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University Distinguished Professor Emerita of English & Co-
Founder of the African American & African Studies Program,
Michigan State University**

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Guest Co-Editor Interview with Dr. Geneva Napoleon Smitherman, University Distinguished Professor Emerita of English & Co-Founder of the African American & African Studies Program, Michigan State University

by Dr. Raven L. Jones



**Dr. Raven L. Jones and
Dr. Geneva Napoleon Smitherman**

I was 18 years old when I first heard the name Dr. Geneva Napoleon Smitherman, (a.k.a. “Dr. G”) and her impact on students, culture, language, and all things Blackness! During my sophomore year as an English major at Michigan State University (MSU), I served as a Resident Assistant (RA) on the second floor of Yakeley/Gilchrist Hall in West Circle Complex. In this position, I would conduct rounds throughout the multiple dorms in the complex, ensure the safety of residents, and organize meetings and events based on residents’ interests and needs. Each night, I would also check on my favorite residents, one being my present-day best friend, Tanisha (Tompkins) Sanders, who was the first resident I met that fall semester. We were both from Detroit and loved music, so we would sit in our rooms and in the hallways, listening to Anita Baker and Luther Vandross, envisioning what our futures would be like. We are indeed living the lives that we planned for ourselves almost 25 years ago.

Throughout that year, another resident, Brandi, would join our sister circle after returning from one of her

evening courses and would gleefully tell Tanisha and me about her class on African American English. Brandi’s face said it all every week. The class was everything to her. A Ronald E. McNair Scholar at the time, and now Dr. Brandi E. Newkirk-Turner, Associate Provost for Academic Affairs and Professor in the Department of Communicative Disorders at Jackson State University, Brandi also highlighted what it meant to her as a Black undergraduate student to have a Black professor. This resonated with me because I had not yet had that experience. Brandi made her professor, Dr. Smitherman, sound like pure magic. She touted her career accomplishments, books she had written, and community work she engaged in.

Specifically, I remember Brandi telling us about Dr. Smitherman’s *My Brother’s Keeper Mentoring Program* (MBK), which she co-founded with the late Dr. Clifford Watson in 1990 at Malcolm X Academy (MXA), the first African-centered all-male public school in the country and part of the Detroit Public Schools system. I learned that MBK was a mentoring program for Black

middle school males designed to assist participants with developing self-awareness, while also exposing them to college life and research and career opportunities. MBK mentees were matched with undergraduate and graduate students at MSU.

Years later, I would come to learn for myself that Dr. Smitherman was *more* than magical. She was a legend in every way possible. Because of Brandi's joyful framing of Dr. Smitherman, I was geeked to enroll in one of her courses and serve as an MBK mentor for several years. Both experiences profoundly changed my life significantly. MBK will always have my heart. To this day, I still reflect on driving from MSU to Detroit to MXA to learn from Dr. Smitherman, the mentees, and MSU mentors and graduate assistants, including Drs. David Kirkland, Austin Jackson, and Jeffery Robinson. Our Blackness was affirmed during each session. We centered ourselves. Our people. Our stories. At the start of every MBK session, mentees and mentors recited an affirming pledge. It was our cultural compass and reminder for us to never forget who we are. And now, because of that practice, I recite daily affirmations with my daughter, Zuri Hudson.

This interview was a full circle moment for me. Real talk! Dr. G has been my mentor, academic mother, confidant, and friend. Her steadfast and intentional mentoring has allowed me to enter rooms and sit at tables that I know I would not have been able to without her advocacy and love. Whether inviting me to co-present with her at conferences, modeling for me and others how to develop our scholarly identities or attending my graduation parties and taking me on fine-dining dates just to kick it and help me plan my life, Dr. G is everything to me! And so many others! I would not be where I am without her guidance. She has gotten me together time and time again, while also reminding me that I am a writer and thinker. As soon as we logged onto Zoom for this interview, it was a love fest filled with laughter, respect, and honor. We kee kee'd like never before. I learned so much more about her life as a Black woman, PK (Preacher's Kid), language and literacy Scholar, her connections to Detroit, and everything in between. Hearing Dr. G reveal she is proud of me and my work

and the ways I am mothering my baby girl nearly made me pass out. She said I have vision. Yet, she has been my muse, reminding me how to get to the light at the end of every tunnel. This interview is an offering of us both seeing!

Logs in to Zoom.

Dr. Raven L. Jones: Heyyyyy Doc!!! Look at you! I'm on the line with the woman of the hour! You lookin' good, G! You bout to make me cuss and pray at the same time!

