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## Black Feminist Autobiographical Inquiry into the Experiences of a Teen Mom

Advis Dell Wilkerson

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A BLACK FEMINIST AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES  
OF A TEEN MOM

by

ADVIS DELL WILKERSON

(Under the Direction of Delores Liston)

ABSTRACT

Using Black feminist thought as the theoretical framework and autobiographical inquiry as methodology, I explored ways in which adversity fostered resiliency of character. Despite difficult circumstances, such as growing up in a poor, single-parent household and becoming pregnant in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when continuing one's education after pregnancy or marriage was not permitted in the Deep South, with the help of others, I fought to finish my high school education and succeeded in college. I credit a close bond with a supportive adult and my own development of racial awareness with helping me to turn obstacles into successes. My intent was to draw lessons from my own experiences that can be used by educators and social service workers alike when interacting with teen mothers and their families. I conclude my personal narrative with a set of recommendations for helping teenage mothers to become educational successes.

INDEX WORDS: Autobiography, Black Education, Black Feminist Thought, Black Teenage Pregnancy, Black Women's Experiences, Black Women's Studies, Womanism, Womanist, Womanist Studies.

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OF A TEEN MOM

by

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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ADVIS DELL WILKERSON

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my dearly beloved mother, Victoria Hannans, who departed this life March 30, 2007. The woman who gave me life, loved me unconditionally; and who would not usually take NO for an answer, was my SHERO. A Womanist at heart, she instilled in me a sense of pride, self-preservation and a desire for an education. I love you Mommie!



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## PROLOGUE

A few years ago, prior to becoming a teacher, I visited my eldest brother who taught school in Tustin, California. It was the last day of school and his students were too loud, too playful, and somewhat unruly. Despite their behavior, I realized how much I enjoyed them. When I returned home to Atlanta, Georgia, I quit my job of 15 years to become a teacher. I left a lucrative career and took a sizeable pay cut in pursuit of what I believed to be my calling. I wanted to make a difference. As a result, I have been a student since 1998. First, I went to school to become a certified teacher, then to earn a master's degree, and now I am working on earning a doctorate in education. Education is definitely at the top of my list of priorities. I believe that if you can conceive it, you can achieve it. Like the Black feminists whose work has so influenced me, I am adamant about the importance of self-determination and self-sufficiency.

As an educator, I only want to find creative ways to help my students learn what is being taught, not because they have to, but to do so because they have a desire to understand. Therefore, I am frequently reminded that I need to help my students draw distinctions between theory and practice. Wanting to instill in them a desire to become life-long learners, I encourage independence as I provide them with opportunities to discuss their personal experiences, while encouraging them to value ideas and opinions different from their own. My goal is to help them to view problems and solutions from multiple perspectives by making their learning culturally relevant. Ladson-Billings (1994, pp. 17-18) has stated "...culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes." Thus, one of my goals is to take what I have learned in my life—both

personally and professionally—and to use those experiences to help my students make their own connections between what is being taught and real-life situations. I will use my education to become a more informed educator, and in doing so, I will help instill in my students, a sense of pride, self-preservation, self-determination, and a desire to become life-long learners themselves.

The roots of my inquiry lie in the fact that when I was 15 years old, I became a teenage mom. Although I do not condone teenage pregnancy, I know from experience what it means to have an opportunity for an education to be literally snatched out of my hands because of a teenage pregnancy. Consequently, I understand the importance of having sound, supportive networks. I am grateful to have been a teen mom who came from a strong family, which instilled in me values for education and hard work. Had it not been for my mother and grandmother's undying support before, during, and after my teenage pregnancy; I might not have returned to school. With their support, I was able to overcome what seemed like insurmountable odds. Accordingly, I believe that quitting is not an option and people should never give up on their hopes and dreams in life no matter what obstacles they may face. I value sayings such as "practice makes perfect," "persistence prevails," and "never give up."

Nearly five years ago, when I first started this program, for the most part, many of my views were basically traditional. Today, my views have definitely changed. Now, thanks to my continuing studies, my views of curriculum have been reconceptualized. At present, I see and understand curriculum from multiple perspectives. Taking an in depth look at understanding curriculum via a historical lens; a political lens; and a racial and gender lens contributed greatly to my understanding of curriculum. As a result,

reconceptualized curriculum studies have made it possible for me to do a dissertation that interweaves Black feminist theory and autobiographical landscapes into an inquiry that has implications for teen moms worldwide.

Taking an in-depth look at my own experiences as a Black teenage mom through a Black feminist lens, I used autobiography as a methodology to spotlight the little known phenomenon of a successful teen mom—me. Delving deep into the complexities and processes of my life as a teen mom, one purpose of my study was to heal by uncovering and describing my life as a teen mom and the obstacles I encountered and overcame. My wish is to build better lives for both teen moms and their children by promoting character and education as a means to achieve their goals in life. A serious national effort to help teen moms achieve their goals could have a positive impact on both teen moms and their children.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

While in recent years the number of teenage pregnancies has declined, Black teens are nearly twice as likely as Whites to become teen mothers (Hurtado, 1996; National Center for Health Statistics, 2000; Planned Parenthood, 2005; Save the Children, 2004; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). One study on teen pregnancy found that Black women “stay fewer years in school, have fewer dollars to spend, and bear more economic burdens than any other group in this country” (Hurtado, 1996, p. 5). Despite the fact that Black women have made remarkable progress in terms of their race, class, and gender; historically, their general mistreatment by both their men and mainstream society has resulted in vast poverty for women and children in Black communities all over the country. As it stands, single Black mothers who often lack sufficient resources to provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter for their children head many Black families. Thus, more often than not, Black teenage mothers further relegate themselves and their families into poverty because they too lack sufficient education and consequently, jobs to adequately provide for their young. As a result, social perils such as homelessness, hunger, and poor health remain commonplace in Black communities nationwide.

#### Tracing the Roots of My Inquiry

Early on in my graduate studies, I was introduced to a body of literature comprising the work of Black feminist philosophers such as Anna Julia Cooper, Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and others too numerous

to mention, who through their writings, greatly influenced my thoughts. Although I knew what it meant to be Black and female, the notion of learning more about me by way of reading about the experiences of other Black females became even more intriguing. Reading their work, I gained valuable insight into Black feminism as an ethical framework as well as about myself as a Black female. As expected, in those women, I found some common characteristics. What most of them seem to have in common is they are writers, scholars, activists, and primarily educators in higher education. Using their positions to continually fight all forms of oppression, not only are they feminists of color, they are social activists too. Promoting racial solidarity, education, love, and other important social, economic, and political issues within the Black community, Black women have been and continue to be gentle giants in their communities.

The aftermath of slavery has caused Blacks in American society to encounter racism so much so that race, class, and gender incessantly pose a struggle for Black females all over the country; and, although “African-American women have rights of formal citizenship, [we] remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy” (Hill Collins, 1998, p.33). Quite evident in dominant discourses that have historically portrayed Black women in roles of servitude, fighting to overcome obstacles has become a socially accepted way of life for me as well as for others like me. Socially constructed as inferior to men in general and our White feminist counterparts in particular; we are continually building coalitions that challenge and defy negative portrayals of ourselves like mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, whore, etc. For example, in an attempt to defend their womanhood, a coach and her nearly all Black women’s college basketball team recently used the news media to force a public apology and consequently, the resignation of Don

Imus from his nationally syndicated (all White, all male) radio talk show for referring to them as NAPPY HEADED HOES. Today, I realize that Black women have been using their voices to undo erroneous images commonly accepted as truths about us for a long time. Best known for her collection of essays entitled *A Voice from the South*; Anna Julia Cooper's work has opened doors and influenced the work of contemporary Black feminists like myself.

One of the many first wave feminists instrumental in the Black women's club movement in the late 1800s (Davis, 1995; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Hill Collins, 1998); Cooper's character, drive, courage, and convictions still live on today through the work of others. Her "...belie[f] that she could achieve the goals she set out to accomplish in spite of her sex, her race, and her slave beginnings" (Pitts, 1999, p. 73), in my opinion, broke new ground in Black feminist philosophy. Coming from a background comprised primarily of obstacles—an ex-slave, living in the South, an African American, and female—like so many others before and after her—Cooper overcame insurmountable odds. Her "practice of direct social activism and advocacy for the rights and uplift of Blacks in general and Black women in particular is a significant carryover to the present day womanist movement" (Burrow, 1998, p. 20). Present day womanists are modern day Black feminists. My desire to learn more about present day womanists led me to Alice Walker.

Alice Walker, best known for her book *The Color Purple*, "coined the term womanist" (Burrow, 1998, p. 20). According to Walker (as quoted by Burrow, 1998), "A womanist is determined to be her own woman-person, be her own mouthpiece, and thus to speak her mind...The womanist loves self, other women, women's experiences, and



the Black community” (p. 21). In addition, Walker said, “A womanist is a feminist of color” (Burrow, 1998, p. 21). As a child, I must have been a “feminist of color” or a “womanist” because I knew that I had to be educated if I wanted to be my own person. As if our ancestors were living through us; our souls obviously yearned for the knowledge that they were denied because both my mother and my grandmother believed in education. Unlike many of their generation, both my grandmothers were literate. They demonstrated their abilities to read and write in the many letters that they wrote to their family members who lived out of town, and in the many books that they read to us as children; namely the bible in a church setting. As will be revealed later in my story, both my mother and father’s families were actively involved in the community via the Black church. The Black feminist philosopher whose work influenced me the most, Patricia Hill Collins, helped me to understand that my experiences growing up were Black feminism in the making.

In her (1998) book, *Fighting Words*, Patricia Hill Collins referred to “womanism as an ethical system always in the making...continually evol[ing] through its rejection of all forms of oppression and its commitment to social justice” (p. 64). Her critical analysis of Black feminism as it relates to Black females traced the historical oppression of Black women from slavery to modern times. She reminded me why love, family, the church, the school (education), the community, freedom fighting, and racial solidarity are so important to Black people. Not long ago, “fighting on behalf of freedom and social justice for the entire Black community was, in effect, fighting for one’s own personal freedom; the two could not be easily separated” (Hill Collins, 1998, p. 27). Promoting Black feminism as a shared standpoint, Hill Collins (1998) has asserted, “group-based

experiences, especially those shared by African American women as a collectivity, create the conditions for a shared standpoint that in turn can stimulate collective political action” (p. 224); I agree. One of my strongest beliefs is there is strength in numbers. This became evident in my quest to continue my education after a teenage pregnancy when the Black community rallied on my behalf. Close akin to Hill Collins, bell hooks is probably one of the most read and better-known contemporary Black feminist authors in academia today. As one of those working toward social change, hooks has numerous publications to her credit.

bell hooks has written books on hope, love, class, community, and teaching. Because she is an African American female with a voice, I see her as a role model not only for myself, but for others as well. Because our backgrounds are so similar, I can also relate to her views. We are both from the South, we both consider ourselves “smart,” and we are both progressive educators. Our views on self-actualization are similar to those of Anna Julia Cooper who believed “the fact that she succeeded in her personal endeavors proved to her that others could also” (Pitts, 1999, p. 73). Reading about their lives—the struggles and obstacles they had to deal with because of their race, class, and gender—inspires me to never give up on my own personal goals. My continual desire to learn more about present day womanists led me to Beverly Guy-Sheftall.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall has been “described as a modern day Anna Julia Cooper” (Guy-Sheftall and Hammonds, 1997, p. 31). Thanks to her efforts, Spelman College has a wonderful undergraduate women’s studies program of which she should be applauded for her contributions. Her (1995) compilation of Black women’s writings, *Words of Fire*,

dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was quite instrumental in revealing the history of Black feminism and its roots. Thanks to Davis (1989), Guy-Sheftall (1995), and to Hill Collins (1998), I now know that the history of Black feminism began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with the anti-slavery movement in the North. Out of this movement of freed Blacks and a number of White abolitionists grew the Black women's club movement. In an attempt to "free the slave and liberate the woman" (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 1) early pioneers such as Mary Church Terrell, Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Sojourner Truth—among others—organized and attended national conferences at home and abroad (Davis, 1989; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Hill Collins, 1998). This movement "...emerged not because [all-male and] White women's clubs prohibited their membership...but because they had a unique set of issues—defending Black womanhood, uplifting the masses, and improving family life—to name a few" (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, pp. 6-7). In addition to many other clubs, famous sororities like the Alpha Kappa Alphas and the Deltas grew out this movement. Very relevant to my story and similar to a number of of my own personal experiences during the same time, the second wave of the Black feminist movement mainly grew out of two movements—civil rights and women's liberation—in the 1960s and 1970s when I was growing up. Within the realm of the 1960s and 1970s, a social consciousness for both civil and women's rights grew, particularly in the Black community. Hence, contemporary Black feminists evolved.

### Contemporary Black Feminists

In her dissertation, *From a Position of Strength: Black Women Writing in the Eighties*, Ward (1993) conveyed the enthusiasm that emerged among Black women

particularly during the civil rights and feminist movements. With a major theme of “consciousness-raising” (hooks, 2000a), the efforts of modern day Black feminists such as Angela Davis, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Patricia Hills Collins, bell hooks, and Barbara Smith originated in those movements. Their themes would later evolve into what we now know as women’s studies in present day academia (hooks, 2000a). As I alluded to earlier, in the 1980s, Black women scholars in the academy wrote to promote growth and social change in the Black community. Fighting to overcome gender exploitation from men and racial oppression from mainstream society at the same time, Black feminist movements sought to change Black women’s awareness of themselves by critiquing their oppressions and oppressors. To convey their voices and actions, they often wrote and spoke about widespread social issues in the Black community such as education, employment, healthcare, love, community, housing, segregation, sexism; and above all, racism.

So as to help others to see that self-actualization is possible despite the obstacles they are bound to face because they are Black and female; many Black women who were educated and positioned in higher-learning institutions, wrote about their own personal experiences in terms of race, class, and gender. These women should be applauded for their contributions to Black women’s studies. Thanks to their combined efforts, Black feminist tradition dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is documented. Hoping to change damaging and dehumanizing images of Black women such as mammy, matriarch, whore, etc. (Davis, 1989; Hill Collins, 1998; Moraga, 2004); Black feminists seek to build the self-esteem of Black women as we repeatedly reject oppression and continually commit to social justice by way of education and publication.

Although I knew what it meant to be Black and female, what I did not know was Black feminism was an ethical framework unique to Black women's lived experiences, and "for Black women as a collectivity, emancipation, liberation, or empowerment as a group rests on two interrelated goals—self-definition, or the power to name one's own reality—and, self-determination, aiming for the power to decide one's own destiny" (Hill Collins, 1998, p. 45). As I traced the historical oppression of Black women from slavery to modern times, I was reminded that not long ago, discrimination and segregation against Blacks were ways of life and Black people had no rights per se. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1997) provided a nice summary of Black feminism as a standpoint theory when she said:

[Black feminism] capture(s) the emancipatory vision and acts of resistance among a diverse group of African-American women who attempt in their writings [and practices] to articulate their understanding of the complex nature of Black womanhood, the interlocking nature of the oppressions Black women suffer, and the necessity of sustained struggle in their quest for self-definition, the liberation of Black people, and gender equality. (p. 31)

As I interpret my childhood experiences through the Black feminist lens that I have developed since entering the doctoral program, I realize that my life has been geared around Black feminist principles and practices all along. Their courage and commitment to the struggle for the betterment of Black people, Black women in particular, inspire me. From experience, I know that "group-based experiences, especially those shared by African American women as a collectivity, create the conditions for a shared standpoint that in turn can stimulate collective political action" (Hill Collins, 1998, p. 224). This

became evident in my quest to continue my education after my teenage pregnancy, and will be a part of the reconceptualized version of Black teenage pregnancy that I will present later. One of my greatest beliefs is there is strength in numbers, which became evident when the entire Black community rallied behind my mother and me as we took on our all White school board during my quest to continue my education after my pregnancy. Our combined efforts forced the school board to change its practice and permit pregnant and married teens the opportunity to continue their education if they so choose. The aforementioned is an example of the ways Black feminist theory will support my interpretation of my experiences throughout this dissertation. However, along with Black feminist voices and actions were criticisms.

#### Criticisms Leveled Against Black Feminism

Ironically, much of the criticisms leveled against Black feminism have come from the Black community and other feminists. For example, in her research, Davies (1994) has posited, “Black feminism began as a subversion and counter-articulation to the terms of both Black and feminist criticism” (p. 31). The women’s movement largely consisted of White, middle-classed housewives who were obviously privileged because of their race. Initially, when Black feminists attempted to ride the White feminist wave, White feminists embraced them until they tried to incorporate race into their feminist analyses. Not willing to acknowledge or give up their White privilege, White women seemingly turned a deaf ear to their Black feminist complements (Andersen and Hill Collins, 2004; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Hill Collins, 2004, 2000, 1998; hooks, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Hurtado, 1996; Langston, 2004; Smith 1985). Over time, what they found was, although “White women and women of color share some common experiences based on their

gender, their racial experiences are quite distinct; moreover, experiences within the race/gender system are further conditioned by one's class" (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2004, p. 21).

Thus, Black feminists contend that "for African-Americans, the relationship between gender and race is intensified, producing a Black gender ideology that shapes ideas about Black masculinity and Black femininity" (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 6). Since "Blacks of all socioeconomic statuses tend to be confined to a limited geographic space, which is formally designated by the discriminatory practices of banks, insurance companies, and urban planners, and symbolically identified by the formation of cultural and social institutions" (Pattillo-McCoy, 2004, p. 164), Black people are marginalized as a whole. Knowing that "Black women can never be fully empowered in a context that harms Black men, and Black men can never become fully empowered in a society in which Black women cannot fully flourish as human beings" (Hill Collins, 2004, p.6), Black feminists opted to abandon White feminists ideologies as they adopted their own.

Barbara Smith, a noted Black feminist lesbian who emerged in the 1970s, expanded her diligent fight for women's rights to include feminist lesbians. In defense of Black feminism, Smith (1995) asserted, "Until Black feminism, very few people besides Black women actually cared about or took seriously the demoralization of being female and colored and poor and hated" (p. 262). She further charged, "Unlike any other movement, Black feminism provides the theory that clarifies the nature of Black women's experiences, makes possible positive support from other Black women, and encourage political action that will change the very system that has put us down" (Smith, p. 262); I agree.

In her essay, *Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement*, Smith (1995) tried to dispel myths such as feminists are lesbians and men haters. While over a quarter of a century ago, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was founded to foster “the eradication of sexism, racism, and heterosexism” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 15); notable lesbian feminists such as Audre Lorde paved the way for modern day lesbian feminists like Barbara Smith. Smith and the Combahee River Collective were contemporaries. The Combahee River Collective movement took a stance that “emphasized the importance of eradicating homophobia and acknowledging the role of lesbians in the development of Black feminism” (Combahee River Collective, 1995, p. 231). For many years, out of ignorance, I was hesitant about admitting that I was a feminist for fear of being labeled a lesbian. Today, I realize that that fear was merely another form of subjugation.

Another criticism leveled against Black feminists is that they hate men. Although I knew that I did not hate men, here again, I feared being labeled as such. Thus, I acknowledge the power that these accusations hold to keep women in their respective places. In her epilogue for Guy-Sheftall’s (1995) book entitled *Words of Fire*, Johnnetta Cole noted, “The single most tenacious misconception about feminism is that to be a feminist is to hate men” (p. 550); most women would agree. Then, she criticized “the media and certain fundamentalist groups [for] implying that feminism and lesbianism are synonymous” (p. 551). Based on what I now know about the field, this is another stance for which I find agreement. Unlike bell hooks who openly embraced her lesbian activist sisters (hooks, 2000a); to my knowledge, Hill Collins never takes a concrete stand on her acceptance of gays and lesbians. Although, she did say that “we’re all in this bag



together;” it was not clear if that was inclusive of gays and lesbians. If we are to come to any resolution on social issues, today’s feminists would be better served if we extended our fight for social justice to include any and all oppressed people; no matter their race, class, or gender.

From the start, Black feminists only asked for equality; none of them favored turning their backs on Black men. In one of her famed speeches, feminist pioneer, Anna Julia Cooper was noted as saying, “...Not the boys less, but the girls more” (2001, p. 419) back in the 1800s. An attempt to make Black women “feel disloyal to racial interests if they insist on women’s rights” (Murray, 1995, p. 192) is just another form of suppression. While prominent Black leaders and avid supporters of women’s emancipation included Frederick Douglas and W.E.B. DuBois (Guy-Sheftall, 1995); many Black intellectuals and spokespeople have turned a deaf ear to Black feminism. In terms of sex and gender, most Black men adopted the dominant culture’s ideologies. Noting “...their apparent inability to empathize with Black women’s suffering under sexism; [and] their refusal even to acknowledge our struggles,” Walker (1995, p. 538) implied how ignorant Black men can be when it comes to Black women. Seemingly, Black men have no clue as to what sexism is or to its ramifications on Black women.

