

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: **“TELL ME YOUR DIAMONDS”: STORY BEARING IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVES**

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In 1994, a week prior to the release of her family memoir The Sweeter the Juice, African American writer, Shirley Haizlip was a guest on the Oprah Winfrey Show. The episode, “Denying my Race,” unveiled the ways some members of Haizlip’s bi-racial family sought to pass for white, while others lived successful lives as African Americans. During the publicized reunion, members of both sides of the racial coin worked toward coming to terms with their identities. In telling this story, Haizlip took on the role of the female story bearer, the writer of the family narrative who is positioned two or more generations beyond the story she tells. What does it mean to be a living archive, a black woman who carries the mantle of an uneasy familial past and makes it her body of work? What does it mean to investigate a wound in the family that is representative of larger cultural injuries that occurred during pivotal moments in black history? How can deeply entrenched cultural wounds open dialogue, establish common ground, and create spaces for empathy and

understanding across race, gender, sexuality, and class? Each of the women, about whom I am writing in this dissertation, helps to address these questions.

A'Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Haizlip, and (Carole) Ione¹ have all been afforded the opportunity to labor with their fingers to corroborate the oral narratives handed to them. The fruit of their labor are their life histories: On Her Own Ground, The Sweeter the Juice, and Pride of Family, respectively. The titles signal familial pasts that intersect with the complexities of gender and labor, race and racial passing, class and privilege. Using personal life histories like that of Haizlip, Bundles, Ione and others I seek to better understand the ways in which women writers can foster more generative understandings of African American life histories and the ways in which they are situated as sites for social change.

¹ Ione, as she currently chooses to identify herself, published Pride of Family under the name Carole Ione and also produced articles during her journalism career as Carole Bovoso.

**“TELL ME MY DIAMONDS”: STORY BEARING IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN’S LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVES**

By

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Dedication

For the women around the table, my foremothers Georgia Faulkner, Gillette McCowan, Edna Cowan Williams, Sylvia Bernice Kennedy, and Rosetta Ford, and to the memory of Louise Carson Smith.

Especially for A'Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione.

The Lord gives the word (of power); the women who bear and publish (the news) are
a great host (Psalms 68:11)

Acknowledgements

“For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you a future and hope” (Jeremiah 29:11)

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION DOING WITNESS

Miss Leah: I keep tellin' you those ain't writin' stories. These are tellin' stories.
Fan: Then tell them to me.
Miss Leah: So you can write 'em?
Fan: So we can remember them.
from "Flyin' West", by Pearl Cleage

"This why I have it wrote down, why I has the child say it back ... *This* the childrens have heard from our own lips"

from Dessa Rose, by Sherley Ann Williams

Dessa Rose is a woman whose life is not her own, and whose life story is open to interpretation by her owner or any other respectably classed white male during the nineteenth century. She is a slave, who, upon daring to escape a slave coffle, is marked violently with one such interpretation seared onto her backside. Sherley Anne Williams writes Dessa Rose, a neo-slave narrative that reflects on the impact of enslavement, to demonstrate the power of taking charge of one's own life history. The novel also demonstrates the danger of not taking ownership of personal history, and having it proscribed by others instead. Intermittently, Williams takes care to insert Dessa's voice and present for her a life rich with the kinship of other enslaved women, rituals that include hair braiding and oral storytelling, and loving relationships with black men, Kaine, and later Harker. There is also a complex alliance with a white woman, "Rufel", who assists with a successful escape from enslavement and the possibilities of new life for Dessa's family in the West. Williams portrays her characters with humanity. However, the narrative opens in 1847, a time in which enslaved black women and men are not generally viewed with humanity. In fact, a young white male writer, Nehemiah, plans on exploiting Dessa's story shortly after her first escape attempt and sensationalize it in a book about slave rebellion. He will capitalize on the popularity of plantation

literature and make a name for himself among the planter class to elevate his social status. Nehemiah, whom she calls “Nemi”, comes to the cell where she is held with the intent to confirm his most salacious notions of her. Dessa is pregnant at the time that she is imprisoned for attacking her master, and is scheduled to die by hanging once she has given birth. After her successful escape, he dogs Dessa’s every move, determined to successfully publish this story. His relentless actions only prove to Dessa that her life story has value. This is quite the revelation for an enslaved black woman: she possesses something that she can control. By the end of the novel, Dessa offers the one thing she owns that has priceless value, her life story, to her family as a narrative inheritance.

