care is always about working, for other people. It is always about shoring up the patterns of unequal power distribution in which their lives are ensnared. That goes without saying.

But it is not just that. As I reread my interviews with J.G. and E.M., I am struck by how care comes up precisely at those moments when language seems to falter. Care comes up on the edge of terror, the Klansman's torch, the child's trauma. Care also comes up as those almost invisible gestures, too small to say much about, like dishing out plates of steamed cabbage and wiping up globs of glue. Care comes up as the give and take that holds lives together and moves them along. Care comes up as a something that people do for one another, with their words and their bodies, rather than something that they talk about. Care comes up as something that women like J.G. and E.M. have learned how to do, over a long time, to answer to injustice with something more powerful than silence.

76. U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVS., *supra* note 17, at iv.

77. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., *My Trip to the Land of Ghandi*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* 25 (1986).