Dr. Geneva Napoleon Smitherman: (Laughs heartily) Shut up, fool! You still crazy! Look at you! I remember little ole Raven. Now, you're all grown up!

RJ: (Smiles widely) Thank you, Dr. G!

GS: How are things going at MSU?

RJ: Wonderful! I'm having a great time. Our Chair, Dr. Carter Andrews, is amazing and has been a Godsend!

GS: Excellent! Please tell her I send love and much respect. And give her a big hug for me!

RJ: I definitely will. I appreciate you taking the time to do this for Zuri Hudson and me. You've been a constant in my life since I was an undergraduate student, so it means a lot to have this time with you and to highlight your realness, love for Detroit, and inspiring career. I want to start out by going back to your younger years and hearing you reflect on your younger self. Could you share where you are from? What were some of your favorite hobbies as a child? What are your current hobbies? Favorite foods?

GS: I was born and started school in Brownsville, Tennessee. It's a small rural community in Hayward County. And in my father's brief story about his life growing up in Brownsville, he wrote about his friend, Elbert Williams. Elbert Williams was a member of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Color People). He was lynched by the Ku Klux Klan

because he was working and getting Negroes...this was back in the 1930s and 40s...and he was lynched by the Klan for getting Negroes registered to vote.

RJ: Wow! Just wow!

GS: When my Daddy tells it in his autobiography, he says they took Mr. Williams to the Hatchie River Bridge and... shot him 11 times and threw his body over the Hatchie River. This is the kind of white supremacist terrorism that shaped my early family life. It motivated my father to become a part of what the historians call, "The Great Migration." The Great Migration, as you might recall, is when seven million Black people left the South between 1916 and 1970. Seven million! As my Daddy put it in his autobiographical story, "Steppin' out on faith, I left Haywood County with six dollars in my pocket and the clothes on my back!" He was married and with a baby on the way, which was me. This was 1940. That's the kinda background I came from. When you asked me about hobbies, I had to laugh... for Black kids in the 40s, we didn't have no hobbies. My parents couldn't afford them. I would spend my time reading books and newspapers. That was my hobby and a habit I maintain to this very day.

RJ: I'm speechless. I love it. Thank you for that. So powerful!

GS: You asked me about my favorite foods?

RJ: Yes!

GS: Hey! I'm a southern girl. My favorite foods are greens, okra, corn, and red velvet cake! Everybody knows me for that. All my grad students learn about that, and after they have their defense, they'll have their foods and drinks to celebrate, there'd be a little bitty red velvet cake right in front of me. They've learned that's my favorite, that's my weakness.

RJ: (Laughs with Dr. Smitherman) I so love that. This is good to know. I want to transition and ask when did you know that you'd pursue education/academia. How did your scholarly trajectory and career begin?

GS: Ever since I can remember as a kid growing up, teaching has been my passion, my calling. You know when you're growing up and you play house, and you imitate grown-ups? I always imitated the role of the teacher. That's what I did when I got my degree and my certificate; I started teaching at the K-12 level. In those years, we called it intermediate school. And then, high school. And Raven, I never gave a thought to teaching college--until one night when I was working on my degree in English. I was enrolled in an evening class that met one day a week. Our professor announced that he'd be reading our papers, and if we wanted to come to his office to go over our papers, we could. He mentioned that he only taught one other class, which also met one day a week. We were all working on our Masters, and most of my classmates were like me--they were teaching full-time and in public schools. In English, we'd teach 5-6 classes a day with 30-35 students per class. So, when this big-time professor is telling us he only teaches two classes a week, one of my classmates asked, "Oh, is that just part-time?" And he said, "No, of course not; that's full-time! That's how they do it in academia!" That's when we learned about the teaching schedule of professors. I said, "Oh, that's the key!" That's how these professors have time to think. They have time to really read students' papers, connect research, attend conferences. That's when I made my plan to get my Ph.D.

RJ: YASSS! That's good. That's so rich. I remember having a similar moment and just being exhausted from having so many students and endless work to check. I'd come home and pass out, and my mom thought something was wrong with me. I'd just tell her, "Mom, I'm exhausted!"

GS: Yup! I was teaching at Northwestern High School. That's 30-35 students per class. That's 30-35 papers. I was working on my degree and getting my permanent teaching certificate. And during those years, in order to qualify for your permanent teaching certificate in Michigan, you had to teach a minimum of three years, and you had to have a Masters or so many hours towards a Masters. Here I am teaching all these classes and reading all these papers every day, and then we had

this professor telling us, “Well, in college, we don’t do it that way!” I thought, “Dang, ok! I’m smart! I can do this. Imma get a Ph.D. too, dammit!” And that’s when I decided to go to graduate school.