“Tell Me My Diamonds: Story Bearing in African American Women’s Life History Narratives” introduces story bearing, a concept that I developed to explain how black women writers go about recovering the life histories of their family. Story bearing is a tedious, consuming process of mining oral history and archival record to gather a black family narrative whose value has slipped or fallen completely away. It fills a gap within scholarly literature that effectively captures how story bearers come to their work and go about the process of doing it. In Dessa Rose, the protagonist eventually recognizes the value of her life history and fiercely protects it for just the right heir to preserve. Story bearers are the “right heirs” that recover and preserve life history. “Tell Me My Diamonds” not only observes the process of story bearing, it explains the varying roles that supports it, unpacks orality, performance, and material culture as methods that comprise it, and closely examines texts that represent it. From these, I argue that story bearing shares in the African tradition of *nommo*ⁱ, where words spark transformative power and action.

Dessa, whose thigh is branded with an “R” for runaway and whose buttocks is seared with whip scars, understands more than most how black bodies can be misread. She is marked with a brutal insignia of slavery. Nemi observes her from a position of white male privilege, intent on profiting from his interpretation. The first two sections of *Dessa Rose* are presented from a white, outside gaze in sections entitled “The Darky” and “The Wench”. With only brief moments of interiority where she reflects on her family and her lover, Kaine, “The Darky” views Dessa as little more than a savage who attacks white authority figures. Like a caged animal, Dessa is watched by Nemi from afar, who lobs provocative questions to confirm what he already believes about her. The second chapter, “The Wench” describes both Dessa and Ruth Ellen, called “Rufel”, who is a widowed white plantation mistress who hides and aids runaway slaves. Both struggle with mistrust of each other even as they join forces to become free, as women. This section illustrates Rufel’s point of view. The final section, “The Negress”, represents dignity and a semblance of self-actualization for Dessa by allowing her to name herself and tell her own story. It is poignant that she insists that her progeny profit from hearing and preserving her life history.

The context for the quotes from “Flyin’ West” and *Dessa Rose* that open the dissertation is that they reflect the beliefs of formerly enslaved black women about the impact of narrative. Leah and Dessa are older women who have lived through slavery and chose to move West in order to experience greater freedom as blacks and as women. *Dessa Rose* is set in the 1840s and reflects the impact of enslavement on both black men and women, and on white women. “Flyin’ West” presents the life experience of a family of Exodusters, black women and men who travel west to Kansas and Nebraska beginning

in 1879, after the Civil War. It is now 1898 when Fannie attempts to record Miss Leah's story. The conversation that the two have and the admonition that Dessa demands demonstrates the significance of preserving memory in black communities. There is a distinction in the way that memory is preserved. Miss Leah privileges the orality of telling stories, a perspective that stems from a long black storytelling tradition. Dessa also favors orality, and chooses to use her spoken words to verify any written accounts. There seems to be a mistrust of the written word. Through her experience with "Nemi", who seeks to distort her story in order to profit from it, Dessa understands that she must own her life history. She must carefully select the child who will write it and she must be a full participant in its transcription. Though all of her grandchildren hear the story at the end of Dessa Rose, only one, "the child," is charged to remember it and to fulfill the role of story bearer for the next generation. It is important in this family that oral memory and written narrative operate in tandem for the purposes of preservation. Dessa insists:

"I hopes I live for my people like they do for me, so sharp sometimes that I can't believe that it's all in my mind. And my mind wanders. This is why I have it wrote down, why I has the child say it back. I never will forget Nemi trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands. Well, *this* the childrens have heard from my lips. I hope they never have to pay what it cost us to own ourselves" (236)

Determining who tells black narrative history and who "owns" that history is significant. Dessa Rose emphasizes the point when at the end of the narrative Nemi's written account amounts to a collection of empty pages blowing in the wind, while Dessa's story survives intact. The above passage is where my initial ideas about story bearing begin. Three things are revealed through Dessa's words: 1) narrative preservation done orally and in writing are important to people who are illiterate or have little access to education 2) a descendent who is literate and a good listener is personally selected to preserve family

history and 3) the process for narrative preservation is participatory and involves storytelling, written documentation, and oral verification. From here I noticed a similar pattern of narrative preservation in the literary work of other black women, including Hannah Crafts' The Bondwoman's Narrative, Gayl Jones' Corregidora, Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow, and Toni Morrison's Beloved. Also common among them was the burden felt by the chosen descendant – a woman - to do something with the narrative history given. I call these female descendants story bearers. The role fills the responsibility for carrying the mantle of family lineage. Additional patterns evolve during my close investigation of these and other texts. The narrative histories are nearly always maternal histories, involve serious trauma that stems directly from enslavement, and includes silenced or lost history. There is an expectation that something will be done as a result of the recovered narrative – a written record will be constructed, a book will be written, a memorial will be devised. In each of the texts a deceased ancestor acts as a guide to encourage or bring about the narrative. Finally, there is a cost to bearing the story and a consequence for choosing not to bear it. The term story bearer is appropriate, particularly considering that connotations for “bearing” includes: to bring forth, to support, and move in a forward direction. I call the entire process for what is done here, story bearing.