In the Black community, sexism has been viewed as a lesser evil than racism, causing many women to abandon it as an issue. However, Black Nationalist demands that women be subordinate to men and stay home and have babies forced Black feminists to take a stand. Black Nationalism was a movement in the Black community that called for racial solidarity worldwide; its drawback however, was sexism. Unfortunately, many Black Nationalists adopted White male gender ideologies for the women in the Black

community causing many Black feminists to challenge their position. Torn between two movements, the Black female was doubly oppressed—in and out of her community.

Realizing that “men who consciously try to refuse male privilege are still male; [and] Whites who want to challenge White privilege are still White” (Langston, 2004, p. 142), Black women felt the effects of sexism from her Black male counterparts, and racism from her White feminist counterparts and mainstream society, simultaneously.

“The explosion of Black feminism in the 1970s has been spurred on, in large part, by the refusal of Black women activists to take a back seat to men within the civil rights and the Black Nationalist political movements” (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 48). For example, on the issue of birth control, one item on the Black feminist agenda, Black men tried to tell Black women when they could and could not have children. Marcus Garvey opposed it, while W.E.B. DuBois advocated it (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Garvey’s main concern was the eradication of the race, while DuBois, along with the National Urban League and the National Association of Colored People advocated birth control because smaller families were considered more economically feasible (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Defendants of racial solidarity still believe that “in a climate of institutionalized racism that valorizes Blackness; Afrocentrism offers an affirmation of Blackness, a love ethic directed toward Black people” (Hill Collins, 1998, p. 182). Closely affiliated with the Black Nationalist movement, in the 1980s, Angela Davis was one of the more radical feminists of her time, who not only called for a new Socialist order, but insisted that her Black sisters join their Black brothers in the struggle for human rights.

In her 2004 book, *Black Sexual Politics*, Hill Collins also openly supported the Black male when she noted: “Black women can never become fully empowered in a

context that harms Black men and Black men can never become fully empowered in a society in which Black women cannot fully flourish as human beings” (p. 7). As with most Black feminists, here again, I agree. When it comes to social movements, there is truly strength in numbers. Similar to Langston (2004), I think that “we need to overcome divisions among working people, not by ignoring the multiple oppressions many of us encounter, or by oppressing each other, but by becoming committed allies on all issues which affect working people: racism, sexism, classism, etc.” (p. 149).

Noting that oftentimes, women “look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred,” bell hooks (2000a, p. 14) has commented that women have been socialized to think themselves inferior to men. In addition, bell hooks has spoken about how capitalism and greed affects up and coming feminists. Sounding much like a postmodernist, hooks (2000a) has noted, “In a world where pathological narcissism is the order of the day, it is difficult to arouse collective concern for challenging racism or any other form of domination” (p. 81) because seemingly, every man is for himself. Although that may be the case, quitting is not an option. As a high school teacher, I deal with hopeless attitudes on a daily basis. My job, I believe, is to change their minds. Recognizing that “racial segregation in housing, education, and employment fostered group commonalities that encouraged the formation of a group-based, collective standpoint” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 24), and that “...the overarching theme of finding a voice to express a collective, self-defined Black women’s standpoint remains a core theme of Black feminist thought” (Hill Collins, 2000, p.99); the intention of my study is to counsel and empower Black women from a Black feminist standpoint by way of my story.

One limitation of Black feminism as seen by Carole Boyce Davies (1994) is the fact that Black feminism “is almost wholly located in African-American women’s experiences” (p. 136). That may be true, but I see nothing wrong with it. I do not see how one can be a Black feminist and not identify with a standpoint unique to Black women and their experiences. Some have alleged that class posed a problem between the working class Black woman and the Black middle-class woman because, like the White feminists, Black middle-class women feminists usually missed the point from a poor woman’s perspective. According to Hill Collins (2000), “Many African-American women may reject Black feminism because they cannot see clear connections between the elite Black feminist claims to be a progressive discourse and the actual conditions of their lives” (p. 283); I concur and so do others.

For example, bell hooks (2000a) has posited, “Privileged feminists have largely been unable to speak to, with, and for diverse groups of women because they either do not understand fully the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression or refuse to take their interrelatedness seriously” (p. 15). Although I agree that Black feminism originated out of elite Black feminist alliances; the fact still remains that Black females are treated differently because of their race, class, and gender (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2004; Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000b; Davis, 1989). Thus, I agree with bell hooks (2000b) who noted, as “progressive Black ‘elites’ ...it is our task to forge a vision of solidarity in ending domination...” (p.99). In her text, *Feminism is for Everybody*, hooks (2000b) made clear what modern day Black feminists should be focusing on when she wrote:

...We are in need of a renewed commitment to political solidarity between women...[Y]oung women need guidance, sisterhood, political solidarity, bonding across race and class...We need to put into place thinking and practice which affirms the reality that females can achieve self-actualization and success...We need literature that informs masses of people...We need work that is especially geared toward youth culture...[and] we need feminist studies that are community-based. (pp. 17-23)

Like hooks, I believe that “it is the task of those who hold greater privilege to create political strategies” (hooks, 2000b, p. 48) for those less fortunate. Coming from a poor-to-working-class family, as a teen mom, the odds were stacked against me. However, thanks to Black feminist beliefs and practices, I was able to advance from a poor-to-working-class status to a working-to-middle-class lifestyle. Since my own experiences crossed boundaries, I believe that I am better equipped to understand and articulate the conditions of poor, Black teen mothers.

#### Educational Significance of a Black Feminist Inquiry

While all “women” share similar experiences, their “racial” experiences are markedly different (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2004; Davis, 1995, 1989; Hill Collins, 2004, 2000, 1998; hooks, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d). Astoundingly, even today, “in some situations, gender, age, social class, and education do not matter if you are Black” (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 2). From a Black feminist perspective, one can readily see how, over time; race, class, and gender in particular, have forged an alliance between Black women all over the world. Since teenage pregnancy is prevalent in Black communities worldwide, my study rests upon the two overarching Black feminist goals—self-

definition and self-determination (Hill Collins, 1998) as means of empowerment in Black communities everywhere. These are important to Black teen moms, because they are means of survival in Black communities the world over. In the context of this dissertation, my autobiography will be used to explore my experiences as a teen mom in the Southern United States from the mid 1970s to date. To articulate how teenage pregnancy affected my life in terms of my race, class, and gender; from a Black feminist standpoint, my inquiry aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the socio-cultural context in which teen pregnancy is understood and experienced from both my past and present perspectives?
2. How can my story elaborate upon and illustrate these socio-cultural conditions as well as assist to reconceptualize teen pregnancy?

“...[C]onfronted with reified images of ourselves...” (Davis, 1995, p. 200) the blatant exploitation of Black women on account of our race, class, and gender can no longer be tolerated. To ensure survival, modern day Black feminists must pick up where others have left off by assuming the responsibility of shattering negative portrayals of us (Davis, 1995). Whereas Black women must continue to play crucial roles in their homes, churches, and communities; although some would not agree, Black feminism remains a powerful ideology in which to do just that.

My study is important because it contributes to the small body of positive, educational literature on Black women and the even smaller body of resiliency literature on Black teenage mothers. While there are several studies on teenage mothers, none of them were conducted the way I conducted my study. Working within a Black feminist theoretical framework, my study is similar to Elaine Bell Kaplan’s (1998) study in which

she dispels common misconceptions of Black teenage motherhood. However, contrary to Kaplan, instead of interviewing several teen moms, my analysis was confined to my own personal experiences as a teen mom. Theoretically, I confined my study to my own experiences because I thought that by studying my own case, I could work to reconceptualize Black teen pregnancy by providing an analysis for a successful experience. Knowing first hand the obstacles that Black teen moms face because they are Black and female, as someone who made it, so to speak; it is my civic duty to give back to my community; a community which greatly contributed to both my survival and success today.

In lieu of the participation of others via observation and or conversation, my inquiry and data was derived solely from my own experiences as a teen mom. The strength in this approach lies in the fact that I was my own data source; allowing me greater self-discovery. Similar to Luttrell, I presented an analysis of how race, class, and gender affected me as a pregnant teen. However, unlike Luttrell's ethnographical study, I spoke about my own personal experiences rather than someone else's. One benefit of an autobiographical investigation over an ethnographical investigation is I get to tell my own story. Another benefit is the fact that I was the only participant in the study, which allowed me greater control over the timeliness and outcome of the study. Most importantly, I did not need Internal Review Board (IRB) approval or endorsement from my employer to conduct my study. Additionally, I believed that autobiography addressed my research questions more fully. To articulate the socio-cultural context in which teen pregnancy is understood and how teenage pregnancy affected my life in terms of my race, class, and gender; from a Black feminist standpoint, my autobiography was used to

explore my experiences as a teen mom in the Southern United States from the mid 1970s to date.

An obvious drawback to an autobiographical inquiry is the divulgence of personal information that is essential in an inquiry of this nature. Another weakness in such an approach could be that my inquiry is more subjective than objective; consequently, others may not view it as legitimate research. Granted there are some who dismiss all qualitative research as illegitimate; however, during the 1980s, autobiography evolved into a major curriculum discourse (Grumet, 1980; Harris, 2005; Neumann & Peterson, 1997; Pinar, 1994; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman, 2000; Prentice Hall, 2004; Roth, 2005). Throughout my program of study, I read and wrote about the work of many curriculum theorists and their views on our ongoing educational dilemma.

Coincidentally, all of the papers that I wrote for various classes were autobiographical in nature. Quite naturally, I would choose autobiography for my methodology. To link my autobiographical inquiry to the reconceptualized curriculum field, I went back to the origins of my studies.

Early on in my studies, I learned that most of our ideas about curriculum dates back to the 1940s and the work of Ralph Tyler. I also learned that the reconception of curriculum was a fight against Tyler's rationale, which was basically traditional in nature and considered the beginning of the standardization of curriculum across the states. Over the past century, the word curriculum became synonymous with curriculum development. However, today, with reconceptualized curriculum, comes different perspectives. After the 1970s, education was no longer considered a non-political entity and many of the things in education came under question. I learned that many believe that diversity is "lip



service” and is making everyone color blind. As we look at education as if it were in a black box, we do not talk about issues of race, class, and gender because they are “trigger words” that are too complicated and too uncomfortable to talk about.

Additionally, I learned that race, class, and gender are socially constructed and one thing that the feminist movement did was bring personal to public—women starting talking and writing about their personal experiences in public. After reading a variety of texts and listening to multiple lectures and class discussions, I have concluded that I am definitely a critical theorist, and I have always wanted to make a difference and speak out against the injustices in the world, I just did not really know how. I did not have a voice, so to speak. Today, I see a path in which to follow and an avenue in which to speak. Thanks to the doctoral program, I can do it in an intellectual, socially acceptable, and respectable way—by being a scholar. After five and one half years of study, I am more open-minded and I have changed from within. Now, I know that I can make a difference. Thus, using autobiography as a methodology, my study captured the deep meaning of my own experiences, in my own words, by delving deep into the complexities and processes of my life as a teen mom.

### Reading the Study

This dissertation is an autobiographical inquiry into my experiences as a teen mom in the South from the 1970s to date. The dissertation consists of a Prologue, four chapters, and an Epilogue—Chapter I: Introduction, Chapter II: Literature Review and Methodology, Chapter III: Understanding the Socio-Cultural Context, and Chapter IV: A Reconceptualization of Black Teen Pregnancy. In Chapter I, I introduced Black teenage pregnancy as worthy of study, and provided some introspective thought into the roots of

my inquiry. Promoting Black feminism as a critical social theory that can be used to break the silence and invisibility of all marginalized people, especially women of color; as I explored the general field, in Chapter I, I identified theorists who helped me define my position. I also discussed some of the criticisms leveled against Black feminism, the educational significance of an inquiry such as this, and the questions that guided my inquiry.

In Chapter II, I further explore Black feminism as a theoretical position as I present a thorough review of related literature on teenage pregnancy as well as studies grounded in Black feminism. After a brief overview of the general literature on teen pregnancy, the remainder of the literature review consists of bodies of literature pertaining to Black feminist studies in general; Black teenage pregnancy studies; and Black feminist autobiographies, respectively. Inquiring about methodological resources describing how one writes autobiography led me to delve deep into any text that I could find that used autobiography as a methodology. Using this approach, I was able to find a variety of autobiographical texts—male/female, Black/white, foreign/domestic, etc. Reading such a vast array of autobiographical texts promoted my understanding of how experience and storytelling are relevant in this type of qualitative research. Therefore, the latter part of Chapter II explains my step-by-step methodology for writing an autobiographical inquiry such as this.

Chapter III provides an understanding of the socio-cultural context in terms of African Americans and other minorities in America by way of an in-depth discussion of Americanization and popular culture and how, over time, they have both impacted the lives of African Americans and other minorities in the United States; particularly African

American women. To illustrate how vulnerable teenage mothers are to slipping through the cracks and their need for sound, supportive networks, Chapter III focuses on the socio-cultural context of my lived experiences as a Black teen mom in the South from the mid 1970s to date. To articulate how a teenage pregnancy affected my life in terms of my race, class, and gender, my autobiography explored my individual lived experiences through Black feminist lens. Because it is essential to secure quality jobs, housing, and healthcare for teen moms and their children in Black communities everywhere, Chapter IV concludes my personal narrative as it demonstrates the intent of my study and offers a reconceptualization of Black teenage pregnancy. Finally, I conclude my personal narrative with an Epilogue about my mother and the role she played in my life.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

To create and conduct an inquiry such as this, I referenced several bodies of literature; some relevant and others not so relevant to the field of curriculum studies. To help the reader distinguish between those whose work was and was not relevant to curriculum studies, I first categorized my references into bodies of literature directly related to curriculum studies, bodies of literature indirectly related to curriculum studies, and sources not necessarily related to curriculum studies but relevant to my inquiry. For example, references directly related to curriculum studies included the work of Black feminist theorists such as Anna Julia Cooper, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Gloria Ladson-Billings, D. Langston, Elaine Bell Kaplan, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and Barbara Smith. Their work demonstrated how autobiography in the academy is tied to the growth of women's studies on race, class, and gender via personal narratives.

Another body of literature related to curriculum studies included Black teenage pregnancy studies by Abramovitz, Bromberg Bar-Yam, Evans-Winters, Jennings, Johnson, Jones, Merrick, and Robilliard. Combined they dispelled common misconceptions about Black teenage pregnancy, while they demonstrated the need for support and pointed out race associated differences in health outcomes of Black teen moms and their children. Addressing issues relevant to my story but not necessarily associated with curriculum studies, S. Cole, D. Davis, E. Lerman, W. Pillow, and editors, V. Palokow, S. Butler, L. Deprez, and P. Kahn shed light on teen experiences before, during, and after pregnancy, educational policy on teen pregnancy, and low income mothers in higher education.

Literature not specifically related to Black feminist thought, but also directly linked to curriculum studies comprised of publications by Madeline Grumet; Meta Y. Harris; editors A. Neumann and P. Petersen; editors Joann Phillion, Ming Fang He, and F. Michael Connelly; William Pinar; and the work of curriculum theorists, William Pinar, William Reynolds, P. Slattery, & P. Taubman. Important to my inquiry, their work promoted autobiography as an acceptable method of education research, which assisted in connecting my inquiry to the field of curriculum studies. To highlight the social, historical, political, and cultural contexts in which my story took place, another body of literature depicting the impact of slavery, the Reconstruction Era, Americanization and popular culture included publications by Davis, Chappell, Jeffers, Johnson, McKenney, Spring, Strickland, Sullivan, and Tuttle. Finally, although not related to curriculum studies at all, autobiographies by Black women such as Zora Neale Hurston, Rosa Parks, and Assata Shakur assisted me with my methodology.

A broad search on teenage pregnancy from databases such as ERIC, Alt HealthWatch, PsycINFO, Academic Search Premier, and ProQuest, yielded as many as 8,145 results. Examining teenage pregnancy in any context imaginable—social, political, economic, historical, etc.—these quantified and qualified studies ranged in scope from narrow to broad and provided data specific to race and ethnicity (National Center for Health Statistics, 2000; Planned Parenthood, 2005; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Researchers have said that “teenage motherhood has been identified as an epidemic” (Bromberg Bar-Yam, 2000, ¶ 4); and is thus believed to be a major social problem all over the world. “One in every 10 births in the world today is to a mother who is still a

child herself—some as young as 11 and 12 years old” (Powers as quoted by Ahmad, 2004, p. 1616). Although “birth rates for teenage girls in the United States have declined in recent years” (Save the Children, 2004, p. 4), the reality is “as long as teenagers are fertile, there will be teenage pregnancy and childbearing” (Bromberg Bar-Yam, ¶ 17).

A study on teenage mothers found “more than 50% of high school adolescents are sexually active” (Donohoe, 1996, p. 28), and while “nearly 60 percent of pregnancies in the United States are unintended; among teenagers that rate is 82 percent” (Gaskin, 1998, ¶1). As with many social issues, teenage pregnancy is often depicted as a problem unique to Black teens (Abramovitz, 1988; Bromberg Bar-Yam, 2000; Luttrell, 2003; Merrick, 2001; Perrin, 1992). Arguing that dominant discourses on Black teenage pregnancy give yet another picture of the racist society in which we live; like some social construction theorists, my inquiry “highlight[s] the influence of social context and suggests that our current understandings of the ‘problem’ of adolescent pregnancy are rooted less in ‘fact’ and more in public sentiment” (Merrick, 2001, p. 2). In the context of a patriarchal society; racism, classism, and sexism remain challenges for Black women, especially Black teen moms. “In essence, the mass media has generated class-specific images of Black women that help justify and shape the new racism of desegregated, color-blind America” (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 147); ideally situating Black feminist standpoint theory as a theoretical position from which to investigate and cross-examine these concerns. I agree with Hill Collins (2004) who has posited:

Rather than looking at a lack of sex education, poverty, sexual assault, and other factors that catalyze high rates of pregnancy among young Black women,

researchers and policy makers often blame the women themselves and assume that the women are incapable of making their own decisions. (p. 104)

Historically, Black women have been placed at the bottom of the social rung. Portrayed as domesticated, child-bearing savages, we have been “treated as manual laborers without intelligence...ravaged in mainstream cultural representations...” (Bobo, 2001, p. xv). To survive, “Black women invented their own unique aesthetic expressions” (Bobo, 2001, p. xv) by documenting Black women’s lived experiences. Over time, these written accounts of women’s experiences have evolved into theories and practices known today as Black feminism. Thus, the next section explores studies relevant to this inquiry grounded in Black feminism.

#### Black Feminist Studies

A narrow search of studies grounded in Black feminism from the ProQuest dissertations and theses database yielded a mere 35 dissertations and theses combined. Compared to dominant discourse studies, a minimal outcome of 35, demonstrates a need for additional studies grounded in Black feminist studies. Realizing that “...the overarching theme of finding a voice to express a collective, self-defined Black women’s standpoint remains a core theme in Black feminist thought” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 99), I am obliged to contribute to this small body of literature. All of the Black feminist studies confirm how Black women as a whole have been multiply oppressed (Brown, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2003; Fall, 2002; Fitts, 2005; Jennings, 2000; Niandou, 1994; Springer, 1999; Thompson, 1997). Fighting to overcome oppression in terms of race, class, and gender; most Black feminist studies address Black women’s experiences within historical, economic, political, and social contexts. Although critical analyses and

historical studies of Black women's narratives and social events within historical and political contexts were the major forms of inquiry; other approaches included oral history and comparative studies.

While a few studies explored Black women in academia (Baker, 2005; Baloney-Morrison, 2003; Becks-Moody, 2004; Robinson, 2005) mostly by way of interviews and/or oral histories; others studied Black feminist activists and organizations (Brown, 2000; Harris, 1997; James, 2000; Joseph, 2000; Springer, 1999; Ward, 2002) from historical, political, and social perspectives. A few studies documented the dynamics of resistance and resiliency (Evans-Winters, 2003; Fall, 2002; Madibbo, 2004) unique to Black women. Elaborating on the effects of race, class, and gender on Black women in and out of the Black community, several studies analyzed Black women's writings (Garcia, 1998; Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Niandou, 1994; Schmidt, 1983; Thompson, 1997; Toombs, 1998; Townes, 2000; Ward, 2002; Woodard, 2003) while, the smallest body of literature investigated spirituality (Fall, 2002; Littlejohn, 1994; McCrary, 2001) and its strengthening effects on the Black community; on Black women in particular.