RJ: Yup! I’m so glad to know that story, Dr. G. That’s fascinating, and it shows a deeper level of thinking. It’s like, I’m going to get in front of this, and that’s going to benefit me and my own trajectory--not only with your career, but with everything.

GS: Yes, I mean, I had been teaching since I was 19.

RJ: How old were you when you graduated from high school?

GS: I graduated a month after I turned 15. I turned 15 in December, and I graduated in January.

RJ: 15? Wow! So, you skipped a couple of grades?

GS: See, in them years, they double promoted kids, so I was double promoted twice. Also, in them years, you could go to summer school and earn half a grade. My father was an advocate of education because he only finished the 7th grade. He wanted us to get all that he couldn’t get, so he was pushing me every summer to go to summer school to get a half a grade. In them years, Raven, you started high school in the 10th grade, not the 9th. When I went to high school, I was 12 years old in the 10th grade. And my best friend, Beverly, had a similar experience; so, she was 13. We in the 10th grade at Cass Tech! We’ve been best friends for 60 years.

RJ: 10th grade at Cass Tech!?! Stop it! Thank you for sharing that. It’s givin’ inspiration! And it’s cool to hear that your best friend, your ride or die, is still your ride or die! This is so good, G! I also wanted to extend my love again to you and your family with the loss of your brother. You know, I enjoyed your brother, Sherrif Benny Napoleon. Everybody loved him, and he always lit up a room.

GS: Thank you so much! Yes, he was so committed to Detroit. He loved the city.

RJ: He did. Now, tell me about some of your proudest accomplishments, whether they’re related to your career, things you’ve done in the community, or in your family?

GS: One of the things I wanted to mention is about the spelling bee. At Bellevue, all my teachers were White. In fact, Raven, I only had one Black teacher when I started at Brownsville, when I was four years old. That was my only Black teacher, during my WHOLE educational and grad school time, period. That one Black teacher. So, here I am in elementary school in Detroit, in predominantly white schools, and one of my proudest accomplishments was winning the grade-level spelling bee and the school spelling bee every year for five years in a row.

RJ: (Falls out my chair, literally) Wait a minute! Stop it! That’s so what’s up! Five years in a row!?! You was like, “Y’all go sit down, somewhere! Let me give y’all some of this Black energy!”

GS: (Laughs boldly) That was one of my accomplishments, and everybody would be like, “How she always winnin’ that?” And they’d whisper behind my back. My sister told me, “They sayin’, you cheat!” I said, “Well, they’re lookin’ right at me. If I’m cheatin’, they can see me! You gotta line up in front of everybody!” I was 9 or 10 when I first won. And my daddy was my biggest influence. He was just so proud.

RJ: (Laughs and claps hands) I love it. You’re something else, Dr. G! Any other accomplishments you want to share?

GS: Oh yes! Another accomplishment was about church. When Daddy got the call to preach, he decided he wanted to found his own church. He called a meeting of 26 people--some were relatives, some were his boys that he ran with, and he said, “I want y’all to help me and I’m gone found a church.” And it was in our living room, deep East side, in 1956. I wrote a history about the church, and I had to name those 26 people. In fact, there are only two of us left. At that founding meeting, they voted for the officers to run the church,

and my grandmother—who was there and who I'm named after her, Geneva—it was her sister, she was voted the secretary of the church. And me—now mind you, it's 1956, I'm going to college, but I ain't but 15 years old—they voted me the assistant secretary!

RJ: (Throws up praise hands and shouts) C'mon, somebody! At 15 years old! Wow, G! Listen, you've been around language and literacy your entire life. This is beautiful! I'm not surprised. It's just beautiful to be able to absorb this energy and this zeal that you have. I mean you've always just been so fly to me, right! From your earrings and braids to just how you show up! That's amazing—at 15 years old, you assumed the role of assistant secretary!

GS: Yup, at 15 years old! These elders had that kinda confidence in me. Yup, 1956 was the founding of Tennessee Missionary Baptist Church. We built a brand-new church under my father, and we now own the whole corner. It's on Kercheval and Fisher. We own the whole corner, and we own the land across from it—the parking lot, and we own another lot on the Kercheval side. The church was built in 1971, and in 1978 we paid off the mortgage. My daddy was still working and was saving money. First, we were in a storefront on Gratiot, and my daddy said he wanted to get out of the storefront and build a brand-new church. We got a baptismal pool. We got Sunday School rooms. We got space to have picnics. That was his vision.