“Tell Me My Diamonds” is an autoethnographic analysis of story bearing, which offers a framework for how life history is produced and for how black women writers, in particular, embrace the communicative experience of shaping memory. The story bearer is selected to preserve and produce the life history of the family, community, and culture. She carries the expectation to do something with the narrative inheritance she has been

given. The story carrier collaborates with the story bearer by providing material or oral detail to corroborate the narrative. The ancestral intermediary provides clues for narrative discovery, haunts the story bearer into production, and points the way toward its completion. Each of these roles helps to facilitate narrative history production. Narrative histories are often in-development and are the culmination of oral history, material culture findings, and archival research. Black women writers, like the ones engaged in “Tell Me My Diamonds”, have crafted life history projects of them. They publish narratives and go on to conduct national on-air dialogues or develop digital archives, blogs, and websites around their recovered history. The terms narrative history and life history seem interchangeable, but I choose to use them to reflect either the process of recovering narrative or the published product.

This dissertation identifies story bearers who write biography, historical fiction, and memoir from the narrative histories they recover. I conduct oral interviews with A’Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione, literary analysis of the works of Carla Peterson, Sanzy Senna, and Lalita Tademy, and film analysis of Maya Angelou’s “Down in the Delta” and Kasi Lemons’ “Eve’s Bayou to give a more complete representation of story bearing as orality and performance. Through these observations, several questions arise: What does it mean to be a living archive, a black woman who carries the mantle of an uneasy familial past and makes it her body of work? What does it mean to investigate a wound in the family that is representative of larger cultural/societal injuries that occurred during pivotal moments in black history? How can deeply entrenched cultural wounds open dialogue, establish common ground, and create spaces for empathy and

understanding across race, gender, sexuality, region and class? Each of the women, about whom I am writing in this dissertation, helps to address these questions.

Story bearing articulates the patterns I first notice in black women's historical fiction. It was quite a revelation to discover that story bearing is a very real function for black women writers of narrative history. I take a closer look at the process while reading the author's notes in Lalita Tademy's Cane River. Tademy's words concerning her great great-grandmother, Philomene's, influence stuns me:

“Philomene came to life before any of the others. She visited my dreams, urging me to tell their stories. No, “urging” is too tame a word, too remote. Philomene *demand*ed that I struggle to understand the different generations of my family and the complexities of their lives. She made it unacceptable that any of them be reduced or forgotten” (xv)

From here, I begin to catalogue every time an author makes reference to ancestral haunting as the reason for beginning the recovery of their narrative history. I note similar declarations by A'Lelia Bundles in On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madame C.J. Walker and (Carole) Ioneⁱⁱ in Pride of Family: Four Generations of American Women of Color. This observation causes me to consider ethnography as a method for teasing out my early understandings of story bearing. Already a research assistant for A'Lelia Bundles during the development stages for her biography on her forebear and namesake, A'Lelia Walker, I begin to form questions from which to begin a conversation. After a series of false starts where Bundles guardedly shares Walker family history in press release fashion rather than her own life experience as mantle keeper, I set a lipstick tube between us. I explain that my grandmother, Gillette Faulkner McCowan's, ornate Avon vial brings about memories of her, our relationship, and family stories. I note my own particular role in the family and explain my position as story bearer. Finally, an understanding exist between us and Bundles not only shares her own experiences in

recovering family history, she trains me in the archival organizing techniques Alex Haley shared with her as his assistant and offers me her book, On Her Own Ground, in which I discover her words:

“The Walker women – Madam, her daughter A’Lelia Walker and my grandmother Mae Walker – were already beckoning me at an early age, sometimes whispering, sometimes clamoring with the message that I must tell their story” (16).