For example, in her study on Black women's writing, *A Socio-biography of Shirley Graham-DuBois: A Life in the Struggle*, Thompson (1997) made it obvious how Black women's voices remain marginalized. Highlighting the life and work of Shirley Graham-DuBois, she demonstrated how intersecting oppressions such as race, class, and gender forced Black women to take a back seat to mainstream society and Black men. She was not only an educated activist, but she was also W.E.B. DuBois's wife. In another study documenting the promotion and tenure experiences of African American female professors in higher education, using data gathered from interviews, Baloney-



Morrison (2003) made the reader painfully aware of the double burden of racism and sexism in predominately White universities. During my research, I discovered that modern day Black feminists such as Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in higher education. Their themes evolved into what is now known as women's studies. The fact that these emerging Black feminists blossomed during the same time period that I was struggling with teen motherhood; and the fact that I was determined to get an education is interesting to say the least. Here too lies an interesting connection of the literature to my personal story, which will be revealed later.

Convinced that Black feminist movements would lead to the changed consciousness of Black women in the 1980s; in the academy, Black women scholars wrote to convey their voices and actions. "U.S. Black women writers not only portray the range of responses that individual African-American women express concerning their objectification as the Other: they also document the process of personal growth toward positive self-definitions" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 94). Emerging themes in these entire studies include feminism, education, social activism, and spirituality; key aspects of Black feminism, which I will tie to my own personal experiences later.

In her comparative study of five Black women novelists, Niandou (1994) analyzed and compared the situation of women and their children as depicted in novels written by five Black women. Similar to Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison's (1970) book, *The Bluest Eye*, which provided the reader with insight into America's standard of beauty through the eyes of a poor, Black girl who considered herself ugly and yearned for beauty by way of blue eyes; Niandou revealed striking similarities in the oppression of

women and their quests for identity within their communities. Here again lies a great example of how my personal experiences are connected to the research literature. For instance, although all of my mother's children had the same father; since my brother Roy and I were darker in complexion than the others, my father and paternal grandmother often questioned our paternity. According to my mother, they often favored my brothers, Billy and Ernest, over Roy and me, because they were lighter in complexion than us.

Ironically, my brother Roy and I got our dark skinned features from my father and his people, while Billy and Ernest took on the lighter skinned features of my mother and her people. Having grown up in a small town where everyone knew everyone else and their families, one could tell. Also, having heard of the "light, bright, damn near White" concept and how it evolved in the Black community; when I was younger, I often lacked self-esteem and wanted to be light skinned like my mother. Growing up, being Black had a negative connotation because Black people were always depicted as inferior to White people. Until recently, the media mostly portrayed Blacks as acquiescent to their White brethren. Therefore, I often felt like a dark, skinny, ugly duckling. In the Black community, "the light, bright, damn near White concept" originated in the days of old when Black folk attempted to blend into mainstream society to circumvent subservience and the inferiority complex that came along with the many roles of servitude that were forced upon them (Jones, 2000). Dark, skinny, and a teen mom; I had several inferiority complexes to contend with, while growing up in the Deep South.

In yet another study, *Our Politics was Black Women: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, Springer (1999) used oral history interviews to highlight the sociopolitical challenges of five Black feminist organizations. Until I researched the field

and learned its history, I neither knew what Black feminist organizations were nor their origins. For instance, in *Sisters in Struggle: The Development of Black Feminism in SNCC*, James (2000) revealed the birth of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and how it opened doors for women and youth in the civil rights movement. bell hooks was influenced by the SNCC. Also during my research, I learned that one of the reasons for the formation of the Combahee River Collective was that they chose to become independent of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) because they “had serious disagreements with NBFO’s bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of a clear political focus” (Combahee River Collective, 1995, p. 238). As Springer (1999) reconstructed and analyzed sociopolitical conditions of the time, her dissertation illustrated how Black feminism in its formative years mobilized into a movement, the challenges they encountered, and how narratives of Black feminists as a collective identity known as Black feminism emerged. Critically important, her findings call for Black feminists to renew their ties to the Black community; another intent of my study.

Proposing that spirituality can have a transforming effect on the lives of Black women, Fall’s (2002) study, *Spirituality and its Impact in the Lives of Black Women: An Ethic of Resistance and Resiliency*, further demonstrated how resistance and resiliency are present in the lives of Black women by way of Black women’s narratives. As a means of overcoming challenges and obstacles in our lives, the intent of her study was to help others by recording both the successes and failures of her research participants. Further promoting spirituality, McCrary’s (2001) study, *Using Womanist Theology for Designing a Writing Curriculum* illustrated how such a theory could be used to resist the

multi-oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism when teaching Black students how to write. As with many in the Black community, I am constantly reminded of the strong sense of spirituality that was handed down to me by my family and the community in which we lived. As a result, dreams and spirituality are deeply embedded in my beliefs. A major contributor to my spirituality is my ability to see into the future by way of my dreams. On one occasion, I saw my brother, Roy's, death in a dream one week before it actually came to pass. In another dream, I saw my favorite aunt's funeral one year prior to her untimely and unforeseen death from cancer. An obvious reconnection to spirituality, sometimes, my dreams are so vivid and real to life they frighten me.

In yet another study, *The Relationship between the Components of Black Feminism and Psychological Health in African American Women*, Littlejohn (1994) used components of Black feminism such as spirituality and a sense of community to predict the psychological health of Black women. Her study validated theoretical connections between feminist attitudes and the psychological well being of Black women. Here, I am reminded of how spirituality helped me endure before, during, and after my teenage pregnancy so long ago; an obvious connection between spirituality and psychology. In essence, she found that Black women who embodied Black feminist practices were better equipped to resist oppression. This study makes clear why to this very day, on Sunday mornings; one can usually find many members of the Black community, especially Black women, playing active roles in the Black church. Unlike the culture relevant to teen pregnancy in White communities that I have heard about, the Black church is among the first to embrace teen moms. Similar to all of these Black feminist studies, my inquiry aimed to investigate and cross-examine my experiences in terms of race, class, and

gender; however, unlike these studies, my inquiry is unique to my own socio-cultural experiences in the context of a Black teenage mom living in the South in the early to mid 1970s to date. Thus, the next section addresses studies specific to Black teenage pregnancy.

### Black Teenage Pregnancy Studies

Nationally, there is a wealth of “information on family planning, adolescent pregnancy, abstinence, adoption, reproductive health care, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS” (Office of Population Affairs, 2005, ¶4). Within these studies, dominant discourse findings have often portrayed teenage pregnancy as most prevalent in Black and Hispanic communities (National Center for Health Statistics, 2000; Planned Parenthood, 2005; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). While much has been written about teenage pregnancy and its implications, when I narrowed my focus to studies only on Black teenage pregnancy, the results decreased to as few as 77; indicating a broad gap in research. If teen pregnancy is assumed to be a mostly Black teen problem, as with others, I too wonder why so few studies focus exclusively on Black teens. Since there are so few studies unique to Black teen pregnancy and even fewer grounded in Black feminism; it is this gap that my research aims to fill.

The few studies specific to Black teenage pregnancy reveal the dire or dismal social consequences of Black teenage pregnancy (Luttrell, 2003); a greater risk to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS (Jennings, 2000; Johnson, 1995; Robillard, 2000); race associated differences in health outcomes, and the high neonatal and infant mortality rates (Jones, 2000) for Black teenage mothers. For example, in an

attempt to demonstrate race-associated differences in health outcomes, in her article entitled, *Levels of Racism: A Theoretical Framework and a Gardner's Tale*, Jones (2000) presented a theoretical framework illustrating how institutionalized racism (historical and societal norms), perpetuates personally mediated racism (differential treatment because of race), which ultimately results in internalized racism (that reflects White privilege and White societal values as the norm). What was interesting about her story was her ability to demonstrate racism using a garden as a metaphor. Comparing and contrasting how plants will either flourish or deteriorate depending on how fertile the soil is in which they are planted. Using this same analogy, Jones demonstrated how historically, Black people have been treated differently because of the color of our skin for so long, and how others have been taught to treat us differently for so long, many Blacks have internalized and accepted our subclass treatment as a way of life. Even today, many Blacks still suffer from the inferiority complex that was forced upon us as a result of slavery (Jones, 2000). This is a good source and a good conversation to support my claims of oppression and a need for political strategies for further social justice.

In her study, *Genetic Ties and Genetic "Others:" Race, Class, and Infertility*, Jennings (2000) highlighted how race and class affect infertility and adoption outcomes for young women. Unlike other races of impoverished children around the world, there is not usually a demand to adopt Black children, because of the color of their skin. Unfortunately, "U.S. population policies broadly defined aim to discourage Black women from having children, claiming that Black women make poor mothers and that their children end up receiving handouts from the state" (Roberts in Collins, 2000, p. 231). In yet another study, Wendy Luttrell (2003) conducted an 18 month ethnography of a

teenage pregnancy program and illustrated how race and gender affected pregnant teens in school. From experience, I know that Black teens that become pregnant are suddenly ostracized by society; lacking the necessary emotional support necessary to cope with teenage pregnancy. Insufficiently educated, they are hindered from securing meaningful employment to provide for their offspring. Consequently, they usually slip through the cracks and are further relegated into poverty; a trip their babies usually take with them.

In her study of 32 (then and now) teen mothers, Kaplan (1997) observed her participants in their daily life settings—in the streets, in their homes, whenever and wherever possible—where she sought to determine why teens get pregnant. What she found was, like me, many teens have unsafe sex for the first time without much thought about the consequences of their actions, while others use pregnancy to fill the void of love that so many teens are lacking in their lives. Addressing issues relevant to my inquiry, other studies of interest included Wanda S. Pillow's (2004) text, *Unfit Subjects*, which analyzes teen mothers and educational policy, and editors Valerie Polakow, Sandra S. Butler, Luisa Stormer Deprez, and Peggy Kahn's (2004) text entitled, *Shut Out*, which is a study of low-income mothers and higher education in post-welfare America. Although fictitious, Sheila Cole's (1995) text, *The Diary of a Pregnant Teenager*, provided an account of a pregnant teen's experiences by way of daily entries in a diary. The daily entries brought back memories of how easily girls, who think that they are so in love with young boys, get caught up in a moment of passion without thinking, and consequently, have unprotected sex. I was also reminded of how commonplace it is for teens to ignore the fact that they have missed their periods for months; often putting themselves and the babies they are carrying in jeopardy. Similar to these stories, my

story will also demonstrate how happy I was and how much potential I had until I made the dreaded mistake of becoming pregnant unintentionally.

Another resource was Evelyn Lerman's (1997) book entitled *Teen Moms: The Pain and the Promise*, which is a compilation of stories of young women speaking in their own voices about their experiences as teen moms. Advocating nurturing teen mothers and their children without prejudice, in her study, Lerman wanted to find out what was happening to these women and their babies. Over a span of two years, she interviewed 50 pregnant and parenting young women who revealed lots in common. What she found was many of these women were mostly raised by single women; many had been abused, some sexually, others physically; and most lacked nurturing homes and love. She concluded that countless young women deliberately become pregnant as teens just so they will have someone to love and someone to love them back unconditionally. Deborah Davis's (2004) publication, *You Look too Young to be a Mom*, is a collection of edited stories. Again, several teen moms shared stories about their lives before, during, and after pregnancy as they spoke out on love, learning, and success. Another advocate for teen mothers and their children, her work demonstrates just how strong and resilient these young women are and how much they need and want to be loved. Reading their stories, I was reminded of my story and how my pregnancy seemingly changed everything; yet, like so many other teen moms, I did not give up on my dreams. My search for a step-by-step methodology for writing a Black feminist autobiographical inquiry led me to research autobiographies written by Black women specifically, which are discussed next.



## Black Feminist Autobiographies

Reading the autobiography of notables such as Zora Neale Hurston and Rosa Parks, from their own unique historical perspectives; recurring themes for both were spirituality, social activism, and feminism; Black feminist themes definitional of autobiography. For example, in Zora Neale Hurston's (1995) autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* and Rosa Parks' (1992) autobiography, *Rosa Parks: My Story*, each made real the hardships they endured as Black females living in a society that automatically denigrated them because of their race, class, and gender as they reflected on their personal lives from childhood to adulthood in the Black community and mainstream society. Speaking about their experiences growing up in the segregated South, both Hurston and Parks took the reader back to their roots and origins.

What I liked most about Rosa Parks' autobiography was her use of photographs throughout her text. Portraying candid shots of her from infancy through adulthood, Parks showed the reader how she evolved over time into the civil rights icon that she became. Her historical chronology of her life shed tremendous insight into the movements for civil rights and key players within those movements. Consequently, I better understand the origins of many Black male leaders and the roles in which they played like W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other men who received all of the credit, while the women who worked tirelessly behind the scenes received little or no credit for their contributions. Both Hurston and Parks' stories are classic examples of how Black women were forced to take a back seat to Black men in particular and mainstream society in general.

In their collection of women's personal narratives called *Learning From Our Lives: Women, Research, and Autobiography in Education*, editors Anna Neumann and Penelope L. Petersen (2005) helped to redefine research as a personal experience by showing how autobiography as a method contributed to research in education. Critically important to my research, their research demonstrated how my autobiography contributes to the broader conversation. Although not specifically related to Black feminist thought, I also found insight in autobiographical writing within Editors JoAnn Phillion, Ming Fang He, and F. Michael Connelly's (2005) collection of personal narratives entitled *Narratives and Experience in Multicultural Education*. Within that collection, Meta Y. Harris (2005) promoted the use of autobiography in education when she wrote an article called, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: Autobiography in Multicultural Education*. Harris helped me to recognize the autobiographical process and its parameters—which were primarily reflective and basically limitless. As a Black feminist educator, conducting educational research; this study primarily gave me permission to boundlessly reflect on my own personal experiences and write my story with little or no limitation.

Mostern's (1995) dissertation, *Autobiography and Identity Politics: The Narrative Politics of Race-ness in Twentieth Century African American Thought*, introduced autobiography as a theoretical concept with Black feminism as an identity politics. Arguing that autobiography is central to Black feminist narratives because of their emphasis on race and gender, Mostern (1995) asserts, "The study of autobiography in the U.S. academy is closely tied to the growth of race and gender studies" (p. 33); I concur for it has already been established that modern day Black feminists were scholars who emerged in the academy in the 1970s and 1980s, where they wrote to convey their voices

and actions for social justice. Now that I know my history; my study aims to convey my voice and actions for social justice via my education, too. My study further illustrates how it is a part of the Black feminist traditions I have read and written about so abundantly. As I reflect on when I was a teen mom growing up in the South during the civil rights and women's liberation movements; today, I realize that Black feminist principles and practices were deeply embedded in my life and lifestyle.

From a slightly different perspective, Inga Muscio's (2005), *Autobiography of a Blue-Eyed Devil, My Life and Times in a Racist, Imperialist Society*, addresses how we are taught to believe that the ideology of White supremacy is normal. "Born into an environment of White supremacist racism, imperialism, and male domination" (Muscio, 2005, p. 196); Muscio was once referred to as "less than White," (Muscio, 2005) indicating that she was somehow tainted because of her olive-tone complexion. From a more radical perspective, Assata Shakur's (1987) autobiography, *Assata: An Autobiography* and Angela Davis's (1974) autobiography, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, recount their lives and experiences as Black female activists in the 1970s. Falsely accused and incarcerated because of their social activism and Black revolutionary affiliations; both made it clear how government officials were licensed to kill as they attempted to undermine Black revolutionaries "by any means necessary." Recurring themes that kept coming up in all of the autobiographies that I read were their origins and their cultures—where they came from, their childhood experiences, key people in their lives (family, friends, and community), their aspirations for an education and thus, a better life, and how those experiences molded them into who and what they are today. Accordingly, the next section discusses writing a Black feminist autobiography.

### Writing a Black Feminist Autobiography

Similar to the Black feminist autobiographies that I mentioned earlier, I provided insight into my life in a logical sequence that included elaboration on a series of events involving my life and the teenage pregnancy that changed my outlook on life. To assist in writing about my life, I used autobiographical writings including—memoirs, reflective essays, personal essays, and stories. I relied on photographs to establish a timeline. I wrote my personal story from memory from a Black feminist perspective as I elaborated on relationships with people, places, and things that I identified as having impacted my life then and now. Sharing my personal experiences and the significance of those experiences, I further reflected on my life over time—in my home, in school, in the community, with my family, friends, etc., and recorded my thoughts accordingly.

To gather my data, I analyzed and reflected on what happened in my life. I further wrote about how Black feminism as a theory framed what I see today, while I spoke about my childhood and what I view differently today. Themes that emerged from my reflections were education, spirituality, social activism, and feminism; four key aspects of Black feminism. These key aspects were found to be important in other Black women autobiographies as well as Black feminist theory. I detailed the events in my story even more by going into greater depth about turning points in my life. Focusing on key aspects of Black feminism, I spotlighted the paths that I have been shown by way of my knowledge of Black feminism. For example, through Black feminist lens, I recognized that in terms of race, class, and gender; Black women get the worst of what a racist society such as this has to offer (Davis, 1995; Hill Collins, 2004, 2000, 1998; hooks, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Jones, 2000; Smith, 1995). Earlier stages of the

dissertation process were constructed over time from extensive research, conversations with friends and family, periods of reflection, and pictures. In the final phase of data collection, the goal was to answer the following research questions in the same manner:

1. What is the socio-cultural context in which teen pregnancy is understood and experienced from both my past and present perspectives?
2. How can my story elaborate upon and illustrate these socio-cultural conditions as well as assist to reconceptualize teen pregnancy?

To accomplish that goal, I first provided details; second, I elaborated in more detail. As I sought out the socio-cultural context in which my story took place, I looked back at the remnants of slavery and how historical organizations such as the NAACP and movements such as civil rights and women's liberation evolved in and out of the Black community. To trace the changes in how teenage pregnancy has been written, sung and talked about, if any, over the years; I wrote about the socio-cultural context in which I experienced teenage pregnancy in terms of my race, class, and gender in the Black community in Folkston, Georgia during the 1970s and beyond.

As I reflected on the kinds of messages being sent then and now, I referenced old music, poetry, movies, books, speeches, etc. To assist in the formulation of my thoughts, I often compared the past to the present. Cultural artifacts also helped me to elaborate on my past experiences and what they were like for me. Other resources included Black magazines such as *Jet* and *Ebony*. To shape my writing, I focused on the turning point in my life—teenage pregnancy. As I focused on what I learned from that particular experience and what I wanted my audience to understand; in my own voice, I presented my understanding as a Black female who was once a teen mom in the South. Using

several events in my life to build on one another, I articulated and delineated racist, sexist, and classist aspects of my experiences as a Black teen mom in the South in the early to mid 1970s.

Thanks to numerous, credible authors, over time, autobiography has evolved into an acceptable method of education research (Grumet, 1980; Harris, 2005; Neumann & Peterson, 1997; Pinar, 1994; Prentice Hall, 2004; Roth, 2005). In view of that, women are increasingly writing about their lived experiences; specifically, their oppressions and oppressors. From that perspective, reflecting on my life as a teen mom, it is my wish to help myself as I get a better sense of *self*—of who I am—from whence I came—and where I may be going; and in the process, assist others. Dismissed as stupid, unfit, and shut out; because they are Black, there are obvious race associated differences in health outcomes of Black teenage mothers and their children (Abramovitz, 1988; Evans-Winters, 2003; Jones, 2000; Kaplan, 1997; Luttrell, 2003; Merrick, 2001). As a result, high neonatal and infant mortality rates are common among Black teenage mothers (Jones, 2000), which is yet another reason why additional research of this nature is warranted.

Unlike the majority of research, which mostly focused on negative issues; my research focused on my resiliency as a Black teen mom and my ability to adjust to the many social and economic problems in my life. Analyzing the socio-cultural conditions in which I experienced teen pregnancy; similar to Abramovitz (1988), Evans-Winters (2003), Kaplan (1997), Luttrell (2003), Merrick (2001) and others, my study demonstrated how through the support of family, community, church, etc., common misconceptions regarding Black teenage motherhood are dispelled as Black feminist

themes such as education, feminism, social activism, and spirituality were revealed.

Finally, my personal narrative offered a reconceptualization of Black teenage pregnancy.

First, Chapter III, which highlights the socio-cultural context in which this dissertation was understood, is discussed next.

## CHAPTER 3

### UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Many would agree that race, class, and gender are socially constructed and in a sense, people's race, class, and gender, to a large degree, determine their roles and places in society. In this chapter, the goal is to discuss historical aspects of slavery, and Americanization and popular culture to show how they have affected my life as an African American woman in America. To assist in contextualizing my story, it is important to understand how the more distant pasts of slavery and the Reconstruction Era contributed to the real issues of my story. Therefore, it is essential for the reader to identify with what went on during the Reconstruction Era of 1865-1890s and beyond. To help the reader to relate to the socio-cultural context in which my life as a Black female growing up in the Deep South during the 1960s and 1970s took place, this chapter will begin with a discussion on the Reconstruction Era; followed by an in-depth discussion of the history of Americanization and popular culture (through genres such as fads and fashions, music, sports, and mediums such as television, radio, and movies); demonstrating how they impacted the evolution of education and occupation of African Americans and other minorities in America; particularly African American women. First, the Reconstruction Era and its impact are discussed.