RJ: That's everything! YASSS! That's the community. Oh—that's so beautiful that y'all were able to do that. Started with 26 people, and it just grew because y'all kept nurturing, watering, and sowing into yourselves and your communities.

GS: Absolutely! That was his vision. Having vision is so important. Just like I see the things you're doing with your daughter. She's interviewing. Co-presenting with you. You have a vision.

RJ: Yes, I totally do. We do. It's an honor to be her mother and to support her literacy awareness and how she best learns. Like, even for this special issue with the

Michigan Reading Journal, she's been so excited. And I've been explaining to her what it all means for us and our community. Her favorite part of the process has been interviewing Dr. April Baker-Bell. I remember being there at Dr. Baker-Bell's dissertation defense and just seeing you smiling and seeing you be so proud as one of her committee members. I share those stories with my baby girl. I want her to always know she comes from Black excellence.

GS: Wow! How old is she again?

RJ: She's 7.

GS: Wow, Raven. And she's already done so much. You got the vision. See, in my generation, we were limited. We didn't think like that. And you just done bust the sh** wide open!

RJ: (Laughs loudly) Yes, bust it wide open! You crazy, G! Ok so—let's keep talking about your accomplishments.

GS: Ok. You know that Ann Arbor case that everyone talks about, the Black English case with Martin Luther King, Jr Elementary School? I have to give a little background. After Harvard Press turned down *Talkin and Testifyin*, Houghton Mifflin came to me and said, "We want that book!" I said, "Oh yeah?" And as a result of that, I started doing a lot of TV interviews. I was interviewed on *The Today Show* in the 70s. The Black attorney that was representing the kids in that lawsuit said he never watched TV in the morning before he goes to work, but something told him to turn it on. When he turned it on, he said, "I saw this beautiful Black woman who was talking about Black English, and that's the case we're trying to construct for these kids!" I was being interviewed about *Talkin and Testifyin*, and I was making a point about how people hear the language, and they think the kids need to be in learning disability classes. When that TV interview was over, I got a call from my secretary from Black Studies. She called me at home and said, "There's this attorney, Kenneth Lewis, and he said must speak with you immediately!" He said to me, "You're exactly what we need." They hadn't been able to find anybody, an expert witness, to talk about the

language, and that was critical because the Equal Educational Opportunity Act speaks to the fact that a school district must provide education to overcome any kind of language barriers for youth. Ann Arbor School District had been arguing that Black English isn't a language, it doesn't count, it doesn't fit into that law. The judge ruled against them. He said, if any language that children speak, which is interfering or is a barrier to them learning to read or getting educated, the school district has to train the teachers in that language and on how to reach the kids. That's just what you got to do. That's how I got involved. Ken Lewis came down to Wayne State and said, "Just give me 10 minutes, Dr. Smitherman." He rushed outta his office and came down to Black Studies at Wayne State, and the rest is history. He and his partner, a Jewish lawyer, were lawyers for Michigan Legal Services, which was providing pro bono work for people who were from low-income statuses.

RJ: Wow. And that was in 1977?

GS: Yes. Ken said he never watched TV, but said, "God works in mysterious ways." He was a young guy and had just passed the bar. He wanted to commit to helping poor people. He passed away a few years ago, but his partner, the Jewish lawyer, is still living. This case is widely cited in legal scholarship. People started talking more about Black English.

RJ: That's so rich. Do you remember some of the things that immediately came after that interview with *The Today Show*? Like, who started to contact you more? Would you say it was school districts, universities?

GS: It was really the media. *Talkin and Testifyin* was the first book by a Black linguist in that era. Previously, the work had been done by White linguists. My work with those kids and their parents—that was the most rewarding work I've ever done, and it was hard work. Yeah, it was. See, Raven—remember I told you, I had to take speech therapy and speech correction when I was a freshman student Wayne State.

RJ: No, you didn't say that! Naw, you ain't tell me that. Say more.

GS: I thought I told you that. In the 1950s, anybody who spoke what we now call Black English or African American English was considered slow, learning disabled. If you were an adult, you were considered ignorant or stupid. So, in those years, if you wanted to go into teaching, part of getting your teaching license was passing the speech test. When I took the speech test, I was 15. I had just graduated from Cass. I failed the test and had to take speech correction, and I had to pay for it.

RJ: So, you failed the test, and then had to pay for courses?