The ancestors of these writers urge, demand, beckon, and clamor in insistent ways that *they* must struggle, understand, and tell their collective histories. Tademy and Bundes are truly representative of *this child* that Williams refers to in fiction. I imagine the moment when a story bearer and her ancestral intermediary communicate through time, though several generations exist between them. How does the ancestor get her great-great-grandchild’s attention? How is the great-grandchild, as story bearer, directed toward the narrative recovery of their shared history? Why *that* great-grandchild? The answers are often found in the author’s notes that preface or conclude the life histories produced by that great-grandchild. Lalita Tademy describes feeling “driven by a hunger I could not name” that precedes her leap into family history research. Philomene, her great-great-grandmother, is the little known and less discussed mother of a popular relative, Emily Fredieu, lovingly known in the family as ‘Tite. Though there is a lot of family lore centered on ‘Tite, Tademy feels little personal connection to this beloved great-grandmother. Instead, it is Philomene, little more than a name written on a two page historical account of the family, who looms large in Tademy’s imagination. In fact, Tademy’s feelings about her ancestor borders on the mystical:

“It defies description in words, this bond I have with Philomene and her ability to reach across four generations to me with such impact. There were demanding days in the beginning when I feared her, a shapeless

apparition, usually in the aftermath of her unrelenting hand at my back and the unnerving certainty of her voice in my ear. But the fear was always tempered with respect” (xv)

Philomene’s presence in her great great-granddaughter’s life is more than a subconscious bond, it is a tactile relationship. Tademiy feels the hand of Philomene pushing her onward in her narrative recovery efforts. She feels Philomene’s insistent voice in her ear urging her not to let this history be forgotten. It is within this passage that I note the performance of the ancestral intermediary and aspects of haunting for the first time. As to the question, “Why *this* grandchild”, the answer is simple: Lalita Tademiy and A’Lelia Bundles respond to prompting and are moved to act immediately.

Haunting, presented theoretically and literally, is added to my growing list of story bearing devices. I consider the ways that black women writers, in particular, utilize ancestral spirits and haunting in their work. Haunting is useful for understanding how the work of these women has been shaped. When describing the moments that unleashed the urgency to retrieve their family narratives, many of the writers reveal an experience with haunting. Several writers, which also include Carla Peterson, who pens Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth Century New York City, describe haunting as the *pull* that directs their thirst to uncover family history. In Black Gotham, for example, Peterson indicates that she is haunted by family silences, which she describes as a gaping expanse of loss that she has the strong compulsion to fill (16-17). Using Avery Gordon’s concept of haunting, this dissertation investigates various “ways of knowing” that enable one to participate in narrative retrieval, both as a performance of compulsion and as a character, a real ancestral spirit. As Gordon explains it:

Ghostly Matters is about haunting, a paradigmatic way in which life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted. Haunting is a

constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production.ⁱⁱⁱ

This way of studying the complexities of social life brings rational conscious memory to the center, history to the here and now, and change from the spaces of invisibility to visibility.

Story bearing is now no coincidence, and Bundles and I both know it as we sit together with these printed words between us. She hands me copies of books by other women writers, some of whom bear their family histories and others who bear the narrative histories of others – not as diligent observers but as (self) adopted kin. She introduces me to Ione’s work, Pride of Family, not realizing how it will function strongly in this dissertation or that I will one day interview Ione. Bundles offers copies of Sheryl Cashin’s The Agitator’s Daughter and Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot’s A Balm in Gilead to borrow and gives me copies of Paula Giddings’ A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching and DoVeanna Fulton’s Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women’s Narratives of Slavery. Gathering several volumes of reading material, I now determine the qualifications of story bearing literature. Story bearing literature involves fiction and non-fiction, includes recovered family history, taps a particular story bearer, is grounded in sites of home place, utilizes artifacts as story telling devices, and is presented to heal familial ruptures and/or usher in lost history. Particularly included are black women writers who recover their own family histories, publish books, and use the narrative to engage social issues or promote black feminist pride. Life histories like Bertice Berry’s The Ties That Bind and Connie Briscoe’s A

Long Way Home are included for bibliographic reference; works like Valerie Boyd's Wrapped in Rainbows and Adele Logan Alexander's Parallel Worlds: The Remarkable Gibbs-Hunts and the Enduring (In)Significance of Melanin are not. Boyd's and Alexander's writing are exceptional but fall outside the parameters for which I am investigating story bearing. While the idea of ancestral "godmothering" and story bearing for the lives of others as alternative kinship is seductive, it is one that I will consider for future work.