#### The Reconstruction Era and its Impact

During the Reconstruction Era in Georgia from 1865-1877, amendments such as “the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery; the Fourteenth Amendment, which expanded the guarantees of federally protected citizenship rights, and the Fifteenth Amendment, which barred voting restrictions based on race” (Sullivan, 1999, p. 441)



were enacted. As a result, “Reconstruction radically changed social, political, and economic relationships in the South and in the nation” (Sullivan, 1999, p. 441). During the early days of Reconstruction, freedom meant participation in politics on local, state, and national levels, while “state governments drew up new constitutions that implemented sweeping democratic reforms, including, for the first time in the South, a system of universal free public education” (Sullivan, p. 441). As a result, “former slaves participated in civic and political life throughout the South” (Sullivan, p. 441) and attended public school.

However, in 1877, “the Democratic Party’s politics of ‘redemption,’ which promised the restoration of White hegemony and ‘home rule’ for Southern states” (Sullivan, p. 441) was successful. In little or no time, through government control, “a combination of municipal ordinances and local and state laws mandating racial segregation ultimately permeated all spheres of life” (Sullivan, p. 441) once again. As a result, “the Supreme Court, in rulings such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), upheld the South’s ‘new order,’ which essentially nullified the constitutional amendments enacted during Reconstruction” (Sullivan, p. 441). In an effort to restore White supremacy, Blacks were again segregated and stripped of citizenship rights. Significant to my study, throughout the South, Jim Crow laws were enacted that restricted Black Americans to demeaning positions of servitude in which they were economically, politically, and socially exploited. These points are further demonstrated in my life story.

Having known freedom, African Americans protested and boycotted, but to no avail. Victims of lynching, police brutality, and other types of violence, Blacks turned to the church for direction and solace. Coming from a community struggling against

poverty and racism; as with many in the Black community, our saving grace was the church. Born and raised a Southern Baptist, I witnessed how deeply rooted members of my family and the community were in the church. As I recall, whenever my mother could not attend church with us, she would ensure that my brothers and I attended without her. “The Black church focused the mobilization of community resources to provide educational and welfare services, leadership training, and organizational networks and served as a site of mass gatherings and meetings” (Sullivan, 1999, p. 442). Peak periods of violence against Blacks are also peak periods of social activism within the Black community, which can be seen during the eras of A. Philip Randolph, W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King, Jr. Prominent leaders such as W. E.B. Du Bois used their knowledge to form coalitions to fight racial discrimination.

“In 1905, Du Bois, William Trotter, and other Black militants founded the Niagara Movement, an organization committed to securing full citizenship rights for African Americans” (Sullivan, p. 442). Although short lived, the movement led to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). “Founded in 1909 by an interracial group of reformers and civil rights activists...the NAACP provided the primary organizational foundation from which the Black struggle for civil rights was mounted over the next half century” (Sullivan, p. 442). Many African Americans pursued education and became prominent civil rights lawyers to better equip themselves to fight for the rights of Blacks by way of the law.

A noted Black activist, A. Philip Randolph, was a leader who fought for better working conditions for Black train porters. “Founded in 1925 by A. Philip Randolph, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) was the first successful African American

trade union” (Tuttle, 1999, p. 314). Instrumental in securing better wages and hours for the porters of the Pullman Company, “the BSCP became an integral part of the fair employment practices in other industries and helped bring Black workers into the realm of organized labor” (Tuttle, p. 314). Under Randolph’s leadership, “the BSCP was also a voice for civil rights, providing the philosophical seed that bore fruit in the 1963 March on Washington” (Tuttle, 1999, p. 314). Describing the Pullman Palace Car Company, Tuttle (1999) noted the following:

The Pullman Palace Car Company was established in 1867 to provide luxurious service to train passengers. By the 1920s the company was the largest employer of African Americans...Yet the porters, many of whom were college educated men, faced demeaning conditions at work. Placed in servile relationships to White customers, porters were also exploited by their employers. Pullman paid Black workers less than Whites and restricted the men to jobs as porters. The fact that such work was considered desirable is evidence of how few opportunities were open to Black educated men at the time. (p. 314)

That fact reminded me of an oral history interview I conducted a few years ago with an 81-year-old Black male who saw no need for higher education because he was a Black man victimized by Americanization. Consequently, he did not value an education because he did not figure that it would make a difference in his ability to succeed in life because he was Black. Regardless, A. Philip Randolph’s leadership resulted in Black people coming together, demonstrating that collectively they were strong enough to force the dominant culture to change their wicked ways. “Randolph’s leadership led to an executive order banning discrimination in the defense industries, the establishment of the

Fair Employment Practice Committee, and the desegregation of the United States armed forces” (Tuttle, p. 315). Because the BSCP was so powerful, they played several roles that affected the outcome of present day history. Tuttle (1999) noted:

When Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a White man in 1955, it was BSCP member E. D Nixon who helped organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott in protest. In 1963, A. Philip Randolph’s 1941 call for a march on Washington was finally realized; the event brought the civil rights message to a worldwide audience. It was later said the union laid the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement in this country. It inspired Black people by proving that they could organize and get results. (p. 315)

In addition to providing insight into the aforementioned events that catapulted her into modern history; applicable to my dissertation, it was Rosa Parks’ autobiography that contributed to my understanding of how to write an inquiry such as this. For African Americans, “overcoming attempts by early American leaders to limit citizenship and education to ‘free Blacks’ is the most important change in the second half of the twentieth century” (Spring, 2000, p. 441). Reminiscent of earlier struggles I have read about, I understand why education and voting became so important to the Black community. As a people, we knew that if we could not read or write, then, we certainly could not vote. Therefore, we knew that if we were illiterate, we were powerless socially, politically, and economically. In an attempt to render social, economic, and political justice in segregated Black communities in this country, the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, was an attempt by the Supreme Court to eliminate segregation in American education. Americanization, characterized by a

dominant culture of White Anglo Saxon Protestants, believed that a public system of education was needed to build nationalism, to shape good citizens, and reform society (Spring, 2000).

#### Americanization and its Impact

Americanization involved a massive educational effort to change the language and culture of all races that were not White. In addition to segregation in education and housing, other tactics used to promote White supremacy included school prayer, reciting the pledge of allegiance while facing the American flag, English only classes, and textbooks depicting only White historical heroes (Spring, 2000). At the time, I did not realize that “Americanization programs emphasized patriotism and loyalty to the United States government by patriotic exercises and celebrations of U. S. national holidays and heroes” (Spring, 2000, p. 167). However, today, I realize that I experienced all of those tactics growing up in the South in the 1960s and 1970s. Americanization affected women especially, because for a long time, women like other minorities, were regarded as inferior to men. Directly related to my study, if women were considered inferior to men, while Blacks were considered inferior to Whites; both Black and female, I was doubly oppressed to say the least.

Many cultures such as African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans and Irish Catholics were all fighting against the dominant culture for preservation of their own cultures, which through Americanization, were nearly wiped out in the United States (Spring, 2000). African Americans seeking education as means of fighting for civil rights, Native Americans pursuing literacy as a means of preserving their culture and tribal land, and the women’s liberation movement are examples of

minorities and other cultures demanding fair representation in American schools (Spring, 2000). Anglo-Americans believed, “if conquered[,] people could be forced to emulate the dominant culture of the U. S....[and] they would rush to embrace their conquerors rather than resist subjugation” (Spring, p. 169). Unfortunately, things did not go according to plan. Eventually, through education, other cultures began to stand up and fight for their rights to freedom and expression via popular culture.

Just five and a half years before I was born, “on May 7, 1954, in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the United States Supreme Court ended federally sanctioned racial segregation in the public schools by ruling unanimously that ‘separate educational facilities are inherently unequal’” (Tuttle, 1999, p. 321-322). Relevant to my story, it would be at least eleven years after I was born before federally sanctioned racial segregation in public schools would be eradicated in Folkston, Georgia. A span of over 16 years, I came up in the midst of segregation, integration, and discrimination that came along with being a Black person in the South during this historical period. Tuttle (1999) noted:

A groundbreaking case, *Brown* notably overturned the precedent *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which had declared “separate but equal facilities” constitutional, but also provided the legal foundation of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Although widely perceived as a revolutionary decision, *Brown* was in fact the culmination of changes both in the court and the strategies of integration’s most powerful legal champion, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Pushing the court to this point had taken the NAACP

more than 40 years. Since its founding in 1909, the organization had legally challenged racial inequality. (pp. 321-322)

Despite victory in the nation's highest court, desegregation was a slow process that did not come easy. As I alluded to earlier, I was in the fifth grade when we finally integrated nearly 16 years later in Folkston, Georgia.

As a matter of fact, desegregation was moving along so slowly that "a separate decision, known as *Brown II* (1955), set guidelines for dismantling segregation" (Tuttle, 1999, p. 321). Throughout the South, Whites reacted violently to school integration. Although I did not experience any violence directly in Folkston; despite the fact that we were integrated on the surface; for the most part, Blacks and Whites remained segregated. As I recall, we had a few Black teachers in our newly integrated schools, but the new faculty and staff were mostly White. Except for when absolutely necessary; initially, there was little interaction between the races. However, over time, many came to know and respect each other. Tuttle (1999) described Whites' reactions to integration two years before I was born in 1959 in the following passage:

In 1957, crowds threw rocks at Black grade-schoolers in Little Rock, Arkansas.

In 1962, Alabama governor George Wallace blocked the door when the first African American students attempted to enter the state university. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, urban schools increasingly experienced de facto segregation as middle-class Whites fled to the suburbs. New strategies to achieve integration, like busing, sparked renewed frustration, anger, and resentment on all sides. At present, many urban American schools are nearly all Black, while many suburban

schools are all White; in some cases, these schools are as unequal as before Brown. (pp. 321-322)

To this very day, one can usually find students segregated with their own kind on school campuses during any social gathering. Despite such setbacks, however, “the case, considered by many legal scholars the most significant of the twentieth century, brought racial integration to thousands of American schools and inspired the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s” (Tuttle, 1999, p. 322), which is quite relevant to my story because it integrates my life story with the history that took place during the time that I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in the Deep South.





Figure 1: Roy, Billy, Me, Mommie, and Ernest.

### Who Am I?

The knee baby and only girl of four siblings, I was born and raised on a farm in a little country town called Folkston, Georgia. My grandfather owned 180 acres of farmland in which he came to possess by way of sharecropping. In addition to him and my grandmother raising 11 children, they raised hogs, cows, and chickens; but their

major crop was tobacco. On the farm, they housed their own tobacco in a huge barn where once dried out, it was taken to the market. In addition, they made their own syrup from the sugar cane that they grew, and they had a grapevine, from which my grandfather often made his own wine. Back far in the woods, there was a creek for swimming—which I never did—because it also had snakes. But, it sure was fun growing up there. I happened to grow up there because my mother and father divorced when I was a young child. Thus, along with my mother, my brothers and I went to live with my mother's parents.

Being an African American female and growing up in the 60s and 70s in the South, resources and opportunities were few. Education was somewhat restricted in the sense that we were largely segregated. To have a fair chance at life, back in those days, just as they struggled to have a voice in the community, Black people seemingly yearned for an education because they saw it as a way out of poverty. Therefore, as a child, I knew that I had to excel in school. All through grade school I was on the honor roll and I was often the teacher's pet. When I was in fifth grade, the Black and White schools integrated. In high school we must have been on a tracking system because I can remember being one of only two Black students in my all White classes; the other was my first cousin, Jeffery. Within the community, we were considered "smart." Every one expected us to succeed. We knew that we were going to college.

Prior to becoming a teenage mom, I had a reputation for being smart and athletic throughout the community. Coming from an admired, respected, and well-known family in the community, until I made that life-changing decision to have unprotected sex, I was on what seemed like a path of success. Both smart and athletic, I had great potential and

was therefore expected to do well in life. Although opportunities for Black people were mostly restricted to positions of servitude, being the progressive and adventurous woman that she was, my mother sought better opportunities for herself and her children. I understood and appreciated the fact that my mother's attempts to provide for her four children kept her away from home quite a bit. She often had to work long hours and sometimes had to be away from home a lot because of the menial jobs she was forced to take, which regularly exploited her time and labor.

A divorced, Black female with four children in the Deep South with a limited education, my mother saw education as the only way around the positions of servitude that she was often forced to take in local roadside cafes, motels, and restaurants in town such as a dishwasher, a cook, or a maid to provide for us; a sign of the times in which we lived. Because I was my mother's only daughter, I had a reputation to uphold. I was expected to excel in school so that I could fare better in life than she did. Coming from a failed marriage with four, small children, my mother did not want me to make the same choices or mistakes that she did. Therefore, for as long as I can remember, my mother was adamant about me continuing my education and me not having babies because they would hinder me from continuing my education.

Although farming was essential to their livelihood, at a time when many children of farmers did not value an education and usually dropped out before completing high school to work the land, my maternal grandmother obviously realized how important a high school education was for her children, because growing up, I actually witnessed my grandmother's determination to see most of her children through high school.

Throughout my life my grandmother could read and write even though she came from a time when Black people were restricted from an education.



Figure 2: Gramps and Uncle Joe.

Although much limited by today's standards, my maternal grandmother was obviously educated in some capacity herself. Thus, when I was a mere child, I knew that education was important to my mother and her family. Accordingly, over time, not only did I feel compelled to complete high school; I also felt compelled to complete college. Having grown up in a small town where every one seemingly knew everyone else, and many of the schoolteachers in the community had taught several members of my family; I was expected to do extremely well in school. My mother would often say, "Two Bs don't mix; it's either the boys or the books!" She chose the books for me.

In the summer of 1973, prior to my first year of high school, my second oldest brother, Roy, drowned during a function hosted by the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on the river. His loss devastated my mother and me above all. I was especially bothered because on the morning of his death, our last words to each other were harsh. As siblings so often do, the last time that I saw him alive, I told him something like he made me sick. Thus, after his death, I immediately slipped into a depression and nearly suffered a nervous breakdown. Roy's death took a toll on my family, and in the process, somehow changed my mother. My mother tried to compensate for his loss by loving us even more. As a result, she became a lot less stern in how she raised us, allowing me just enough freedom and flexibility to get into mischief. Unbeknownst to my mother, I was primed to date and experiment with sex. So, for about six months after my brother's death, while my mother was preoccupied with working and loving us, I was preoccupied with what could be termed popular culture at that time. I was slipping out of the house drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and partying with my friends.

#### Popular Culture and its Impact

Popular culture is the many ways that certain events, styles, personalities, music, and media have influenced and shaped our attitudes about life. Popular culture is the morays, folkways, and expressions of people of various cultures. Because America is made up of such diverse cultures; multiple subcultures have found avenues of expression. Subcultures, whose expressions have been oppressed and sometimes labeled inappropriate by the dominant culture by way of Americanization, are being overcome via popular culture. Their expressions can be seen in commercials, T. V. sitcoms, music,

and sports; in fact, throughout the entire social system. Like so many others then and now, radio, TV, movies, automobiles, etc., all fit together to generate a particular worldview; a worldview that greatly influenced my behavior too.

Overtime, popular culture has helped influence attitudes. For example, America's fascination with cars and fashion are just two statements of expression of what is popular, which greatly influenced my dating and to a great extent contributed to my teenage pregnancy. The automobile, invented during the turn of the century, is a way of life and lifestyles in America. In 2001, Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) were in a category that "accounted for more than one-half of all new vehicles sold in the U. S. If the trend continues, SUVs eventually will account for one of every five vehicles on the road" (Geico Direct, Fall 2002, p. 20); despite the fact that a regular gallon of gas will cost you nearly four dollars a gallon; that trend still holds true even today.

Once upon a time, in the fashion industry, only "traditional" designers such as Rudolph Valentino, Yves Saint Laurent, and Christian Dior put on elegant fashion shows that "thrill[ed] and inspire[d] young sophisticated trendsetters" (Johnson, 2002, p. 168). Today, in this genre of popular culture, African Americans are beginning to play major roles, as well. In an article entitled, *From Rags to Riches*, McKinney (2002) discusses how hip-hop has invaded the fashion world:

As Frank Sinatra tunes fill the room, a series of male models, dressed in natty-three-piece suits, cashmere overcoats, and military style tuxedos, saunter up and down the runway. At the end of the sartorial display, the man responsible for the \$1.2 million extravaganza emerges onto the catwalk. Sean Combs—better known as 'Puff Daddy' or more recently 'P. Diddy'—takes a bow. At this event, he is

not the multi-platinum selling rap artist and producer. Combs is the designer-entrepreneur who just introduced Saville Row to the hip-hop world. (p. 99)

Although fads and fashions come and go, and will continue to go in and out of style, “Sean John, the apparel arm of Combs’ Bad Boy Entertainment, has rung up mammoth sales...Its 2001 estimated revenues [were] roughly \$250 million” (McKinney, p 99). Not very long ago, this would only be a dream for an African American. At best, Sean John would be a waiter or servant at the extravaganza.

While African American artists have been expressing themselves by singing, rapping, dancing, and speaking lyrics historically; the music industry is another facet of popular culture that has opened doors for African Americans. This seems like a reverse effect of Americanization because these mediums are capable of boosting recognition and popularity in society and across cultures. Thanks to cable television shows such as Music TV (MTV), Black Entertainment Television (BET), and Home Box Office (HBO), Black entertainers, can now display their many talents and promote their music right in our homes. Singer, Marian Anderson, did not have it so easy. Although, she later made history “when she became the first African-American soloist at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City in 1955, in 1939, [she] was the center of controversy when the Daughters of the American Revolution blocked her Washington, D.C., performance at Constitution Hall” (Strickland, 2000, p. 14). As a result, she was later extended an invitation to perform at the Lincoln Memorial.

During my mother’s heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, Rock and Roll music was at its peak with artists like Chuck Barry and Little Richard at the top of the charts; during dances like the jerk and the twist. During my youth in the 1960s and 1970s, Rhythm and

Blues was in its prime, and love songs were trendy. Here lies a connection between my story and the love songs written during the time when I was growing up in South Georgia. I can recall the sexual overtones in love songs like Marvin Gaye's Sexual Healing; the O'Jays' hit single, Let Me Make Love to You, and Betty Wright's, Tonight is the Night that You Make Me a Woman. Closely connected to teen sex and pregnancy, Diana Ross's, Love Child is another song that comes to mind. No one spoke of sex or teen pregnancy directly; yet, indirectly, it was obvious. Today, hip hop is reigning in the music industry. Not only are the lyrics rather sexual; oftentimes, they are quite demeaning to women; particularly Black women. Regardless, nowadays, women rap artists are quite popular; it is more acceptable to have a child without getting married; and with the exorbitant divorce rate in America, there is no such thing as a lifetime commitment, anymore.

Until recently, tennis and golf were two sports considered off limits to African Americans. Once considered solely a White sport, before his untimely death, Arthur Ashe managed to break down a few barriers in tennis. As a result, today, the Williams sisters have managed to play tennis in places that no one ever thought possible. Chappell (2002) noted:

Although opinions vary as to why the Williams sisters are so good, no one can dispute the impact the two have had on the game of tennis. Ratings are up.

Games at major tournaments are filled to capacity. Blacks and people who have traditionally not been interested in tennis are now fans of the sport. (p. 166)

Similarly, in the world of golf, Tiger Woods is so popular and so good at his craft that he is the only person of African decent to ever break back-to-back records in golf. Together,



Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters have won professional golf and tennis tournaments numerous times and are household faces and names around the world. Not to mention, that they are rich beyond measure.

Other trendsetters in the sports arena include head football coaches. “In Notre Dame stadium, home of one of America’s most famous football teams, Tyrone Willingham [was] named the first Black head coach of the Fighting Irish” (Jeffers, 2002, p. 126). As popular as football is in American society, I find it hard to believe that Willingham is only “one of four Black head coaches (out of 115) in NCAA Division 1-A football” (Jeffers, 2002, pp. 126-127). According to Jeffers (2000), “[Willingham] signed a six-year deal reportedly worth around \$1.5 million annually [and] whether he knows it or not, he will be carrying the banner for Black coaches” (pp. 126-127). Jeffers could not have made a truer statement. Like all of his predecessors who struggled and fought to make a way for him, Willingham will be expected to continue the struggle for equality and pave the way for others who will follow him. For African Americans, he is considered a role model. Just recently, two more Black head coaches made history as the first two Black coaches competing against each other for the Super Bowl championship. As a result, Tony Dungie of the Baltimore Colts was the first Black head coach to ever win a Super bowl game in this country.