GS: Yeah, it wasn't free! In the speech correction course, there were about 10-12 other students in there. Some of them were White. Think about it. Appalachia. White folks from there didn't speak standard English. Think about White kids from the Bronx in New York City. So, anybody who was really working class or spoke a lower-class dialect—they were failing. In the class, there were Blacks, Hispanics, Whites from Appalachia, the South, and Whites from New Jersey. And the speech therapist didn't know what to do with us, because speech therapists treat stuttering, language delay—they teach people with real physiological communication disorders, and we ain't have none of that. We ain't even stutter. None of her therapy stuff worked. We just spoke a different variety.

RJ: So, what did she ultimately end up doing to help y'all?

GS: She taught us the test. She gave us a list of words to pronounce that was a part of the test. Like "south." We would say, "souf," and she'd say, "Let's pronounce it again, together." I mean, she was great. She figured it out. She was cool. We all passed the test because she taught us various skills and strategies.

RJ: Whew, your life is so much! How do you keep up with all of this? These experiences? You're talking about the 50s, 60s, 70s, and here we are—it's 2022.

GS: (Shakes her head, smiling) Yeah, I don't know.

RJ: So, what has inspired you to 'keep on keepin' on?' I've heard you use that phrase several times. What does that mean to you?

GS: Well, "keep on keepin' on," is another way of saying, within the Black church tradition, "clothed in your right mind!"

RJ: (Smiles, snaps fingers, and waves hands)

GS: Now, 'keep on keepin' on' means you're clothed in your right mind. Cuz, you know being in this new world, especially from the Jim Crow South and segregation—I mean, you couldn't get outta your right mind. So, we don't just say, "keep on keepin' on," we also say, "and clothed in my right mind!" I think my main influence is my father, the Rev. Henry Nelson Napoleon. He was a motherless child at seven, and he was a dominant speaker in my life. He had a major impact on me. Daddy was a self-made man and mostly self-educated man. He didn't go past 7th grade until he was older and went to night school when he was in his 30s and going to seminary. He was obsessed with knowledge. He told people and the kids at church to read, study, read the Bible, study anything, get knowledge—don't leave here ignorant like when you came into the world! He practiced what he preached. My father read not just the Black newspaper; he read the White ones, too. He read the *Michigan Chronicle* when it came out. In those years, we had the *Detroit Times*, and later it became *The Detroit Free Press*. He read *Jet* magazine, *Ebony*, *the World Report*. He was always reading. He always worked full-time and part-time. His part-time job when I was growing up was at Wayne State in the parking lot. He was a parking attendant. In those years, Wayne State had a big student services building on the corner of Cass and Ferry. He would take his newspapers and books to the parking job, and he'd read. He was always pushing education—at home and in the church. In Sunday School, he'd tell the teachers—let the people read it out loud, so you can help them, and you'll know what words they don't understand and what they're missing. And Raven—as a Christian, he said, "the knowledge you get, share it with other people." He was way ahead of his time. He believed in the economic

independence of women. He was teaching me and my sisters, "Have your own, don't depend on no man! Not even me." And this was in the 50s and early 60s. And he told us not to depend on the government.

RJ: Oh, I love that! That's a word! Don't depend on no man or the government! Have your own. Blessings!

GS: Yup! He was just ahead of his time, and that's what really helped me "keep on keepin' on!"

RJ: So that's how you became aware of sociopolitical things—being right there at home with your dad who was also preaching the word and was astute and aware.

GS: Yes, he was! That's him. My father was something!

RJ: What comes to mind when you hear the words, "Black," "Detroit," "Malcolm X Academy," and "My Brother's Keeper"? You know, I was just talking to Geneva Thomas—"Lil G," before this interview. She's in New Jersey living very well. I love talking to her. We talk about MBK to this day. I also still talk to other former MBK mentors: Allison Paige and Ebony Thomas, who are both in Chicago. And Lulu Fall from D.C., Kimberly Walker, and Dr. Dominick Quinney, who just got tenure. What's funny is when he learned he got tenure, he was right here on my couch. Him, Lulu, and Rivonne were here visiting. And we were kee keein' and talkin' so much junk. And he looked at his phone and was like, "Oh my gosh, I got tenure!" We just started praising. Started playing trap music. Oh, we had a whole celebration. Every time we gather, we talk about MBK. We talk about revolution. We learned a lot and we're grateful for you, Drs. Robinson, Kirkland, and Jackson. You know!

GS: That's so beautiful. That was a long time ago. When I think of all of that, I think of good feelings! We were working to make things better for the next generation. We were all committed to Black liberation. To the struggle. And good feelings. Happy feelings, too. Those were good memories.

RJ: When I think about that program and what it

must've taken for you, David, Austin, and others to work towards getting those university dollars for us, I'm just grateful!