Life History Lineages

Black women's life history writing's earliest beginnings began during the 1850s with Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Wilson's Our Nig, and Hannah Craft's The Bondswoman's Narrative, though the latter was rediscovered in the twenty-first century and re-issued in 2003. These founding texts reveal the particularly brutal experiences of enslaved black women and were published with Northern white audiences in mind. To protect themselves and loved ones from retaliation or recapture, several identifying details were left out.

Jacobs' and Wilson's narratives needed the approving stamp of well respected white leaders, like Lydia Maria Child, who edited and wrote a preface for Incidents, signaling its' authenticity. By the time Margaret Walker publishes Jubilee in 1966, black women life history writers did not need outside verification. Jubilee is an extension of a dissertation Walker writes about her great grandmother, Vvry's^{iv}, life during and after the Civil War for the University of Iowa. Story bearing is narrative recovery by a descendent, which excludes Incidents, Our Nig, and The Bondswoman's Narrative, from the tradition. Jubilee involves narrative recovery by a great-granddaughter but lacks the interiority

demonstrated in the works of story bearers presented for this dissertation. However, story bearing builds upon these foundational texts to fully express the trauma, wounds, experiences, actions, and interior feelings and beliefs of black women's everyday lives in history.

Doing Witness

The act of story bearing involves the performative nature of doing that asks how story bearing is activated, how it is being done, and what is done with it. Performance adds an effective component to the story bearing toolkit. Elin Diamond's perception of performativity as a "doing and thing done" and D. Soyini Madison and Dwight Conquergood's beliefs about co-performative witnessing are helpful to this investigation of who story bearers are and what they do. It cannot be proscribed, something discovered in early meetings with Shirlee Haizlip, who disagrees that she, alone, was designated for the role of story bearing. "I don't say that I was touched from above or anything else," she says in our interview, "But I think the opportunity just came to me and I made the decision to use this time to solve the mystery of the family and what had happened to them". Haizlip, who wrote The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White, about racial passing in her mother's family, considers herself a change agent for interracial cooperation. Change agency is a performative element, and one that is embedded in the transformative nature of story bearer. I am able to incorporate what Haizlip does with her narrative to effect change with story bearing performance. Madison best says, "co-performative witnessing mean(s) a shared temporality, bodies on the line, soundscapes of power, dialogic inter-animation, political action, and matters of the heart" ("Co-Performative Witnessing" 827). Haizlip enacts co-performative witness

as she tells her mother's story, which involves racial passing and a later reconciliation of the resulting divisions that result from passing. This revelation is nothing short of matters of the heart and racial bodies on the line. In 1994, a week prior to the release of her family memoir The Sweeter the Juice, African American writer, Shirley Haizlip was a guest on the Oprah Winfrey Show. The episode, "Denying my Race," unveiled the ways some members of Haizlip's bi-racial family sought to pass for white, while others lived successful lives as African Americans. During the publicized reunion, members of both sides of the racial coin (including her aunt, who had spent her entire life passing for white) worked toward coming to terms with their identities. Viewers were also challenged to consider the implications of learning about family members who may have engaged in passing. In telling this story, Haizlip took on the role of the female story bearer, the writer of the family narrative who is positioned two or more generations beyond the story she tells.

A'Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Haizlip, and Ione, and others, have all been afforded the opportunity to labor with their fingers, turning back pages of census records and century-old journals, and utilizing search engines on websites to corroborate the oral narratives handed to them as children and young adults. The cost of the labor is time, whether spent on the road interviewing elderly aunts and cousins, in libraries and archival institutions, or sifting through downloaded material and passed down heirlooms held in boxes and on bookshelves. The fruit of their labor is the book each produced: On Her Own Ground, The Sweeter the Juice, and Pride of Family: Four Generations of American Women, respectively. Each title signals familial pasts that intersect with complex issues of gender and the division of labor, race and racial passing, class structures and privilege. These

are black women with the skill set necessary to fulfill the story bearing role, which includes having the time, financial means, access, research experience, and professionalism to retrieve and publish their narrative histories. In choosing to bear their foremother's stories these writers inherit and testify to pasts that continue to inform and influence the contemporary world.