Another popular medium, the television, was also affected by Americanization. “TV, which has been called the most powerful medium of human history, has been slow to recognize the power and potential of Black entrepreneurs and managers” (Ebony, 2002, pp. 86-87); however, one powerful, Black woman that managed to overcome racial barriers is Oprah Winfrey. Winfrey, like her White peers, has the power to green light

projects and to make or break dreams. As a producer and host of arguably the most successful TV program in history, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Winfrey is a television icon; “her influence and reach far exceeds that of the show, which debuted in 1986 and has 26 million viewers” (Ebony, p. 90). In the role of TV host, as well as, many other roles, Blacks are now allowed to perform and are supported by these various audio/visual mediums. The history of these kinds of talk shows can be traced from all White, male talk show hosts like Merv Griffin, Phil Donahue, and Johnny Carson to celebrity female talk show hostesses of today like Oprah Winfrey and Tyra Banks.

Hollywood—home of the rich and famous—is the place where glamorous movie stars became famous because their names and faces were televised in our homes. In the 1950s and 1960s, I grew up watching shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, which depicted the White male as the breadwinner and the mother as the homemaker. This example illustrates how the audio/visual medium has been used to reinforce cultural values. Nevertheless, as one of my colleagues so graciously reminded me—ground breaking shows that featured African-Americans—*All in the Family*, *The Jefferson’s*, *Good Times*, and *The Cosby Show*—are examples of how popular culture began to embrace Black people from the 1960s forward; and how, relevant to my study, in those shows, Black men tried to adopt White male gender ideologies. Again, the man was the head of the household and the woman’s place was in the home, taking care of him and the kids. Similar to my study, the more contemporary sitcoms tend to depict Black women as more self-sufficient and independent. Not only do today’s sitcoms present more acceptable values regarding sex and sexuality; usually, women are depicted as equal to their mates and oftentimes, the sole breadwinner in their families.

Until recently, except for minor servant roles, Hollywood and the movies were off limits to African Americans. In contrast to traditional Americanization, today, African Americans have evolved into leading roles. “The year 2002 undoubtedly was the biggest year in the life of Halle Berry...accepting the Academy Award for her outstanding performance in the controversial movie *Monster’s Ball*; she is the first Black woman to win the best actress Oscar” (Ebony, 2002, p. 58). A newcomer on the scene, Jennifer Hudson, is just the third African American female to be pictured on the cover of *Vogue Magazine* for her outstanding role in the newly released film *Dream Girls*. The first and the second were Oprah Winfrey and Halle Berry, in that order. Prominent African Americans who paved the way on the big screen and made it possible for actors and actresses such as Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, and Jennifer Hudson to realize their dreams include household names such as Sammy Davis, Jr., Sydney Poitier, Ella Fitzgerald, Pearle Bailey, Diahann Carroll, Dorothy Dandridge, Ossie Davis, Cicely Tyson, and Ruby Dee.

For example, many of their roles were quite different from what I was accustomed to watching on television at the time, i.e., mammy, maid, butler, etc. Sammy Davis, Jr. was a part of the famous Rat Pack with Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra, while Ella Fitzgerald, Dorothy Dandridge, and Ruby Dee were portrayed as glamorous, entertainers and actresses. In one of her many roles, Halle Berry portrayed the life and times of Dorothy Dandridge who on the surface was good enough to perform for her all White audiences; yet behind the scenes, she continually encountered racial segregation and discrimination and was often denied the perks and privileges of her White counterparts because she was Black. I will never forget the degrading scene where Dandridge

supposedly jumped into the pool at the all White hotel where she was performing and staying, only to later witness the pool being drained and cleaned as a result of her action.

Movies portraying Cicely Tyson in slave roles helped Blacks overcome many of the damaging effects of Americanization by instilling in them a sense of pride and a determination to continue the battle for equality. Academy Award winner Sidney Poitier appeared in dramatic roles that were not necessarily considered Black roles (Strickland, 2000). In the 1950s, his role as a Black man engaged to a White woman in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was unheard of. As a result, it opened doors for other Blacks to be portrayed in non-traditional roles, as well. I can still recall Diahann Carroll's out of the ordinary sitcom, *Julia*, in the 1960s, in which she was portrayed as a single, Black female registered nurse, raising a son alone. As always, sisters were doing it for themselves!

As I transitioned from middle to high school, I managed to maintain my reputation as an honor roll student, while I made the cheerleading squad and the girls' basketball team. The year I began high school, it seemed like every Friday evening there was some type of sports event to attend. I remember living for the various games—it did not matter what season—baseball, football, or basketball—I attended them all, and hated it when I could not. Such events gave me an unsuspecting outlet from the house and the watchful eyes of both my mother and maternal grandmother. In order to attend such events, I had to be accompanied by my brothers who loved getting me into trouble with my mother at every opportunity. To thwart my brothers and their close scrutiny, my best friend and I would usually slip out during the second half of the games.

Oftentimes, we went on double dates with our so-called boyfriends. Since my best friend was older, her boyfriend usually provided the transportation for us to ride and

park. My date and I would usually go along for the company. One couple would ride in the front seat and the other couple would ride in the back seat. On one of those many nights of drinking and partying, I played with fire and got burnt. I fumbled through a sexual encounter with a young boy who was one year my senior. Both young and foolish, I know that it was my first time having sex; and I suspect that it was most likely his first time as well.

A virgin, only in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I became a teenage mom during my first year of high school for what seemed like less than five minutes of pleasure. When I missed my first period, I tried to hide the fact that I made a mistake by ignoring the fact that I was pregnant. I tried to deny what was happening to my body, as I tried to hide the telltale signs from friends and family. Nevertheless, from the time I missed my first period on, I knew that I had made a grave mistake. I was nearly five months pregnant before any one knew for certain. I recall my grandmother and mother having conversations about dreaming about fish. In the Black community, dreaming of fish is a sign that someone is expecting a child. So, somehow, through divine revelation, my secret was no longer a secret. My mother and grandmother already knew.

#### Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972

Literally forcing federally funded institutions into compliance, “in its final form, Title VI required mandatory withholding of federal funds to institutions that did not comply with its mandates” (Spring, 2000, p. 394). However, it did not take the dominant culture long to figure out how to circumvent the Brown decision because “in the late 1960s, the courts began to rule that the Brown decision applied to all schools in the country, if it could be proved that segregation was the result of intentional actions by

school boards or school administrators” (Spring, p. 394). Directly related to my dissertation, school boards and school administrators in the South were slow to comply with federal directives. From a slightly different perspective, not long ago teenage girls could no longer attend public school if they became pregnant or married. As soon as school administrators became aware of it, pregnant teens were immediately withdrawn from school—never to return. Life as she knew it was over. She was immediately ostracized. Like me, they were quickly and quietly, swooped away and seemingly hidden from society until the baby was born.

Today, in order not to jeopardize federal funding, school leaders make every attempt not to violate Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. As a means of prohibiting discrimination against pregnant students, Title IX specifically states that “a recipient [of federal funding] shall not discriminate or exclude any student from its education program or activity, including any class or extracurricular activity, on the basis of such student’s pregnancy...” (LaMorte, 2005, p. 180). This legislation impacted my family because it gave us legal grounds in which to stand when the time came for me to resume my education after my teenage pregnancy in 1974 in Folkston, Georgia. Since I was in high school, programs and possibilities have come a long way. Today, there are so many avenues of assistance for teen moms and their children, teen dads, and even the teen family that it seems almost inexcusable that teens are still slipping through the cracks.

The minute I started showing, the school stepped in. I was summoned by one of the respectable Black, female teachers, who inquired about my condition. As a result, one month before school would let out for the summer, in the spring of 1974, I was

literally kicked out of school; supposedly for good. In Folkston, Georgia, girls who became pregnant or married were not allowed to attend school any longer. They were considered “grown up” so to speak. Now publicly pregnant, all of a sudden, it seemed like all of my so-called friends were no longer my friends. The baby’s father even avoided me. The moment he heard that I was expecting and he was believed to be the father; he actually denied her. I was suddenly ostracized from the rest of society, while my mother and grandmother instantly became my closest confidants. Together, they did everything in their power to teach me the ways of a woman. Unexpectedly, my mother opened up and began to converse with me about sex, birth control, and how boys/men tend to treat women.

Ashamed and afraid of what the future held for me, the majority of my pregnancy, I felt alone and depressed. I can recall crying and praying for nearly the entire time that I was pregnant. I cried because I was ashamed; I felt cursed. I had made a life changing decision without much thought about the consequences. I had let my mother, and above all, myself down. I had higher aspirations for my own life. I wanted to live the American dream. I wanted a nice family, a nice home, a nice car, a nice job, etc. Most of all, I wanted to be educated because I knew that it would be the key to my success. I knew that if I were educated, I stood a better chance of acquiring my dreams. In my childhood dreams, I would grow up and one day, upon completion of my schooling of course, I would meet and marry the man of my dreams and bear him two children; preferably, a girl and a boy. Together, we would all live happily ever after in a beautiful home in Atlanta, Georgia. Thus, I repeatedly prayed for forgiveness and a second chance.

Instead, what teenage pregnancy did for me was make me feel scorned and rejected. No longer feeling worthy, over and over again, my spirit felt submerged in pain. I could relate to what some would refer to as the dark side. Suddenly alone, I felt isolated, restricted, confined, confused, vulnerable, diseased, etc. No one ever really knew the pain I felt and the disappointment that I had in myself. I felt like I had blown any chance I had for acquiring my dreams and a better life than my mother. Not long before this time, I was so happy. I had so much going for me. Once smart, funny, cute, athletic, admired, respected, and at the top of my class; I was now my worst critic. I often wondered how I could be so stupid and fall prey to teenage pregnancy without much thought.

I realized society could be very unforgiving. Left with feelings of fear and uncertainty, no matter how hard I tried, I no longer fit in. I did not know it then, but three social perils—race, class, and gender—continually haunted me in some shape, form, or fashion, always threatening to kill my spirit. I can still remember the silent anguish and the unspoken, yet, obvious language that kept me in my place. As I recall, it was awful. Someone or something always managed to remind me that I had made a mistake. During the entire ordeal, I kept telling myself that this too shall pass. Refusing to give up or give in to defeat, some unexplainable force from within gave me the courage and the strength I needed to endure.

Before long, reality set in and I accepted my fate. Later, with the wisdom, knowledge, and care bestowed upon me by my mother and in her absence, my grandmother, I actually enjoyed the latter months of my pregnancy and learned to appreciate the beauty of being an expectant mother. With their help, I forgot about being



kicked out of school for the moment, and concentrated on having a healthy baby. Now, my focus was on taking care of myself, and the little one growing inside of me. As a result, I got plenty of rest and obeyed the doctor's orders, while I ate right, relaxed and gained weight. What I enjoyed least about being pregnant was the excruciating cramps in my legs that so frequently woke me up from a deep sleep during the night. On the other hand, what I enjoyed most about being pregnant was the bond that was established between my mother and me that still exists to this very day. During my term, my mother would often spend time with me as she accompanied me on my many visits to the doctor. We had ample opportunity to talk and get to know each other on another level. Ultimately, she became my dearest and most trusted friend. Today, our relationship lends credence to the old saying, "A friend in need is a friend indeed." During the darkest and lowest points of my life, I could always count on my mother to see me through.

The nine-month gestation period passed pretty quickly it seemed. However, when the time came; psychologically, I was so afraid of having my baby, I refused to give in and let nature take its course. Thus, as expected, I had a long, difficult labor, which caused my stay at the hospital to be miserable. Unlike so many others I knew who had had their babies in a few hours or a day or two at the most; I was in labor an entire weekend; from Friday afternoon until Monday morning. One can only imagine the hard time that I gave my mother and the staff on duty at the hospital. I carried on something awful. The closer I came to delivering my baby; the more I rebelled in any way imaginably possible. For example, when the nurse said push, I pulled. On several occasions, my mother threatened to leave me alone at the hospital if I did not straighten up. I outright cursed every time I felt a sharp, labor pain. To calm me down, they finally

gave me a shot that put me under sedation. When I woke up, as nature would have it, on August 18, 1974, I had delivered a healthy, seven pound, 19 inches long baby girl. The first time that I set eyes on her, I remember feeling so proud to hold “my bundle of joy.” She was such a beautiful baby. For that moment, somehow, everything seemed worthwhile.

Three days later, my beautiful, baby girl and I left the hospital and returned home, where together we embarked on a lifelong journey. Not accustomed to sleeping with a newborn baby, I clearly recall being afraid that I might roll over and hurt her in my sleep. Thus, to be on the safe side, I would strategically place her safely away from me near the wall. As always, the next morning, I would awake only to find that she had wiggled her way right back to my side; both of us drenched from her urinating throughout the night. During the 1970s, when I was a teen mom, when a woman had a baby, one month was the magical period of recovery. As a result, until my baby was one month old, both my mother and my grandmother restricted our activities. To protect me from illness and possibly death, as I recall, I was not allowed to take a sit down bath, wash my hair, get wet from the rain, or resume any activities for at least one month. I later realized that these were Black feminist traditions handed down for generations in my family.

Unfortunately, when she was a mere one month old, Little Dale, as she is so fondly called, gave us quite a scare when she came down deathly ill with what we thought was a dreadful cold. Unable to talk, all she did was cry fretfully. She was so sick she would hardly eat. Unable to keep anything on her little stomach, she would immediately throw up any food she was forced to eat. When she did not get any better, out of desperation, my mother took her to the emergency room in nearby St. Mary’s,

Georgia, where they superficially treated her and sent her back home. Convinced that she was not any better, the next day, my mother took off work again. This time she took Dale to our family physician in Waycross, Georgia, where she was immediately hospitalized. Diagnosed with pneumonia, she lay in intensive care in Waycross Memorial Hospital for three days. Suffering from pain, chills, and fever; after treatment, thankfully, she recovered quickly and bounced back nicely.



Figure 3: Dale at three years old.



Figure 4: Dale in kindergarten.

#### The 1964 Civil Rights Act

A Phillip Randolph started Black people to marching for civil rights, but it was Martin Luther King, Jr., who is credited with non-violent public demonstrations and marches which showed the world all of the injustices that African Americans were receiving in America. Much like today, “the evolution of the mass media in the 1950s was an important factor in the civil rights movement because it became possible to turn local problems into national issues” (Spring, 2000, p. 391). The civil rights movement, headed by the famous Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., used nonviolent tactics and the media to draw attention to their quest for freedom. Following is a summary of Spring’s (2000) views of their nonviolent demonstrations:

The most dramatic technique used by civil rights groups was nonviolent confrontation. The massive nonviolent demonstration by Blacks and Whites were

met by cursing southern law enforcement units using an array of cattle prods, clubs, and fire hoses. These scenes were broadcast on television around the world. The Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., forced the passage of national civil rights legislation. (p. 392)

The 1964 Civil Rights Act, “the most important civil rights legislation was not enacted until 1964, when violence in Birmingham, Alabama, and a mass march on Washington forced a response from the federal government” (Spring, 2000, p. 393). As intended, “the March on Washington symbolized to Congress and the American people the growing strength of the civil rights movement and provided the stage for television coverage of speeches by civil rights leaders” (Spring, pp. 393-394). Actually, the television and magazine coverage seemed at its peak for Blacks when I was a child. When I was a teenager, Black magazines like Jet and Ebony captured pictures of civil rights marchers like Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King and numerous others. Watching men, women, and children being hosed with water, beaten with clubs by White policemen, and taunted by White onlookers was saddening. Having experienced racial segregation and discrimination for myself makes my story even more relative. Spring (2000) noted:

Under eleven different titles, the power of federal regulations was extended in the areas of voting rights, public accommodations, education, and employment.

Titles IV and VI of the legislation were intended to end school segregation and provide authority for implementing the Brown decision. Title VI, the most

important section, establishes the precedent for using disbursement of government money as a means of controlling educational policies. (p. 394)

Although I was too young to realize the affects of voting rights and employment while in the Deep South, I witnessed first hand the separate public accommodations and segregated education. And, although I do not recall my parents or my grandparents mentioning voting when I was growing up in Folkston, once we moved up north, I had an increased awareness of voting in the Black community. During his presidential bid in the 1970s, I distinctly remember my family rooting for Jimmy Carter.

### Fighting for My Life

Shortly after my baby was born, the next school year started. In view of that, my mother did not waste any time trying to re-enroll me in school. One day, after she was off work, she called me at home and instructed me along with my best friend and first cousin, who was also a teen mom, to meet her at the school superintendent's office. During our brief meeting with the school superintendent, my mother pleaded with him to change his position on teen pregnancy and authorize us to continue our education. Although by law, girls in Atlanta were permitted to continue school after pregnancy; in Folkston, we were denied that right. As a result, my mother vowed to fight. Together, my mother and I rallied other Black teen moms in the community who had also been kicked out of school to join our fight.

Before long, we had the entire Black community on our side. Once our case got the attention of the local chapter of the NAACP; shortly there afterwards, lawyers from the NAACP headquarters in Atlanta descended onto Folkston on our behalf. As a result, the all White school board acknowledged our right to an education by law and gave in to

our demands to continue our education. And although she never received any credit or recognition in the community for the role she played, my mother's social activism is the reason why to this very day, pregnant or married girls in Charlton County, Georgia can return to school and continue their education after childbirth and/or marriage.

While I had to repeat ninth grade because I had missed too many days during the past school year, I successfully resumed my education. At the time, I was so happy to get back into school that repeating ninth grade was a price I willingly paid. Unlike many of my peers who ended up just dropping out of school altogether and having more babies because they had no one at home to watch their child(ren), while they resumed their education; I had my maternal grandmother, Gramps, who gladly watched over my baby the first nine months of her life with tender loving care, while I resumed my education and my mother worked hard to support us.

For the first six months of her life, my baby was like a stranger to me. I did not know what to do with her. It took us a while to understand and get to know each other. Wherever we would go; she would cry uncontrollably. We could be visiting someone's home, attending church; it did not matter to Dale. A very demanding baby; she would cry until she was satisfied. At night, when it was time to go to bed, whenever I would turn the lights out, she would scream until I turned them back on. Oftentimes, I would cry because I needed to get some sleep so that I could get up the next morning for school. Only mama could calm her and put her to sleep without much effort. Once I recall sitting in the audience at church; Dale cut up so badly that my mother had to come out of the church choir to quiet her down. Finally, my mother told me that I should talk to her because she was afraid and she could feel bad spirits around and about her. Another

Black feminist tradition in the Black community is spirituality. Talking to her about where we were going and whom we were going to visit must have worked because she finally stopped crying and we started to bond.

Even though I was able to continue my education with little or no interruption, when I resumed school, everything changed. I no longer felt like that popular, aspiring, smart girl with potential in her class. Once, very active in sports and extracurricular activities such as basketball, track, cheerleading and school clubs; I was now relegated to the shadows. Where I once took a leadership role and was eager to participate in all that high school had to offer; knowing that I had a child waiting for me at home; all I could do was focus on my baby and my studies. I no longer had time to participate in extracurricular activities at school or any place else for that matter.

#### The Great Migration North

A critical turning point in African American's quest for freedom came with the great migration North during the early 1900s. Although Blacks had to contend with segregation and discrimination in the North as well, they had the power to vote. Knowing that there is strength in numbers, Black northerners used the Black vote to gain national attention in presidential elections. "The Black vote in the urban North gradually became a factor of national consequence" (Sullivan, p. 442) for Roosevelt, Kennedy, Carter, and Clinton's presidencies were greatly impacted by the Black vote. This "great migration" is relevant to my story because back in the mid 1970s, my mother moved our family to Detroit, Michigan, where I graduated high school in 1977. Also worth mentioning, the "great migration" is relevant to my story because it demonstrated how extended family relations existed across the North and South territories. As I recall,



while in high school in Detroit, almost everybody I came into contact with had roots in the South. Like my mother and her children, many families migrated from Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi for more freedom and greater opportunity at the automobile plants that Detroit was known for in its heyday.

### Starting Over

As fate would have it, when Dale was nine months old, my mother remarried, and in the process; moved my baby, my youngest brother, Ernest, and me to Detroit, Michigan. By this time, my oldest brother, William, had finished high school and headed off to the army, and my second oldest brother, Roy, was dead. Determined not to give up or give in to defeat, my mother tried to give us all a fresh start. Hoping for another chance at happiness, we could all use fresh starts as we attempted to cope with the loss of Roy and the scandal of me being a teen mom. Although I knew it was for the best, I did not want to leave Folkston. At the time, I thought that I loved Dale's father. I wanted us to raise our child together and one day, possibly get married. I did not want my daughter to grow up a fatherless child as I did, and I shivered at the thought of leaving the familiarity of family and friends. Therefore, when we first arrived in Detroit, I felt like a fish out of water. I did not know anyone, and I did not care to know anyone.