GS: Tell me about it!

RJ: So, THANK YOU for that! The mentees are now adults with their own children, telling them stories from their time in MBK. I know it wasn't easy, but y'all made it look easy. We had a ball driving them university vans, going to Eastern Market after the sessions. So many good stories. Again, thank y'all for that!

GS: It worked because we were all on one accord. Even though we were all different and had different personalities, we were on one accord. And that was a good feeling. When Malcolm X Academy first opened, it was located in a White neighborhood. In 1991, they didn't have a building. The Detroit Board of Education approved the Malcolm X Academy's existence, and we had worked out the curriculum, but we didn't have a physical space, so they put us in a school on the borderline of Detroit and Dearborn, Far West off Warren. It was an all-White working-class neighborhood. The neighborhood didn't want the school there. They would throw eggs at the school buses when the kids were being dropped off at that building. Dr. Watson told Jeff and me that they vandalized the building on the weekends.

RJ: That's so crazy and hurtful.

GS: This was an elementary school. These were little kids. The White people would scream and yell at the kids. We were so happy to finally get our building, but for the first six months, that's where we were.

RJ: That's heavy.

GS: But that next year, the school board found us that wonderful building on Chicago, which is where you would come.

RJ: Yes, it was a beautiful building. What's Dr. Jeffrey Robinson doing now?

GS: He's doing pretty good. They merged Malcolm X and Paul Robeson. He's still the principal there. He started out when the school first opened in 1991 as a teacher's aide. He's done a lot of wonderful work there.

RJ: Share some insights on what it's been like to teach at various institutions? At PWIs (Predominately White Institutions)?

GS: The first PWI I taught at was Eastern Michigan. I taught a night class, Freshman English, now they call it First Year Writing. All the students were White. A student wrote a letter to the Chair of the English department complaining about me. He said he didn't think he could learn to write under my instruction. In those years, department chairs, even at Harvard, would come or send someone to observe your teaching. I said, "Well, what did I do? What is the nature of his complaint?" And he read it to me. He said, "I don't think I can learn Standard English in this class because my instructor is a Negro, and the Negroes can hardly even speak English!"

RJ: (Falls out my chair, laughs to keep from crying) Whatttttttt!!! Are you serious??? Stop it!

GS: (Laughs and puts her hands on her forehead) It would be funny if it wasn't so sad. I said, "What!"

RJ: Because she's a Negro and Negroes don't know how to what?

GS: Because she's a Negro, and Negroes don't know how to speak English, much less to teach someone else how to write it. I was flabbergasted. And you know what, the chair was flabbergasted too. He said, "I have never dealt with anything like this." He was one of those cool White guys. I said, "Well, transfer him to another class. I don't want him to have any excuses." So, Raven—he transferred him to another instructor's class that met at night. And guess what?

RJ: What?!?

GS: He failed! He wanted a White male instructor. And I felt sorry for him. God don't like ugly!

RJ: (Laughs) Okayyyy! God don't like ugly! Hold on. I got something for you that'll resonate with you. (Grabs tambourine)

GS: (Starts praise dancing in her chair). Heyyyyy!!!

RJ: Ok, so that was at Eastern. From Eastern, you went where?

GS: Then I got hired full-time as an instructor at Wayne State. I didn't have my Ph.D. yet. When I finished graduate school at Michigan, that's when Harvard opened up and established the Black Studies Department in 1969. And in 1970 and 1971, they were recruiting Black faculty. I was hired by the head of the new Black Studies department. Racism was still there, but it was covered up in polite language.

RJ: Do you recall if a lot of that couching came more from your students or colleagues or a combination of both?

GS: The students were cool. It was more so from the colleagues. There was some resistance. I decided to leave Harvard. I was there for two and a half years. And Wayne State in the meanwhile opened up a Black Studies Center. When I left, they didn't have it, and then the students picketed and protested. Wayne State hired me back to be head of the Black Studies Center. I have to give credit to the head of the department at Harvard. He made sure we had research money. I had two teaching assistants. I mean unlimited conference travel money...I didn't like the culture. I come from Detroit—where we reign supreme in da D!

RJ: Right! Speak on it! It's everything here!

GS: Right! And Boston wasn't nothing like that. The culture of Boston is altogether different. In some cities, like Detroit, there's some real togetherness.

RJ: Yeah, and then from Wayne State, you went to MSU?

GS: Yeah, I was the head of Black Studies at Wayne State for 15, 16 years.

RJ: How long were you at MSU?