Privilege is explored in "Tell Me My Diamonds" in two ways: 1) the writer's upper/middle class status that affords her the education, skill set, financial means, and connections to produce and publish her family narrative; and, 2) a singled-out position designated by their family as the one chosen to bear the family narrative. At the time of Dessa Rose in the 1840s, literacy is a privilege; however, today it is a fundamental right. How is privilege teased out in new ways in terms of black women who produce life history in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries? This type of privilege is a position that centers on access – to higher education, to financial solvency, to publishing houses and media outlets, to the "leisure time" to research and write. Privilege in this context is less about the acquisition of things, which contemporary black woman is well documented as possessing, and more about transforming intellectual thought. A'Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip and Ione are all former journalists and media specialists; Carla Peterson and Danzy Senna are academics, and Lalita Tademy is a former corporate executive. As life history writer they are public intellectuals and public historians. It takes privilege to insert counter-narratives into historical canons and legal record. For story bearing, privilege is about what story bearers do with their completed narratives. Using the life histories of the writers cited above, I seek to better understand the ways in which women writers are pressed into public service by using their privilege to present

American history through other lenses, generate discussion of touchy subjects, and explore options for change. A'Lelia Bundles is adamant on this approach, insisting during an interview:

“As a person who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s at a time when history and women and history of people of color was unimportant in the academy and in public schools, I knew that American history needed to be fleshed out. And, I always saw this story as very much an American story and it was a piece of the puzzle that was missing. I wanted to tell American history through the lens of these women, of the women in my family.”

Doing so fosters more generative understandings of life histories and the ways in which they are situated as sites for social change. This can include, as it does Bundles, philanthropic service, more rigorous dialogue on social issues, renewed genealogical interest, inclusive public memorial development, and the like. Story bearing begins in performance to initiate the act of bearing history, and it also ends in performance through life history production and resulting projects. Story bearing is not initiated to be self-serving; the presence of the ancestral figure who urges the story bearer not to forget determines that. Because the definition for story bearing includes the expectation that something be done from the narrative recovery, some form of social action is a natural response. What it requires is for the story bearer to mediate between the recovered narrative and their sensed response to the issues that arise from it.

When And Where I Enter

My place has always been in the middle: in the middle of the table, the middle of the story ... the middle child. That place, usually in the bumpiest seat, has afforded me the opportunity to hear from multiple sides. There is the story told directly, the one meant to be heard, and then there is the one that is in the syncopated echo ... murmured under the breath and in response to the official story. My place in the middle means I

always have to make room and am always in negotiation of what I hear or overhear. Those who press against my sides implore me to understand their view against the “other.” For years I believed I was medium – medium sized and average in every way. I also believed I was a medium – discerning, at times prophetic, and always straining to hear past silences, past mouthed words. This is the position of the story bearer, whether in the midst of letters or literature, photographs or periodicals, favored bric-a-brac or heirloom pieces.

I am a story bearer. Because of this ambiguous position, my sister’s revelations during her late night call excited me rather than disturbed. The call woke me up from a troubled, dissatisfied sleep. “I want to tell you about Mom,” my sister, Angie, began. I brace myself as she continues. “She had been feeling heavy, watching old home movies and missing Grandmama. She felt someone grab her by the arms. It was Granddaddy and he said, ‘Don’t forget about me’.” “That’s it!” I proclaim, excited. “That’s my work!” Recovering the forgotten is “my work”. Life history that recovers lost or silenced family narrative is “my work”. That work re-members; it reinstitutes and reconstructs memory and brings about counter-narratives. Those counter-narratives, often found in oral history, is what radio host Paul Harvey called “the rest of the story” known outside legal record. So, when I hear “don’t forget about me” in relation to my own family and in context with the life history writers I study, I connect with it immediately.

To fulfill my study of story bearing in the lives and written work of black women life history writers it is necessary to understand the roles of the story bearer and story carrier, and the influence of the ancestral intermediary. Each of these roles is part of a story bearing tradition, a concept I understand to function in the incomplete places in life

history - within ruptures of the unsaid, undone, or incorrect narrative. It is equally necessary to recognize those roles in action within my own family. My mother is disturbed the moment her deceased father grabs her attention and commands, “Don’t forget about me.” This type of “grabbing” propels the story bearer into action and often ignites the start of her narrative recovery efforts. She collects memory, tediously hears into the unsaid, researches unverified lore, establishes an accurate narrative, and produces text. The tableau between my mother and grandfather demonstrates how story bearing begins at the point of “don’t forget about me”. The words are not a request, but an urgent, purpose filled demand. My mother anxiously tells my sister, who tells me about this incident, and I write it down. The story carrier – who I believe my mother to be – shares the urgency to tell history. She works collaboratively with the story bearer and is fully invested in the final product. My mother’s experience here causes me to reconsider the fluidity of these story bearing roles. I am the story bearer who collects stories, remembers them, records and makes projects of them. My mother is a conductor through which many of our oral histories flow. As she recollects, her eyes dart upward in search of elusive memories then pierce the eyes of her audience, much like our grandmother and great-aunts, daring them not to listen or hear. The impartation of our roles is different, but the result is the same. Though mom is a story carrier, she has her own story bearing to do. My mother and her father had a complex, sometimes strained relationship. In his last days, due to complications of diabetes and cancer, Mom visits him at the hospital. They share an unusually good moment and enjoy one another’s company. After he dies the next morning, she hears repeatedly how her father “waited” for her last visit.