To quickly acquaint my brother and me with the new city, my mother immediately enrolled us in summer school. For my mother, summer school always meant something productive for her children to do. Since I did not know anyone in Detroit, I immediately submersed myself into my studies. Remarried and now a homemaker, in Detroit, my mother took up where my grandmother left off in Folkston, and watched my child while I continued my education. Although I did not realize it then,

it was not until my mother remarried and moved her family across country; removing me from those familiar surroundings that I had a chance to grow. For the first time, I was able to see inside of myself. Over time, I learned to appreciate myself and who I was despite being a teen mom. In the fall, again my mother enrolled me in school. To our surprise, my transfer grades from Folkston were so impressive that I was skipped a year, automatically putting me back on track for graduation with my class. As fate would have it, the year I had repeated in Folkston was somehow erased.

On warm, sunny days, I would often sit outside, while I did my homework. On one of those many days, I met a smart, young man, who had graduated high school one year ahead of his class. Just 17 years old, he had a job, his own place of residence, and he was driving a brand new car when we met. Over time, we became boyfriend and girlfriend; spending most of our free time together. Somewhere, I heard that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Obviously, absence does not make the heart grow fonder for long, because before long; I was over Dale's father, who still resided in Folkston, Georgia, and was head over in hills in love with a young man in Detroit, Michigan. Through him, I was introduced to the Muslim faith and food. The delicatessens in Detroit served the best kosher corned beef and pastrami sandwiches that I have ever tasted.

Together, our favorite pastimes were eating out and attending movies. For obvious reasons, one of our favorite outings was at the local drive-in movie theatre. We could kiss and make love in the privacy of our own car virtually unnoticed and uninterrupted. To my dismay, one year later, I was pregnant with his baby. Now a high school senior on the brink of graduation; keeping this baby was not an option. Therefore,

I willingly aborted the pregnancy within three months of conception. No sooner than I became acclimated to Detroit, my mother and step-father starting having marital problems; forcing my mother to contemplate leaving Detroit after my graduation. Although my stepfather was an alcoholic who became verbally abusive when he drank, I did not want to leave Detroit. I dreaded leaving my new boyfriend and starting over in yet another strange city. Consequently, I suffered from temporary insanity and immediately began to rebel against my mother.

I did not realize it then, but I must have been depressed from the recent abortion and the fact that once again, I was about to leave another city and another man that I loved to start a whole new life in a whole new city. Although I knew better and had no intention of killing myself, I attempted suicide by overdosing on some sleeping pills that my doctor had prescribed for pain from the abortion. Thank God, my boyfriend saw the urgency to seek medical treatment for me immediately; he very well may have saved my life. Fortunately, I awoke to find my mother and boyfriend standing watch over me after the drugs were pumped from my stomach. In 1977, as she planned, one week after I graduated from high school, my mother had divorced my step-father and moved her family to Atlanta, Georgia.



Figure 5: My high school graduation in Detroit, Michigan, June 1977.

### Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Education, seen as a way out of social, economic, and political inferiority, became the quest for success in the Black community. As a result, historical Black colleges emerged. Historically Black colleges such as Spelman, Fisk, Morehouse, Howard, and Hampton—just to mention a few—are largely responsible for educated and successful African Americans who have managed to break barriers in industries nationwide. Spelman College, “known for its ‘sisterhood,’ is the oldest historically Black college for women in the United States” (Davis, 2002, p. 84). Thanks to the Internet, it is safe to say that Spelman’s reputation, as a Black, all women’s college, is known worldwide.

Spelman “College’s endowment is the richest of all Black colleges...second only to Howard University, which has an endowment of \$324 million” (Davis, p. 88). Well-known celebrities such as Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, and Denzel Washington have been

known to make generous donations to historically Black colleges and universities. After Spelman and Howard, “the next richest Black colleges are Hampton University and Morehouse College, which had endowments of \$175 million and \$101 million, respectively” (Davis, p. 88). Recently, I had an opportunity to observe Denzel Washington from afar while in attendance at a Morehouse football game in which his son played a starting position. Although I did not graduate from a historically Black college, I did attend Morris Brown College during my freshman year in college.

Looking back, “there was a time when Michael Jordan could not have played at the University of North Carolina, when the only way Black students could compete athletically on the collegiate level was to attend a historically Black college or university” (Ebony, September 2002, p. 76). Over a course of time and through education, African Americans have managed to gain access into almost every facet of popular culture, especially through sports. “Black football powerhouse Grambling State University...has sent more than 200 players to the National Football League, including Doug Williams, the first Black quarterback to win a Super Bowl when the 1988 Washington Redskins defeated the Denver Broncos in Super Bowl XXII” (Ebony, September 2002, p. 76).

Having stood the test of time, “from its founding in 1866 as a liberal arts institution committed to educating the newly freed slaves, Fisk University has always been steeped in tradition and history” (Ebony, 2002, p. 70). Using the Black institution as a vessel for breaking down racial and economic barriers, Fisk University became “home of the [famous] Jubilee Singers and of distinguished graduates like W.E.B. Dubois...Fisk has prided itself on producing great artists and thinkers” (Ebony, p. 70). Traditionally, African Americans have taken great pride in attending historically Black

colleges and universities. Their main reasons for attendance were the enrichment of the Black culture and a desire for an education. “In proportion to enrollment, [Fisk] now has a greater percentage of minority graduates who go on to earn Ph.D.’s than any other U. S. college or university” (Ebony, September 2002, p. 70).

Although it may seem that African Americans no longer value an education, many historically Black colleges are still doing their part to promote future African American leaders. Radio is yet another popular culture genre that evolved in the early Twentieth century with the invention of the transistor. Tom Joyner, a well-known, well respected, vocal, and influential African American radio personality with his own show, is aired all over the country. Mr. Joyner is known for speaking out and addressing issues regarding the Black community. Through his radio show, Toy Joyner has raised a sizeable scholarship fund that is frequently awarded to struggling students at historically Black colleges and universities.

Recently, while listening to the Tom Joyner Morning Show, I heard Mr. Joyner say, “Keep the Haitians, and send Bush back” (BlackAmerica Web.Com News, November, 2002). He was addressing the unfair immigration and naturalization acts regarding the Haitian refugees who recently jumped ship and swam to American shores for freedom. At the time, “Jeb Bush’s democratic rival and hundreds of Haitian-Americans called lawmakers to help the more than 200 Haitian migrants who remained detained after the nation watched them jump from a crowded freighter and struggle ashore” (BlackAmerica Web.Com News, 11/1/2002). I immediately thought of Americanization because of the double standards regarding those refugees.

After the Haitians had been detained for two days, “crowds of Haitian-Americans waived flags and held signs reading ‘Freedom Now’...outside the Miami headquarters of Immigration and Naturalization demanding the group be treated like others who reach U. S. soil” (BlackAmerica Web.Com News, November, 2002). Because of the reasons they are seeking refuge in this country, they will probably not be granted citizenship, but instead be sent back to Haiti. Applicable to my story, everyone knows that Haiti is a Black country, in poverty, with a dire need for help. Yet, the United States chooses to turn a deaf ear, seemingly because of race. These people jumped and swam to shore hoping that they would receive the same treatment as other refugees, but those same laws do not apply to Haitians. Yet, these same laws do apply to Europeans and people of other accepted cultures. I wonder why? Regarding the Bush administration and their stand on the Haitians immigrants, BlackAmerica Web.Com News November, 2002) noted the following policy changes:

The Bush administration quietly changed its detention policy on Haitian refugees...[because they] feared mass exodus from the impoverished country.

Before the change, Haitian immigrants applying for asylum were released into the community while their petitions were heard. Now, they are kept in immigration custody. (¶ 6)

It seems that as long as you are White or light enough to blend in with mainstream society, you can come. Just learn to speak a little English. But, if you are Black, there is a double standard and if you are Black and female, then you are multiply oppressed because of racism, sexism, and classism.

### Getting Started at Morris Brown College

After graduation, I thought that I was grown and felt like I had somehow repaid my debt to society and my mother by finishing high school. And, once again, I rebelled against my mother's wishes. Blessed to have a mother who was determined not to let me throw away my life; after just two months in Atlanta, my mother escorted my baby and me on the city bus to Morris Brown College for fall registration. Holding my five-year-old baby's hand, I walked slowly ahead, while mama walked behind me, threatening to whip me if I did not walk up. Although I have often gone against my mother's wishes, and rebelled on numerous occasions, I realize just how privileged I have been to be loved so unconditionally. Once, I moved out for a week only to return home with my head hung down in humility asking my mother for forgiveness after the young man who I was supposedly living with drug me across the floor in one of his violent rages; it did not take long to realize that I had made yet another mistake.

The experiences that I had incurred in my life—the teenage pregnancy, the abortion, the attempted suicide, and having loved and lost twice—amazingly, changed my life for the better. Now that graduation was over, I could finally leave all of the foolishness and childishness that youth has a tendency to embrace in high school behind me. No more fighting just because or trying to fit in just to be accepted by my peers. At that time, I thought that I was getting an education for my mother; however, it did not take me long to realize that I was getting an education for myself. I recognized that if I wanted my dreams in life to come to fruition, I would need a college degree at the least. Envisioning the American dream—a nice family, a nice house, a nice car, and educated with a nice job—my aspirations for myself steered my course. I became even more



determined to be self-sufficient and independent because I realized that as a teen mom, I had a responsibility to provide for both my child and myself. Once again, I felt compelled to focus on my education.

After just one year at Morris Brown College, the tuition was so expensive that my mother saw fit to transfer me to Georgia State University (GSU), a state school where the tuition was much less expensive. Coming from a historically Black school, and now attending a predominately White school, I immediately experienced culture shock. While in attendance, not once do I recall being advised about my program of study. As it stands, I pretty much saw my own way through school, and although I barely kept my head above water; in 1982, after five years of study, I managed to graduate from GSU with a Bachelor of Business Administration in Management with a 2.14 grade point average. While a junior in college, I landed my first job with Rich's Department Store. Around the same time, I met a man three years my senior, who later became my husband for 15 years.

Although he never attended college, my husband was a decent provider who loved my daughter and me. Together, we raised my daughter into adulthood in the setting I had so often imagined as a child—a nice family, house, neighborhood, car, etc. Finally, things were coming together. At last, I felt like I had redeemed myself from the grave mistake that I had made so early on in my life when I became a teen mom. Once again, I felt accepted; once again, I sensed normalcy. As fate would have it, ten years into our happy marriage, my husband and I both became addicted to crack cocaine. After six months of addiction, one day I looked in the mirror and did not like what I saw. I had

lost weight from not eating properly, and I looked awful. I could only imagine how neglected little Dale must have been.

When I saw what I was doing to myself, on my own recognizance, I immediately stopped smoking without any outside intervention. Unfortunately, my husband either could not or would not give up his addiction to crack. After years and repeated attempts at rehabilitation, to no avail, in 1991, I finally left my husband and moved back home with my mother. Shortly thereafter, in 1992, my daughter graduated from high school. For her graduation, I assisted her with the purchase of her first car. No sooner than she graduated, she was enrolled in my alma mater, Georgia State University, where she attended for just one year and dropped out. Now 18 years old, my daughter thought that she was all grown up and she no longer had to abide by my rules. Our personalities clashed, as they so often do, and my daughter rebelled against my wishes, dropped out of college, and left home. She wanted to be on her own. Since she already had a car, she was able to secure a job that afforded her the opportunity to move into her own place. She has been on her own ever since.

One year after my marriage ended, I attempted to start over again by accepting a company transfer that moved me to Savannah, Georgia, where I assisted in opening a new Rich's department store. I did not realize how home sick and lonely it would be living so far away from home and alone in a strange city. To pass the time, I would often drink with my coworkers for comfort. About three months after the new store was constructed, to celebrate our grand opening, the company threw a lavish picnic in the store parking lot that included unlimited food and alcohol for its employees. Not realizing my level of tolerance, on that day, I drank entirely too much tequila. At

nightfall, the party moved from the store parking lot to the many bars on River Street in downtown Savannah. As one could almost predict, before the night was over, I was in a car accident. Fortunately for me, no one was injured. However, I was arrested for driving under the influence.

Embarrassed about the arrest that was known and talked about company-wide; once again, I slipped into a depression. After 15 years, I burned out, quit my job, and moved back to Atlanta where with the help of my mother; once again, I turned to education. Since I was a business major with business experience, I figured I could teach business students. With an undergraduate grade point average below the state standard of 2.50 and a DUI on my record, gaining entry into a teacher certification program in Georgia would prove to be very difficult. Before any university would even consider my application for entry, I had to redeem myself and once again, prove that I was worthy. Subsequently, in 1998, I enrolled and took classes at State University of West Georgia in Carrollton, Georgia for over a year just to pull up my grade point average and demonstrate that I had what it took to be in their program. Grateful to be in school again, I excelled in my studies while I substitute taught for experience. My hard work paid off because after several letters of reference and two appeals, I was finally granted conditional admission into West Georgia's teacher certification program. Now even more driven, one year later, with the help of a few school administrators and college professors who vouched for me, I secured a teaching position at Creekside High School in Fairburn, Georgia. Not long afterward, I was enrolled in one of Central Michigan University's master's programs. Just two months after I completed my master's degree, I enrolled in a doctoral program at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia.



Figure 6: Me receiving a Master's Degree in the fall of 2002.

Today, I understand that I have had some devastating experiences in my life of which I overcame. Although not planned, the birth of Little Dale gave me a reason to continue living even when I tried so desperately not to live. In a twisted way, my teenage pregnancy turned out to be blessing in disguise. In more ways than one, my teenage pregnancy helped me to maintain my sanity, which I came very close to losing for various reasons in my life—my brother's death, a failed marriage, drugs and alcohol, suicide, abortion, DUI—you name it. Today, thanks to that teenage pregnancy, I am the proud mother of one daughter, Ardale Lavone Wilkerson-Shepherd, who is now 33 years old, married with no children, and currently pursuing a career and degree in performing

arts. Much like my mother, nothing makes me more proud than to watch my daughter realize her dreams in drama—singing, dancing, and acting on stage—through education.

Coming from a background largely comprised of obstacles—being African American, female, living in the south, a teen mom, etc.—I realize that had it not been for the undying support of my mother, my grandmother, and others; after my teenage pregnancy, returning to school to continue my education would not have been an option, which means, my life and lifestyle could have ended up quite differently. The foundation of my philosophy lies in the fact that I came from a strong family and a small town in the South, which included my extended family (my grandparents and the Black community). My behavior was shaped through their behavior, their rules, and their reward/punishment systems. They instilled in me character and values for hard work, education, self-discipline, and honesty; among other things.

Those values assisted me in my development as a productive citizen whose contributions help to maintain a functional society. Not only were those values the values of my family, they were also the common values of the Black community and the entire social system of which I had grown accustomed. Combined, the laws, rules, regulations, principles, policies, and procedures of the social system shaped my philosophy and behavior. Behavior converse to that philosophy was sanctioned with countless examples—coming from the family, the school, the church, and the media—about those whose lives had become a disaster for failing to follow those rules and regulations. Whenever I deviated, what brought me back were my philosophies of life—obey the laws of society, education is the key to success, honesty is the best policy, and hard work pays off.

### The Impact of Feminism and the Women's Movement

Although not entirely worked out, thanks to feminism and the women's movement; more and more, Black women are working to break down the socially constructed barriers placed upon us by making our presence known—economically, politically, and socially. For example, Arthel Neville, “daughter and niece of the Grammy Award winning Neville Brothers,” thought “it was important to establish her own identity and build her own talents” (Sister to Sister, Inc., 2002, p. 25). In Hollywood, Ms. Neville managed to break down all sorts of barriers. “Her work on the E! Celebrity interview show was the first time on American television that audiences got to see an African-American female sit down and conduct a 30-minute conversation with big name celebrities” (Sister to Sister Inc., 2002, p. 25). Before it was all said and done, Ms. Neville had gained massive popularity from her fans and had conducted over 200 celebrity interviews. Today, she has co-hosted several primetime television shows. Recently, she was a CNN TV host.

Illustrative of the medium's support for single and married Black women who are working outside of the home, Linda Johnson-Rice is an African-American female who spearheads Ebony Magazine, “the No. 1 African-American magazine in the world for over 56 consecutive years” (Jet, 2001, p. 46). These mediums frequently promote women and their causes. Thus, with the women's movement came liberation both, in the way women dress and work. Nowadays, not only are more women working and going to school, but the media has been instrumental in depicting women as equal to men. As an African American female, experience has shown me that two of the driving forces behind the African American race are the African American woman and education. My life

attests to the fact that Black women have been bringing home the “bacon” and taking care of the family for a long time. Like my mother and my grandmother before her, we were all heads of our households at one time or another.

The Black female is setting trends in hair fashions, as well. Like when I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, the latest trend is again the natural look. “The explosion of braids, locks, and twists on the scene is undeniable...On CNN, in music videos, on boardwalks and in boardrooms, in courtrooms and on tennis courts, Sisters are flaunting the latest in braided and natural hairstyles” (Ebony, 2002, P. 108). According to Ebony magazine, “The natural and extension braided styles are endless—ranging from close-cropped twists to individual braids, plaits, cornrows, locks, coils, micro-braids, waves, and knots—and they are popping up everywhere” (p. 108). For instance, tennis superstars, Venus and Serena Williams, have been known to sport their long braids on the tennis court, while Whoopi Goldberg is famous for her locks in the movies. Thanks to well-known Black magazines such as Ebony, Essence, and Jet, African Americans and their latest styles are frequently featured. The main reasons why braids are so popular are convenience and low maintenance. In addition, when done professionally, they can look great. When I was growing up in the sixties and seventies, the afro was the style, and although I deviated from the natural look for a long time; I recently resumed wearing braids for the convenience and fashionable look as well.

### Reflections

Growing up, I do not recall living with my mother and father as a family at all; I guess I must have been too young. Thus, I was nearly a teen before I recognized the man said to be my father, as my father. Consequently, I hardly knew him at all. When it

came to my father, information one would be privy to like when he was born; where he was born; where he attended school, if he attended school; and what he liked and disliked was foreign to me. I was an adult, in my early thirties, when my father's untimely death compelled me to get to know his entire family. His obituary provided me with the most insight into his life. From his obituary, I learned how old he was; where he had been all of those years he had chosen not to spend with his wife and children; and whom he chose to share his life with instead. By way of his death, I also learned much about myself. Until recently, all I ever knew about my father and his people were how well established they were in the community in which we lived and how they rejected my mother and his children by my mother. Although my brothers and I all had the same mother and father; my brother Roy and I, who were darker in complexion than the other two boys, Billy and Ernest, were often treated differently because we were darker in complexion, which further illustrate the points that I have been making throughout this dissertation regarding race, class, and gender in the world; America in particular.





Figure 7: Roy, Mommie, Ernest, and Billy.

Even though I did not know my father very well, my brothers and I had a distant relationship with our paternal grandmother. Oftentimes, my father and paternal grandmother questioned our paternity. According to my mother, after we would visit my father and/or his mother; later, my mother would usually say that our paternal grandmother favored Billy and Ernest over Roy and me because their skin were lighter in complexion than ours. Ironically, my brother Roy and I got our dark skinned features from my father and his people, while Billy and Ernest took on the lighter skinned features of my mother and her people. Having heard of the “light, bright, damn near white”

concept and how it evolved in the Black community; when I was younger, I often lacked self-esteem and wanted to be light skinned like my mother, who also had what was considered beautiful hair because it had more white traits than Black—long, wavy, etc. With traits more like my father's people, growing up, I often felt like a dark, skinny, ugly duckling.

Alex Haley's, renowned mini-series, *Roots*, demonstrate how the "light, bright, damn near White concept" originated in Black communities. Not long ago, Black folk, like so many other minorities, attempted to blend in with mainstream society to circumvent subservience and the inferiority complex that comes along with it. Many Black families know of and have relatives who are hiding the fact that they are passing for White even today. Recognizing that I was dark and skinny with ugly toes to boot; I already had several inferiority complexes with which I had to contend. Somehow, I knew that I had to be educated in order to compensate for what I was lacking. Knowing my mother and her aspirations in life, I believe that had my father stood by her, we all could have fared in life much better, easier for certain. Instead, my mother had to sacrifice all of her hopes and dreams in life as she struggled to raise four children with no support from our father or his family. Acting as if we did not exist, they literally abandoned us.

Since my father and his people treated us so badly; I often wondered what attracted my mother to him. In hindsight, I realize that my mother and my paternal grandmother were much alike in the sense that they were both enterprising and progressive women seeking a better life for themselves and their children. My mother's main attraction to my father and his family was the fact that they had potential and they owned property. My father's mother owned a well-established business in the

community, which greatly contributed to their prosperity and better positioned them as what society deemed socially acceptable.