GS: I came to MSU in '89, and I was at MSU for 23 years. That year in 1988, 1989, all 15 universities in the State of Michigan had an uprising. Every single one of them had some kinda unrest, student mobilization, and uprising. And the one at Michigan State was carried out by Jeff Robinson. He was then an undergraduate student at Michigan State. It was him and Darius Peyton. They took over the administration building. Locked it down. Wayne State students had done that not too much before then. And my brother who passed, Benny—he was head of the Michigan Civil Rights Convention that year, and he convened hearings at every one of those 15 college campuses.

RJ: My goodness. This is just too much history wrapped up within itself.

GS: Benny's whole life was public service. Everything he did. Now, at Michigan State—this is Lou Anna Simon—she was the Assistant Provost, and they negotiated with the students. I give Lou Anna credit for that. They met students' demands. They wanted more Black faculty. They offered funds for every department at Michigan State to recruit and hire senior Black faculty.

RJ: Okay. I gotchu!

GS: So, I had already done some public speaking engagements and workshops for the English department in English and Language. So, when they got the offer from the Provost Office, that's when I said, "Ok, I'll go."

RJ: This is just so much, G. Twenty-three years. You done put your time in Queen! That's why you get to relax and be all off frolicking in South Africa! You get to do that! Absolutely!

GS: (Laughs hard) Not frolicking!

RJ: (Laughs hard, too) So, what's it like to write a book for you? Like, what's your process? How do you know when it's time to shut it down and go in the lab?

Oh my gosh, you've written so many, and they're not flimsy texts.

GS: (Laughs)

RJ: They're very comprehensive. They encompass so much history. Timeliness of Blackness and hopes and desires mixed with racial tension based on language and linguistic policies and practices. How do you know where to pick up where you've left off?

GS: It's inspiration! You know in the Roman ...and Greek... traditions, I know they're European and not African, but in those traditions, they talk about the inspiration of the muse. The muse that inspired Homer to write *The Odyssey*. Well, that's to me, like in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the visitation of the spirit! And the spirit moves you and gives you ideas. You gotta learn to listen to them thoughts!

RJ: (Speechless for 7 seconds; I counted.) Yes! You gotta learn to listen!

GS: That's the inspiration coming from the spirit. And on a practical level, good writers are good readers. You gotta read everything you get your hands on. Like my daddy.

RJ: You're givin' me so many vibes and ideas right now. And this might be difficult to answer, but do you have a favorite book that you've written?

GS: Ohhhh. My favorite—each one! I would say *Word from the Mother*. It's like I updated 21st century *Talkin and Testifyin*, to me. And it's been recently updated and released as a classic. And now it has a foreword by a young brother, Dr. H. Samy Alim. He does work on hip hop.

RJ: Yup! I got y'all other one, *Articulate While Black*...!

GS: Yup! That was his idea. That's what the spirit sent him. And he said, "G, I got an idea for this book on Obama, and I want you to help me write it. Write it with me!" And I was like, "Okay, okay—let's do it."

RJ: See, and that's how you get caught up, but that's good! It keeps you connected and grounded, G! We get excited when we see your name out here. We know you're busy. We know you have other things to do, and you're still down for us! Okay, last question. You just came out with your most recent work, *My Soul Look Back in Wonder: Memories from a Life of Study, Struggle, and Doin Battle in the Language Wars* (2022)! What was it like to reflect on its content?

GS: Thank you for asking that because I haven't really had anyone else to talk to about this. I'm trying to think about how to make education work for all our youth. And revisiting that Black English case, the King case, to say what did we miss that can help us now? It was about educating Black kids. And Raven, now that I'm revisiting that historical moment, I'm remembering the respectability politics. I learned that from y'all. I missed it. This is something I learned from y'all generation. If we're going to have equal opportunity education, we must have educational equity. How do you make sure that children in housing projects get a good education and learn to read? That's the other big area that I'm trying to see. What did we miss in that King case? That's the charge that I'm laying on y'all.

RJ: Wow! Ok. THANK YOU for all of this! I love you, Dr. G. This has allowed me to reflect on my own upbringing so much. You've done a lot for so many people and communities, and you're still connected to your people. I love this.

GS: (Smiles) Thank you, Raven! Alright baby! I love you!

RJ: (Smiles) I love you, too! Make sure you stay fine! Imma send you some red velvet cake!