However, his “grabbing” onto her in death suggests that something in their relationship is left incomplete.

I am left to fill in the gaps. It is not the first time. As a child I sat quietly, forgotten by the grown ups who gathered in my grandmother’s kitchen. I learned early that this is where narratives are born. Unobtrusively, I listened and recorded narratives to memory ... about how Granddaddy Zebedee carved furniture by hand, how his sister “Cindella” owned a dry cleaning shop and was a skilled seamstress, and how Cousin “Jo Hattie” wrote and produced plays for neighborhood children on the Pike. These are ordinary stories of small town life in Danville, Kentucky. They are simple stories of black folk who work with their hands. When it became uniformly accepted that this is my role, to listen, my grandmother, great-aunts, and their older cousin convened with me in the living room for a formal story telling. There I learned that my great grandmother was a softball pitcher for a neighborhood team, that several babies are buried under a flowering bush in a great-aunt’s front yard, and that someone’s daughter – no one knows who – was bartered away for a pint of whiskey. I discovered how our black Cowan family became McCowans to differentiate between us and the white Cowan family living in a nearby section of town. This is a portion of my maternal lineage. My paternal history includes much talked about stories about my great uncle, the Tuskegee Airman, and unverified accounts of three great great-aunts who passed for white. All of these disparate narratives converge in me until I am free to verify and write them.

Chapter Review

With a clear outline of story bearing, and my relation to it, the following chapters explore how it operates in the narrative recovery work of story bearers, in their life

history narratives, and in material culture. It concludes with musings of possible new directions for story bearing in light of the development of digital humanities. Chapter Two, “Narrative Lineages in African American Women’s Life History”, follows three writers, A’Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione. I begin by mapping a narrative lineage for black women’s life history writing, referencing Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, Hannah Crafts, and Margaret Walker. I discuss how story bearing diverges from the foundational texts produced by these early writers. Using ethnographic practices, I interview Bundles, Haizlip, and Ione in her home or office specifically concerning her identity and experience as story bearer. Each reveals her own way of viewing her role, naming herself a mantle keeper, change agent, and lineage holder, respectively. I consider the ways in which each writer’s view intersect or diverge from my beliefs about story bearing. As research assistant to A’Lelia Bundles, I observe more of her day to day practices and gain awareness of her research, archival process and organization, writing practices, and the ways in which she immerses herself in and utilizes material artifacts as her guide. Bundles imprint is revealed throughout the course of the dissertation rather than in a single chapter. Excerpts of transcripts from my conversation with each writer are heavily used here.

Chapter Three, “Beloved Haunting in Carla Peterson’s Black Gotham and Lalita Tademy’s Red River and Cane River” illustrates of story bearing at work in life history. Narrative lineages leave room for intertextual dialogue among multi-generational writers within the literature produced. The detail and interiority that Jacobs is forced to omit about her experiences as an enslaved woman, for example, is fully revealed in Toni Morrison’s Beloved though it is a fictional work. So much revelation and emotion is

unleashed through the character, Beloved, and her mother, Sethe, that the experience of haunting overwhelms. The strong influence of the ancestral intermediary and her ghostly interactions here leaves its traces in Carla Peterson's and Lalita Tademy's beginnings with narrative recovery and their texts. The fact that Peterson names Morrison's character, Denver, as her muse during her archival searches that result in Black Gotham, a family memoir, demonstrates the impact of intertextual exchange. Haunting is emphasized in this textual analysis, as is the duality of remembering and forgetting (narrative history). Black Gotham and Red River, in particular, are counter-narratives to existing historical record; they add to current knowledge of black life in New York City and Colfax, Louisiana in the nineteenth century. But, those counter-narratives are haunted into existence, the stories having been lost or silenced through generations – until Peterson and Tademy are compelled to recover them.