Additionally, like my mother and her siblings, my father and his people were adventurous in their attempts to flee the South for a better life in the North too. As a matter of fact, my father's people ventured back and forth between Folkston, Georgia and New York City for the duration of my life. Years after I was grown with a teenage daughter, my father died in New York. Upon his death, I learned that education was as important to my father's family as it was to my mother's family. For example, at his funeral, I met family members that I had never known; many of whom were educators. Although neither of my parents attended college; apparently, both thought that education was the key to success because both encouraged me to get an education. On rare visits, my father's conversations revolved around education; however, it was my mother who consistently instilled in me at an early age the importance of an education. When the time came, I knew that I would be attending college.

Living in the merchandise Mecca of the free world, New York City, my father would often drive down from the North to visit his family. Always well groomed, dressed sharp, and smelling good; as a woman, I can see how my mother may have been attracted to him. As I recall, whenever he did come around, he always looked and smelled good to me. I must have acquired my personal hygiene and well-groomed characteristics from both my parents because much like my father, growing up, my mother instilled in me a desire to always look and smell good too. Since I was her only girl, she also took pride in dressing me. As I recall, as far back as elementary school, my classmates always admired the way I dressed. Thanks to my mom, I always wore the

latest fashions. Consequently, overtime, I too acquired a knack for dressing sharp and a desire for the finer things in life. Here again, in order to do those things, I knew that I had to be educated so that I would be better positioned to acquire a job that afforded me those luxuries. Unlike how I felt when growing up, today, I can see that my father came from a dark, handsome and outgoing family of which I am proud to be a part. In retrospect, I can see that, although largely absent, my father's influence was there in some ways too.

In addition, today, I can see that my mother came from the same type of handsome and outgoing family; however, unlike my father and his people, my mother's family was light in skin color with long, wavy hair. With obvious White features such as their light colored skin and the texture of their hair, I am convinced that my mother's family has some White relatives nearby. Now that I think about it, we all do; however, the White lineage is closer in my mother's family than it is in my father's family. This is an interesting irony that I was somewhat shunned by my paternal grandmother for my darker complexion when the darker complexion seems more closely related to her side of the family.

Since Folkston is such a small community, and everything is in such close proximity, coincidentally, my mother and my father's family attended the same church—Mt. Carmel Baptist Church. Considered one of the classiest churches in the city, many of the Black people who were looked up to in the community like educators, administrators, and community leaders also attended church there. Both my mother's and my father's families were deeply rooted in the church and the community. Therefore, on Sunday mornings, one could usually find members from both sides of my family playing active

roles in the church; most sang in various church choirs. When my brothers and I were old enough and my mother could not attend church, she would make us attend without her. During those times, my brothers and I would save part of the money we were given to put in church to later spend at the nearby candy store.

Sometimes after leaving the store, out of curiosity, my brothers and I would visit our paternal grandmother, who lived right next door to the candy store. I remember thinking, for a Black woman in a small, country town like Folkston, Georgia; my father's mother had a very nice house and lived a very lavish lifestyle. Looking back, I can see how her family would have been considered one of the more upper classed-families in town. When most Black families were lucky to have a wooden house; their home was a two-story brick house with a carport large enough to cover several cars. Since my father's mother owned a funeral home, she also owned a fleet of cars in which she used to conduct the family business, which was located on the bottom floor of their two-story brick house. The family living quarters were located on the top floor. Growing up, the nature of the business—working with dead people—did not appeal to me at all. Thus, to my knowledge, I was grown and married before I ever spent one night in her house.

Now that I recall, I did not mind going upstairs; the problem was downstairs. Actually, upstairs was beautiful. Equipped with window air-conditioning, plush carpeting throughout, fully furnished master and guest bedrooms, modern bathrooms, formal living and dining rooms full of memorabilia, and a modern kitchen with hot and cold running water; compared to the farm, their house was new. Nonetheless, although my father's family appeared as though they were well off, their prosperity was not bestowed upon his wife and children. Thus, for obvious reasons, I grew up resenting my

father and his people. As a result, whenever my mother's family would tease me about my Wilkerson features, i.e., how I looked and/or acted; which was often, I would often get upset and cry. Then, when I would cry, I was told that I was acting like my father's mother who was known to cry for no apparent reason. I hated when anyone told me that. Also, I was frequently teased about my toes, which I hated because I was told that I had toes like my daddy's people too. Later, I learned that much like my father and many of his siblings, I have what is called hammertoes. A hammertoe is a disorder of usually the second toe, which is usually longer than all of the other toes and normally bent downward. As a result, the friction caused from wearing shoes can sometimes cause painful corns and calluses to form on all of the toes.

Not along ago, I underwent surgery to repair the abnormal second toe on both feet. As I remember, the operation was excruciatingly painful and not at all worthwhile. Although the surgery repaired the deformity of the second toe, it did not alleviate the recurring corns that form from simply wearing shoes. Although I always had a complex about my ugly toes and I usually kept them concealed; today, thanks to maturity and the art of the pedicure, I no longer have that complex. Now, ugly or not, I am grateful to have ten toes; however, when I was younger, I did not see it that way. Incidentally, I hated the notion of being a Wilkerson, and for a very long time, I did not want to be like them in any way. As a consequence, I hated the way they looked, their uppity attitudes; and the way that they treated us. Since my father and his family treated us so badly throughout our lives, my mother never had anything nice to say about neither my father nor his family; especially my father. Therefore, in my eyes, the Wilkerson's were dark, ugly, and bad people. Society had already impressed upon me that to be dark was ugly.

According to my mother, during their short marriage; when the going got tough, my father got going. Meaning he always left her. As a result, when it came to time, money, and commitment; my father failed miserably. While married, as my mother told it, my father ran off with a different woman every time that she said that she was pregnant. During their marriage, my mother became pregnant eight times; four of which she miscarried, no doubt from defending herself from my father when he would come home drunk and want to fuss and fight with her. I have often heard my mother talk about how when they were married, my father would get paid on a Friday, come home and give her \$20.00 or \$30.00 for groceries then, go out and blow the rest of his earnings for the week by gambling and drinking with his buddies.

Later, after he was usually broke and drunk, he would come home and twist her arm up her back and take back the little bit of money that he had given her earlier. My father's unwillingness to support and provide for his family forced my mother to go home to her parents on numerous occasions. After running back and forth several times, my mother became sick and tired of the constant physical, emotional, and mental abuse as well as the lack of financial support. Accordingly, my mother set out to save herself and her children from such an unhappy and unhealthy environment once and for all. Finally calling it quits, my mother divorced my father and moved back home with her parents, who helped my mother raise my brothers and me.

Living with our grandparents, my brothers and I were always surrounded by a large and usually loving family. Since we lived on a farm and grew our own food, plants and animals were in abundance as far as the eyes could see. I loved watching the livestock being raised from infancy to adulthood and the various crops being cultivated

and later harvested. In addition, I enjoyed climbing the assorted trees on the farm because they always grew something edible like apples, pears, peaches, pecans, and plums. As I recall, during the course of a day, while the adults were hard at work on and off of the farm, the children usually spent the day romping through the huge cane, corn, and tobacco fields surrounding the big house.

Unlike the modern, brick house that my dad's family resided in; my grandparents' house was a big, old, wooden house that my grandfather built himself. Since it was old, it lacked insulation. So, during the winter, the house was particularly cold. The primary source of heat for the entire house was a huge fireplace in the front of the house. Thus, to keep warm, we would all hover around the fireplace in the living room. Many times, I burned myself trying to keep warm. Instead of the taken for granted luxury of having hot and cold running water inside of the house, on the farm, we had to fetch water from the well or the pump outside, then heat it on the wood burning stove. My maternal grandmother also cooked breakfast, lunch, and dinner on the same wood-burning stove. At night, we used oil lamps to light the house as we went to the bathroom in what they called slop jars because we did not have an indoor toilet either. Looking back, I recall taking baths in large tin tubs in which we had to first heat our bath water on the wood burning stove. To conserve water and energy, as children, my brothers and I often took baths together. My eldest brother, Billy, was responsible for ensuring that the younger children were bathed properly. Sometimes it would be so cold that when it came time to take a bath, I dreaded taking off my clothes. Knowing how we lived and how we could be living, I secretly yearned for a more modern lifestyle.



I have often heard that good things often come to us by way of bad things and that sometimes what appears as a tragedy may be a blessing in disguise. Although I did not see it that way then, when I was in first grade, I recall being summoned home from school for a family emergency only to find the home I had come to know and love burned to the ground. I remember seeing my baby brother Ernest, who was not yet old enough to attend school, with visible burns and abrasions from the heat on his face. I also remember thinking how grateful I was to see him alive because rumor had it that he was missing during the fire and was believed to be hiding out of fear underneath the burning house. I understand that at the time, my mother had also received a call on her job informing her that the house was on fire and that Ernest was missing. I imagine, like me, that phone call probably gave her a big scare. Upon my arrival home, I can remember being so relieved to see that Ernest was alive. To assist us with recovery from the fire, I remember going uptown to visit some of the all White department stores where we were given generous supplies of new and second-hand clothes and shoes. Early on, that experience demonstrated to me that some people are compassionate regardless of their race.

Like every place in the United States, race played a role; however, until we went into town, obvious discrimination was rarely encountered because we were largely segregated and shielded from such. In town, everything was lily White; therefore, as Black folks, when we visited, we knew our respective places. I can remember attending the segregated movie theatre located in the heart of downtown. Because we were segregated, Black folks had to watch movies from the balcony, while the White folks watched the same movies from the main floor. Although they may have thought that they

had the better seats in the theatre, the Black children actually had the advantage because we were better positioned to taunt our White counterparts by throwing popcorn from the balcony above.

A combination of court rulings and restrictive citizenship laws were used to deny ownership of land, justify economic exploitation, and deny voting rights to entire races of people. Relevant to my story, my grandfather lost his 180-acre farm to the bank because he failed to meet a payment on a measly tractor back in the late 1960s. Prior to that revelation, the house mysteriously caught fire and burned to the ground; how convenient. The family was literally forced to move without a fight. Segregated schools, housing, and discrimination in employment became methods of social control to ensure the continuation of the dominant culture (Spring, 2000).

As a result of the fire, we not only lost the house, but it would later be revealed that we lost the farm too. As a child, I was left with the impression that it was my baby brother, Ernest, who was to blame for setting the fire. We were left to assume that he was playing with matches and accidentally started the fire that caused the big, wooden hull of a house to be quickly consumed. Forced to leave the farm and the life we once knew; we moved into a more modern house in another part of town. As a result, we no longer had the farm or the vast amount of land and livestock that we once owned. However, we had electricity, hot and cold running water, and an indoor toilet; not to mention a telephone and television. For me, that was a step up in the right direction. Being the coward that I am, I have always hated creepy crawlers like bugs, spiders, and snakes. On the farm, such pests were prevalent. So in that regard, I did not miss the farm

at all. Although this house was wooden framed too, it was better insulated and thus, much warmer.

According to my mother, my grandmother always believed that the White people wanted our land, so they figured out a way to force us off of it by deliberately setting the fire that burned us out. I later learned that my grandfather lost his farm of 180 acres to a White man because he fell sick and got behind on the payments for a tractor which was borrowed against the property. I later learned that my grandparents' sons made several attempts to save the land, but failed. Since history has shown that what the White man wanted, the White man took; akin to my grandmother, I find it suspect that the vice-president of the bank that foreclosed on our property is the proud owner of that same property today. Also today, that same land is full of rich timber that can be seen as far as the eyes can see. Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, at present, I think that the banker had an ulterior motive back then that made him rich at the expense of our family. After my grandfather lost the land that he worked so hard for via sharecropping, shortly thereafter, he lost his will to live and soon succumbed to death in 1973. As a matter of fact, it was the year of 1973 when a lot of traumatic incidents happened in my family. Also in the summer of 1973, my second oldest brother, Roy, drowned. His loss devastated my mother and me above all.

I was especially bothered because, one week prior to his death, I had had a dream that he could no longer speak because of me. In the dream, my brother and I had had a fight. During the fight, I kicked him in the mouth, causing him to bite off his tongue. Also in the dream were my mother, my grandmother, and myself. We were standing around what appeared to be a hospital bed where, in the dream, my brother appeared to

lay asleep. Later, when I described my dream to my grandmother, she said that the dream was God's way of showing me that my brothers and I needed to stop fighting each other so much. Although we loved each other, we used to fight like cats and dogs. Tragically, one week later, Roy drowned. As a result, I could not forgive myself because I had already foreseen his death and did not realize it. In addition, I felt even worse because on the morning of his death, our last words to each other were harsh. As siblings so often do, the last time that I saw him alive, I told him something like he made me sick.

Thus, after his death, I immediately slipped into a depression and nearly suffered a nervous breakdown. On several occasions, I can remember my mother taking me to the doctor where I received shots to calm my nerves because I refused to accept my brother's death. Consequently, Roy's death took a toll on my family and in the process, somehow changed us all. When the house burned down, I was in first grade, so I could not have been any older than six years old. In 1973, I was thirteen, nearly fourteen years old when we lost Roy and shortly thereafter afterwards, I became a teen mom. Today, I realize that for various reasons in my life, I have been depressed and in need of some psychological counseling for a long time.

Recently, my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given just six months to live. When I found out, for about six weeks, excessive drugs and alcohol became a way of life for me. As a result of my lifestyle I incurred dramatic weight loss, while my behavior became quite irrational and unpredictable once again. I would frequently become intoxicated and depressed. Feeling sorry for myself, like my paternal grandmother, I would often cry for no apparent reason. In the process, because I had to take family medical leave to care for my ailing mother, I nearly lost my job. After four

months off, I was forced to resume work after I had exhausted all of my paid leave and most of my savings. When I attempted to resume my old position, I learned that my principal had filled my position with another certified business teacher.

Consequently, I had to resort to legal measures via the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) for placement elsewhere because my contract states that they have to provide me with a comparable position, but not necessarily the same position upon my return from family medical leave. My principal and department chair, who never liked me and wanted to get rid of me anyway, used that loophole to get rid of me while I was out with my mother. However, in their haste, they failed to realize that I was protected under the Family Medical Leave Act for 12 weeks. Thus, I reported them to the federal government. Forced to give me a job; to encourage me to quit, I was transferred from one end of the county to the other end of the county. I went from working in almost extreme South Fulton to working in nearly extreme North Fulton County. Now that I had my mother and her well-being to consider, I was grateful to just have a job. Terminally ill, for six months, she was totally dependent on me for her survival. Now, I understand why she invested in my future and me. She must have known that one day all of her good deeds would come back to her by way of me, her only daughter who she would not let throw her life away.



Figure 8: Dale, Mommie, and Me in a church portrait in the early 1990s.



Figure 9: Ernest, Me, Dale, and Mommie in a church portrait in the mid 1990s.

## CHAPTER 4

## A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF BLACK TEEN PREGNANCY

Teenage pregnancy is depicted as a problem unique mainly to Black teens (Abramovitz, 1988; Bromberg Bar-Yam, 2000; Luttrell, 2003; Merrick, 2001; Perrin, 1992). Arguing that dominant discourse findings on Black teenage pregnancy give yet another picture of the racist society in which we live; social construction theorists “highlight the influence of social context and suggest that our current understandings of the ‘problem’ of adolescent pregnancy are rooted less in ‘fact’ and more in public sentiment” (Merrick, 2001, p. 2). The few studies specific to Black teenage pregnancy focused on depressing social consequences of Black teenage pregnancy such as HIV and AIDS or welfare mothers seeking social handouts; never the beauty of motherhood.

Dismissed as stupid and unfit, they are often shut out, and because they are Black, there are obvious race associated differences in the health outcomes of their children. For example, research shows that high neonatal and infant mortality rates are common among Black teenage mothers (Jennings, 2000; Johnson, 1995; Jones, 2000). Analyzing the socio-cultural conditions in which I experienced teen pregnancy; unlike the majority of research, which focuses on these negative issues, my research focuses on my resiliency as a Black teen mom and my ability to adjust to the many social and economic problems in my life. Similar to Elaine Bell Kaplan’s (1998) study, my study demonstrates how through the support of family, community, the church, etc., common misconceptions of Black teenage motherhood are deconstructed.

A noted Black feminist, Patricia Hill Collins praised postmodernism and its use of constructive/deconstructive methodologies for disproving socially accepted myths. For



example, In her 1998 book *Fighting Words*, it was Hill Collins who noted how postmodern tools can be beneficial for oppressed groups when she said that “deconstructive methodologies refute not just the context of scientific knowledge but the very rules used to justify knowledge; in this regard, intellectuals from oppressed groups can put deconstructive tools to good use” (Hill Collins, 1998, p. 138). After a thorough review of related literature, I tend to agree with this premise. Black feminism revealed to me how others used deconstructive methodologies such as this one to overcome obstacles.

Realizing that “...girls of color...are far more likely to be victimized by sexism in ways that are irreparable” (hooks, 2000a, p. 59); although their comments are not extensive, contemporary Black feminists such as hooks (2000a); Abramovitz (1988); Davis (1989); and Hill Collins (2004) addressed teenage pregnancy in selected texts. Calling for a focus on reproductive rights to prevent and control unwanted teen pregnancies, contemporary Black feminists call for preventive strategies such as sex education, preventive healthcare, and easy access to contraceptives (hooks, 2000a; Davis, 1989; Hill Collins, 2004). Speaking on class, sexuality, and the social stigma of unmarried motherhood in the Black community, hooks (2000a) posited, “More than class, mama saw sexuality—the threat of unwanted pregnancy—as the path that closed all options for a female” (p. 20). From experience, I can definitely relate. I remember it like it was yesterday; the stigma of being pregnant; the feelings of loneliness and depression.

For me, becoming pregnant was like the old cliché I often heard during my childhood: “If you play with fire, you will get burnt.” Growing up, I learned lots of old sayings and wise tales from my maternal grandmother. In my eyes, Gramps was a very

wise lady. In a sense, those words became real for me when I played with fire (had sex for the first time), and I got burned really, really bad (I became pregnant). Consequently, I learned very, very quickly not to play with fire.

I was so psychologically scarred from being a teen mom that to this very day, my daughter is an only child. However, in spite of the difficulties; like so many others before me, I too found the joy of motherhood to be quite rewarding (Hill Collins, 2004; hooks, 2000a; & Merrick 2000) too. “Despite mass media’s negative assessment of Black motherhood for poor and working-class Black women, motherhood remains valued by the majority of Black women. Through motherhood, they exercise strength, demonstrate power, and, as a result, often suffer the consequences associated with this commitment” (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 208). Thus, once I got past the initial shock, I became focused. I realized that I had to grow up fast because now, I not only had myself to think about, but I had a child too.

I suddenly realized that “more than ever before, there is a great need for women and men to organize around the issue of child care to ensure that all children will be raised in the best possible social frameworks, to ensure that women will not be the sole, or primary, child-rearers” (hooks, 2000a, p. 147). Unlike my mother, I did not want to raise my child by myself; therefore, from the start, I tried to embrace my baby’s father. Like the research suggests, I realized that teen sex and teen pregnancy are directly correlated to socio-economic status and family status (single-vs. -married). Since I grew up without my father, it was imperative to me that my daughter be raised in a traditional household where men and women come together on child rearing. Therefore, I intentionally got married and bought a house with my husband.

One of the more radical and militant Black feminists in the contemporary movement, Angela Davis (1989) cautions us against dominant discourse findings. Davis (1989) posited, “Effective strategies for the reduction of teenage pregnancy are needed, but we must beware of succumbing to propagandistic attempts to relegate to young single mothers the responsibility for our community’s impoverishment” (p. 13). All Black feminists caution others against misinformation with reference to the Black community. For example, “In prior eras, Black women were encouraged to have many children...Now Black women are seen as producing too many children who contribute less to society than they take” (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 104). I find it amazing how over time, our thinking is so easily swayed by society. I tend to agree with Patricia Hill Collins (2004) who noted:

Despite a high adolescent pregnancy rate, worrisome increases in the rate of HIV infection among American adolescents, and emerging research demonstrating that high school students grappling with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) identities are more prone to depression and suicide, the reluctance to talk openly about human sexuality with United States schools places students at risk.

(p. 38)

As an educator, I see youth at risk almost daily. More often than not, I also see how “...unregulated sexuality results in unplanned for, unwanted, and poorly raised children” (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 130). In addition, “a sizeable portion of families maintained by Black single women are created by unmarried adolescent mothers” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 63). When it comes to motherhood, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) summed it up best when she noted:

African American women encounter differential treatment based on our perceived value as giving birth to the wrong race of children, as unable to socialize them properly because we bring them into bad family structures, and as unworthy symbols for U.S. patriotism. This treatment is based, in part, on ideologies that view U.S. Black women as the Other, the mummies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, and jezebels who mark the boundaries of normality for American women overall. (p. 230)

Unlike Black women, "...middle-class [W]hite women are encouraged to increase their fertility, and are assisted by a dazzling array of new reproductive technologies in the quest of a healthy [W]hite baby" (Hartouni in Collins, 2000, p. 231). In an attempt to better understand how race, class, and gender shape Black women's maternal experiences, this inquiry explored my experiences as a teenage mother. I investigated the sexism and racism that I/we encountered, and the few support systems that were in place to help my child and me. Now, through my story, the historical record, and research literature, I will explore topics relevant to my inquiry such as education, spirituality, and social activism.