My goodness! I am so full in this moment. You just read and learned from the language Queen herself. I literally bowed at the end of the interview and did another praise dance with my tambourine! You might be thinking, "Dang, this is a long interview." And to that, I say, "Greatness takes time and to 'put some respect(t) on her name!" I am thankful to Dr. Brandi Newkirk-Turner for taking Dr. G's African American

English class at MSU back in the day and coming back to our dorm after class to share parts of Dr. G's story with Tanisha and me. Dr. G is church. Sunday School. Revival. And my spirit has been renewed from her genius, transparency, laughter, and love. Dr. G is your favorite concert. The one you get dressed up for—to see that artist you cannot live without. And you even do a 2-step in the aisle, or stand up, screaming in excitement because they are finally singing your favorite song. Dr. G is that meal you crave. The one that your mother or grandmother makes because they can look in your eyes and then lovingly feed your soul. I am eternally grateful that she gave me her, “Yes!” to share more of her story in this special issue. I hope that her astounding life has in some way inspired you to read, write, invest in a young person, and listen to the spirit. Furthermore, I hope that these words have compelled you to stand in your truth and call out injustices when you see them. Dr. G is indeed my favorite book, and I will never tire of reading her. Highlighting her with my life's markers. And keeping her in the most sacred space—my heart. In the introduction to this interview, I shared that each MBK session at MXA began with the mentees and mentors reciting an affirming pledge, before engaging in Black literature and texts. As another way to honor

Dr. G's life and work, I am closing this interview with that pledge. In it, I am reminded of my undergraduate self. And now, I am excited to return to this pledge and to recite these same words with my daughter, reminding her that we have vision and that we are our own brother's and sister's keeper. Amandla!

My Brother's Keeper Pledge

We will work hard.

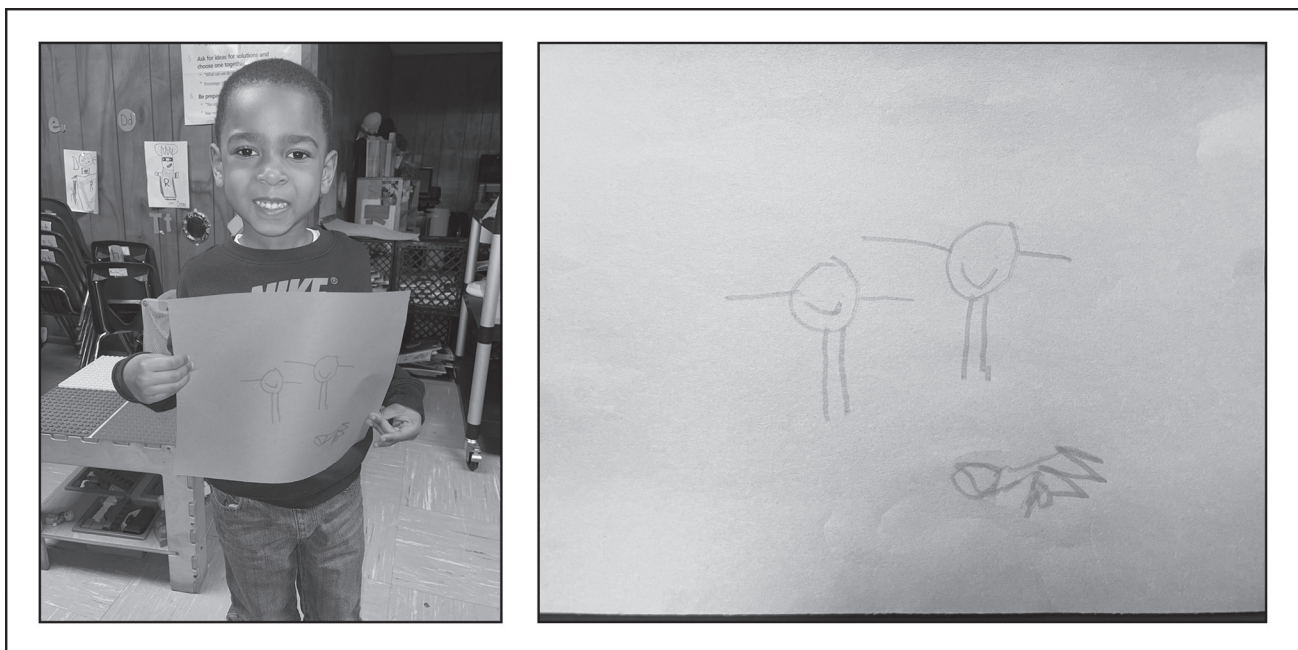
We will gain knowledge.

We will share.

We will be kind to each other.

We will love and take care of each other.

We will learn to become our own brother's and sister's keeper.



Isaac Robinson is a preschool student at Just Imagine Child Development Center in Redford.



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