#### Education, Social Activism, & Spirituality

Education, spirituality, social activism, and feminism are key Black feminist characteristics that were prevalent in my youth. Through a Black feminist lens, today, I understand why education is so important to me; why I am a social activist at heart; and why I am so spiritual. I recognize that education, social activism, and spirituality are just a few of the Black feminist traditions that were practiced and passed down in the Black community for generations and generations. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, like my

mother, and my grandmother before her, I knew that I had to be educated if I wanted to be my own person. I am a social activist at heart because the civil rights and women's liberation movements that I came up in the midst of inspired me. Growing up in the middle of these quests for liberation greatly contributed to my desire to be self-sufficient and independent. Having grown up in a segregated society, my family and the Black community instilled in me values for education, pride, self-preservation, and self-determination. Today, I realize that these are all Black feminist traditions.

Studying the work of modern day Black feminists has shown me that “knowledge for knowledge's sake is not enough—Black feminist thought must be tied to Black women's lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 31). Thanks to their labor, I better understand my role as a Black female in present day society. Since Black feminist theory is a body of literature about Black women aimed to inform the Black community, I go along with calls for “literature that informs masses of people...work that is especially geared around youth culture...[and] feminist studies that are community based” (hooks, 2000b, pp. 22-23). Reading about the experiences, struggles and obstacles others had to endure because of their race, class, and gender inspires me to never give up on my own personal goals and to also give back to the community from whence I came.

Since race, class, and gender remain struggles for Black women, “therapeutic intervention, whether through literature that teaches and enlightens us, or therapy, [is usually required] before many of us can even begin to critically examine childhood experiences and acknowledge the ways in which they impact our adult behavior” (hooks, 2000b, p. 8). Like Black feminists of old and new, it is my belief that by writing about

my own personal experiences as a Black teen mom in the rural South in the early to mid 1970s, not only will I heal from my own childhood experiences in terms of race, class, and gender, but I will also contribute to a body of literature that enlightens and inspires others.

Ironically, the birth of my daughter represented the diminishment of my potential in this world, as well as the fulfillment of the best that I can be. My daughter's birth brought reason to celebrate life after the tragic death of my brother, but it also brought tremendous struggle against the oppressive forces prevalent in U.S. society. Resting upon the two overarching Black feminist goals—self-definition and self-determination (Hill Collins, 1998); from a Black feminist standpoint, the intent of my study was to share my story in order to promote education as a tool of empowerment for Black teen moms everywhere. I hope that this sharing will move toward reconceptualizing the socio-cultural context; a context that is racist, sexist and otherwise harmful to teen mothers and their children.

Today, I realize that I have had some devastating experiences in my life of which I overcame. Although not planned, in a twisted way, my teenage pregnancy turned out to be blessing in disguise. The birth of my daughter gave me a reason to continue living even when I tried so desperately not to live. Thanks to that teenage pregnancy, today, I am the proud mother of one daughter, who is now 33 years of age, married with no children, and currently pursuing a career and degree in performing arts. Much like my mother, nothing makes me more proud than to watch my daughter realize her dreams in drama—singing, dancing, and acting on stage—through education.



Figure 10: Me and Little Dale at a Christmas party.

Coming from a background largely comprised of obstacles—being African American, female, living in the south, a teen mom, etc.—I realize that had it not been for the undying support of my mother, my grandmother, and others after my teenage pregnancy, returning to school to continue my education would not have been an option, which means, there is no telling what I might be doing with my life today. An educator equipped with the latest in theory and practice, my goal is to instill in myself, my students, and others pride, self-preservation, self-determination, and the need for an education if they want to be their own person. I want others to see that knowledge is power and once they possess it, no one can take it away from them.

#### African Americans, Americanization, & Popular Culture

Although African Americans have evolved into what is considered by American standards as socially, economically, and politically acceptable; the effects of

Americanization are still haunting minorities even today. Despite the many successes of African Americans, “White people’s prejudices against Black people in general, the prejudices against Black women, the prejudices of wealth, upper-class Blacks against lower-class Blacks, White women’s organizations against Black ones, and the educated against the uneducated are forces [that are continually] confronting [African Americans]” (Pitts, 1999, p 80). However, there are still many ways that popular culture has evolved into a diverse and multicultural society that has opened doors for women and minorities. Popular culture is a new way of looking at things, i.e., acceptance of gays and lesbians, women, and minorities, etc. It is inclusive of all people and persuades the minds of so many, especially young people.

Conversely, America’s fascination with cars, fashion, sports, music, movies, and television—just to mention a few—are so deeply embedded in our cultures until they are a way of life—so much so—until society’s color blind. Seemingly, the going color is green and it reads “dollar signs.” W. E. B. Du Bois (1990) asked, “What if the Negro people be wooed from a strife for righteousness, from a love for knowing, to regard dollars as the be-all and end-all of life?” (p. 63). Du Bois could see it coming back then. Today, it seems, instead of morals and values, the ideal society is based on money and who and what it can buy. Overall, I find that the media has influenced and continues to influence people in terms of popular culture, and expressions in terms of fashion, sex, nudity, vanity, profanity, etc., will only encourage teen pregnancy.

#### Black Teen Pregnancy Reconceptualized

Since teenage pregnancy is seen as prevalent worldwide, the intention of my study was to take a role of action, advocacy, and empowerment; encouraging teen moms



not to give up, but to go on and lead productive and happy lives despite the odds that will be stacked against them. The purpose of the study was to heal by uncovering and describing the views of someone who succeeded despite the odds—me—a successful teenage mom who went on to school and became an educator and a role model for all with whom she comes into contact. This emotionally charged issue will have significant political and social implications for both schools and society; however, teen moms will receive the greatest benefit because they too will have a voice through me.

Why should Black women or Black people, for that matter, be looked down upon? Why must there continue to be an “Other?” Instead of having to focus on the trivialities of race, class, and gender; we all should be focusing on the continuation of the *human* race. We should be addressing worldly issues like food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare for all mankind; no matter their race, class, or gender. Unlike most other positions, Black feminism embraces their third world sisters and their global issues, as well as any others who are willing to get on board with our fight for social justice. In Africa, as can be seen almost daily in the news, AIDS threatens an entire continent. As a civilized society, like Black feminists, others must revamp their priorities and embrace a more humanitarian approach worldwide also. In many communities, at home and abroad, people are actually dying because they lack the bare essentials needed to live; while those who manage to live face societal evils such as homelessness, starvation, and illiteracy even in a modern, capitalistic society such as America.

If teen pregnancy is assumed to be a mostly Black teen problem, as with others, I too wonder why so few studies focus exclusively on Black teens. Since there are so few studies grounded in Black feminism; it is this gap that my research aims to address. As

has been proven over the years, multiply oppressed, Black feminists remain resilient via self-definition and self-determination.

While most of the literature on Black teenage pregnancy focused on personality factors related to Black teenage pregnancy (Falk, 1981); social problems like HIV and AIDS (Johnson, 1995; Robillard, 2000); the challenges of teenage pregnancy and the need for support (Derrickson, 2003); unlike the majority of research on Black female adolescents, my research is closest akin to Evans-Winters' (2003) thesis, *Reconstructing resilience: Including African American female students in educational resiliency research*, which focused on the educational resiliency of Black female students and their ability to adjust to the many social and economic problems in their lives despite the odds against them; however, in this case, the focus is on me. Similar to Evans-Winters (2003), Fall (2002, and Madibbo (2004), my goal is to contribute to what Evan -Winters has termed, "resiliency literature," by helping to fill the gap in the absence of positive educational literature on African American girls. Both the researcher and the sole research participant, in this case, I am the African American female contributing to the educational resiliency literature on African American girls.

## EPILOGUE

*Sister Victoria Hannans of Folkston, Georgia, died Friday morning, March 30, 2007 at Hospice Atlanta after a brief illness. She was a native of Folkston, Georgia, but resided in Atlanta, Georgia, most of her life. She was the daughter of the late Samuel and Leila Mae Hannans. She was preceded in death by her son, Roy Dale Wilkerson.*

*Sister Hannans lived in Folkston the last seven years of her life until she took ill. She was a faithful member of the House of Faith Worship Center where she is remembered for her dutiful caring of others and her dedication and love for her church and family. She loved working in the yard; she was truly a farmer's daughter with a green thumb, who always said, "Give me my flowers while I live!"*

*Loved ones left to cherish her memories include one daughter, Advis Dell Wilkerson of Atlanta, Georgia; two sons, William Wilkerson, Jr. (Melanie) of Foothill Ranch, CA, and Ernest Alfred Wilkerson of Atlanta, Georgia. She also leaves to mourn seven grandchildren: Ardale Lavone Wilkerson-Shepherd (Ali) of Atlanta, Georgia; Marcus Wilkerson of Santa Ana, CA, Richard Allen Miller of Lake Forest, CA; Rodney Garmon and Verkiesha Jackson of Atlanta, GA; Jacquinta Marschelle Wilkerson of Griffin, GA; and William Anthony Wilkerson of Foothill Ranch, CA.*

*Additionally, she leaves to mourn five brothers: Vallie Hannans, Sr. and Daniel Hannans of Folkston, GA; James Ernest Hannans (Pamela) of Eastman, GA; Joe William Hannans (Carol) of St. Mary's, GA; and Larry Dean Hannans (Barbara) of Waycross, GA; two sisters: Catherine Edwards (Horice) and Lucille Bernice Hannans of Folkston, GA, and a host of family and friends.*

*—From Mommie's Obituary, April 2007.*

The foundation of my philosophy lies in the fact that I came from a strong family that instilled in me values for hard work, education, self-discipline, and honesty. The Black school, the Black church, and the Black community all helped to reinforce that behavior. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, I was in the midst of the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and these quests for liberation. My mother was my role model. One of the main reasons I pursued an education was my desire to please my mother who loved her children very, very much and only wanted the best for us, and a yearning to be self-sufficient and independent. My mother was a womanist. A womanist is a feminist of color. She raised me to be a womanist.

Not a true Delta, but obviously a Delta at heart, my mother loved the color RED and elephants. She collected them both. Our living room has been surrounded by elephants my entire life.



Figure 11: Cousin AJ, Me, Mommie, Dale, and Cousin Cynt at church.

On May 3, 1937, my mother, Victoria Hannans, was born on a farm in a little country town in South Georgia called Folkston. Her parents owned 180 acres of farmland on which she was raised. I happened to grow up there because this is where mom chose to call home. On the farm, my grandparents raised hogs, cows, chickens, tobacco, corn, sugar cane, etc. On the farm, they housed their own smokehouse and tobacco barn where they cured their own meat and dried their own tobacco. In addition, they had grapevines and plenty of pecan and peach trees, and far back in the woods, there was a creek for swimming, which I never did because I was afraid of snakes. As a child growing up in the South, my mother was my SHEROE. There was nothing that she could not do. She never took NO for an answer.

Over the years, she instilled in me a sense of pride, self-preservation, and self-determination. She believed in sound supportive networks (family and friends) and that education was the key to success. Coming from a failed marriage with four small children with only a high school education herself, my mother had higher expectations and aspirations for her children; especially her only daughter. Being both African American and female, at that time, resources and opportunities were few, and education was somewhat restricted because we were segregated. To have a fair chance in those days, just as we struggled to have a voice in the community, black people seemingly yearned for an education because they saw it as a first class ticket out of poverty; therefore, as a child, I knew I had to excel in school.

For my mother, nothing less than a B was acceptable. Consequently, all through grade school, I was a top honor roll student and often the teacher's pet. I can still remember my mother saying, "Two Bs don't mix, it is either the boys or the books!" She

chose the books for me! Unfortunately for me, in the ninth grade, I suffered a lapse in judgment that nearly compromised my future endeavors. I became pregnant! Back in those days, if you became pregnant or married you could no longer attend school.

Although she never received any credit, my mother is the reason why to this very day, girls in Charlton County, Georgia can continue their education after childbirth and/or marriage. Today, my daughter, Ardale Lavone Wilkerson-Shepherd is an only child who is now 33 years old; married with one step-son, and is currently pursuing a career in acting.

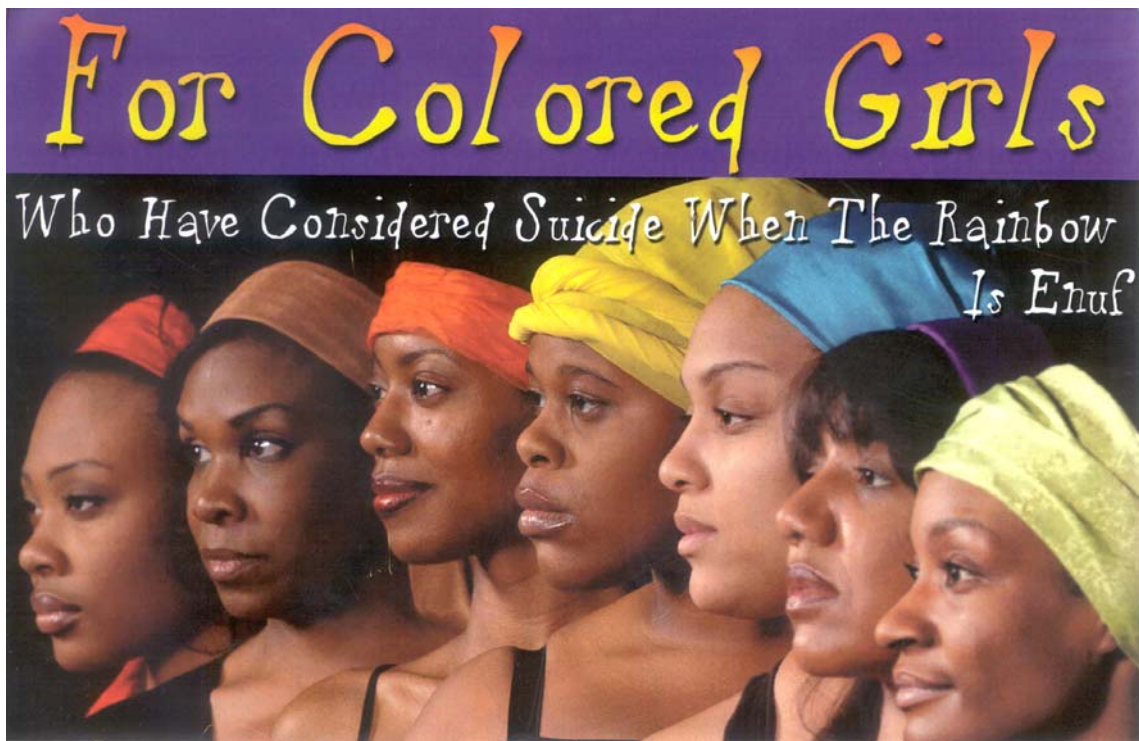


Figure 12: Dale in one of her many productions (In orange: Third from left), 2006.

Envisioning the American dream—a nice family, a nice house, a nice car, and educated with a nice job, I had higher aspirations for myself. My mother, too, had higher

aspirations for me. She was a strong, determined Black woman who, as I already mentioned, would not take NO for an answer. With the help of the local NAACP, She rallied the black community and literally forced our Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, school board to reverse their decision and let me back in school. Her argument was, like everyone else, “I had a right to an education.” We won that battle!!!

My admiration for my mother goes back to when I was a child. Her quest for human rights inspired me. Like my mother, I advocate love, compassion, and respect for my fellow man. What I took from my mother was to be of good character, of good courage, and to fight for what I believe in. It was her philosophies of life that inspired me to believe that no matter what may happen in life, one should never give up on their hopes and dreams in life. Since 1998, I have been a student. First, to get certified to teach; second, to get a masters degree; and now, I am working on an education doctorate. I guess, you can conclude that I do value education, and I am much like my mother, I am driven from within. I realize that had it not been for my mother’s undying support, and her persistence that her “only” daughter not be denied an education, I would not have a high school diploma, let alone be working on an Ed.D. Therefore, I cannot help but feel a sense of gratitude towards my mother for providing me with the love and support that I needed as a child. It was through her behavior, her rules, and her reward/punishment systems that my behavior was shaped.

When I started my quest for an education doctorate in curriculum studies, I was not sure where my journey was taking me. All that I knew was I expected to gain a broader understanding by reading, writing, and rationalizing the work of others in the education arena. In the midst of my journey, I learned that my views were closely

aligned with and I am greatly influenced by the work of black feminist theorists such as Anna Julia Cooper, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Also, I realized that although Black people have made remarkable progress from the days of old, discrimination in terms of race, class, and gender still exists. Today, it is just better hidden.

Knowing from experience that race, class, and gender are social setbacks for Blacks; and that we live in a society which hypocritically professes that no child will be left behind; as a Black feminist educator who was once a teen mom, I will neither abandon hope, nor idly stand by and watch millions of Black children fall by the wayside because of the color of their skin. Consequently, since quality education, jobs, and healthcare are strong focal points of Black feminism (Davis, 1989; Davis, 1974; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Hill Collins, 2000, 1998; hooks, 2000a, 2000b; Hurtado, 1996; Jennings & Kushnick, 2004; Langston, 2004; Smith, 1995; Smith, 1985); pressing social issues such as teen pregnancy in the Black community warrant further investigation.

I agree, “It is high time to stop picking on teenagers and the poor. Unplanned pregnancies are common, even among the most educated and ‘responsible’ classes. Some estimates say that every other birth in this country is the result of an unexpected conception” (Gips, 1996, ¶ 6). A common misconception regarding teenage pregnancy is that it is mainly a problem of minority groups. Windsor (1994) noted, “...68% of all adolescent births are to [W]hite teenagers” (¶ 2). Additionally, “Recent research has found that most young mothers leave school before they become pregnant, and those mothers who give birth while still in school are as likely to graduate from high school as their peers” (Windsor, 1994, ¶ 1).



According to Uhrich (2000), “Being in tune with what pregnancy and parenting means to young women and men, being armed with appropriate resources, and being knowledgeable about services and supports in your community can make working with teens some of the most rewarding work you may ever do” (¶, 8). “Beliefs about adolescent childbearing, including those related to ‘race,’ have been challenged by social construction theorists. Their critiques highlight the influence of social context and suggest that our current understandings of the ‘problem’ of adolescent pregnancy are rooted less in ‘fact’ and more in public sentiment” (Merrick, 2001, p. 2). Merrick’s contention that “recent research on minority adolescents’ development reflects an awareness of the need to incorporate new perspectives in assessing development among lower-income minority populations” (2001, p. 85), serves as justification for black feminist thought, also.

Hill-Collins (2000) has asserted, “As a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social justice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (p. 22). Intersecting oppressions refers to oppressions women face in terms of race, class, gender, etc. “Since Black women cannot be fully empowered unless intersecting oppressions themselves are eliminated” (Hill-Collins, p. 31), it is believed that “Black feminist thought must both be tied to Black women’s lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion” (Hill-Collins, p. 31). It also believed that “when such thought is sufficiently grounded in Black feminist practice...Black feminist thought encompasses general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 31). Promoting a “dialogical relationship” Hill-Collins (2000) posited,

“On both the individual and the group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness” (p. 30). Accordingly, since I am a teen mom who is both, Black and female, I see a need for such an inquiry. Also, I seek understanding from those perspectives.

Since the reconceptualization of curriculum studies has opened the field to multiple perspectives making it possible for voices that was once silenced to speak with conviction on their own personal experiences; my research inquiry embraced autobiography as a methodology via Black feminist lens. In an attempt to counteract our differential treatment, my inquiry was confined to Black feminism as a critical social theory used to address Black teen mothers as an oppressed group. Using this approach, I presented my understanding as a Black female who was once a teen mom. Articulating and delineating racist, sexist, and classist aspects of my experiences, through such an inquiry, not only did I get a better sense of *self*—of who I am—from whence I came—and, where I am going, but in the process, help others by contributing to the small body of Black feminist literature in existence even today. Continually in search of myself, the more I wrote; the more my writing became therapeutic, and consequently, a healing process for me as well.

Hopefully, hearing about my struggles and obstacles will inspire anyone who comes into contact with my work to never give up on their own personal goals. The fact that I succeeded in many of my endeavors may help my students and others realize that they can too. Most importantly, an inquiry such as this allows me to use my own experiences to derive meaning and lessons that might help others who interact with

pregnant teens. I often tell my students that knowledge is power and once you possess it, no one can take it away from you. Therefore, in the context of this dissertation, from a Black feminist standpoint, my autobiography was used to explore my experiences as a teen mom in the Southern United States from the mid 1970s to date.



Figure 13: Me & my partner of nine years, Richard Byrd, December 2006.

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