Chapter Four, "Heir/Looms and Landscapes" considers issues concerning inheritance. What is an heir? How does the heir function in light of her inheritance? What does she do with it? To fully answer these questions, a closer look at the inherited object – the artifact, the land, the trait – needs to occur. How do these make meaning for heirs? Is there a pre-fixed expectation to hold onto or let go of these things. For all of the story bearers studied – A'Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Ione, Carla Peterson, and Lalita Tademy – home space and material artifacts are significant to their story telling. They aid in the process of narrative recovery. In this chapter, I closely examine the artifacts and home sites that make meaning for A'Lelia Bundles and Ione, in particular, and how they use their inheritances to shape their life histories. I also include bell hooks ideas around home place and pair her experience with Danzy Senna to

illustrate the discord and disturbance that life history work can uncover. Home space can be a fault line that makes narrative recovery difficult. I also look at two films, “Down in the Delta” and “Eve’s Bayou” to illustrate how black women use inheritance and material culture in various aspects of narrative making. These places, spaces, and things do not always represent a welcome nostalgia.

Chapter Five, “Digital Story Bearing”, investigates how story bearers utilize digital archives, websites, and blogs in their narrative production. Their efforts are a part of the digital humanities, a relatively new academic terrain. Once narratives are recovered and life histories are produced, how do story bearers get history into the hands of new generations? Nineteenth and twentieth century culture can be introduced to millennials and others to come by utilizing twenty-first century technology. Story bearing must continually transform; as it is always tapping new generations to retrieve historical pasts. However, those pasts should not be held tightly as anachronisms. This chapter considers the new developments that story bearers like A’Lelia Bundles, Ione, and Carla Peterson employ to reach new viewers and readerships. It considers the disconnections as well as the advantages of using technology to tell, store, or demonstrate stories.

Bearing memory is a responsibility that is at times cumbersome. “Tell Me My Diamonds” is a treatise of that responsibility and offers for future story bearers a “job description”, “business strategy”, and “mission statement”. The dissertation catalogues the tradition of life history writing that black women have engaged in since the 1861, when Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is produced by Harriet Jacobs. At the time, Jacobs needed her life experiences – even her writing – to be verified by respected white leadership. Lydia Maria Child fulfilled the role of authenticator for Jacobs’ story. Story

bearing offers a different trajectory – the idea that black women can not only own their life histories, but can select a story bearer to preserve and authenticate that history. It provides the opportunity for black women, unlike their forebears, to proscribe memory for themselves.

As living archives, story bearers are mantle keepers with life histories that are voiced and offer platforms for deeply entrenched familial wounds and silences to be heard. Here, A'Lelia Bundles addresses sexism in the midst of racial uplift efforts and her ancestor, Madame C.J. Walker's efforts to bring philanthropic support to black communities. In response to the sexism, Madame emphasizes her business enterprise *on her own ground*, which becomes a mandate for the way her great great-granddaughter encourages young girls and women today. Shirlee Taylor Haizlip brings the taboo topic of racial passing to the Oprah Winfrey stage, stimulating an avalanche of questions and interest by white viewers to consider to racial makeup of their history. Both Bundles and Haizlip use their story bearing to initiate a national conversation about race, sexism, and classism. However, all of the story bearers featured in "Tell Me My Diamonds" do just that; they cull priceless value from difficult pasts and offer their readers the privilege of sharing in narrative inheritance. In the next chapter, I locate these writers within a narrative lineage of story bearing.

CHAPTER TWO LINEAGE: STORY BEARERS & NARRATIVE HISTORY

My grandmothers are full of memories.
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
They have many clean words to say.
My grandmothers were strong.

from "Lineage", For My People, by Margaret Walker

"I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but
what I do know is that it is in your hands"

from, "Nobel Prize Lecture", by Toni Morrison

Margaret Walker invokes the image of grandmothers who are steeped in memories, and who share them with their grandchildren in bits of oral history while going about their work. This image is appropriate, as Walker made narrative and lineage her life's work through poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. In fact, she turns the life history of her maternal great-grandmother, Margaret Duggans Ware Brown, from an oral narrative, into a dissertation manuscript for the University of Iowa, and finally into Jubilee, an award winning work of historical fiction in 1966. Walker renames her protagonist "Vyry" after her grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier, Margaret Brown's daughter who shares the oral history. Jubilee provides an account of Brown's experiences during enslavement and through the Civil War and Reconstruction years. The narrative presents a black woman's point of view on historical events during pivotal moments of American history. She spends thirty years recovering, writing, and finally publishing Vyry's story. She also writes the poetry collection, "For My People" that demonstrates reverence for both the struggle and achievements of ancestors. In the brief lines of her poem, "Lineage", Walker takes note of everyday life, like the funk and filth of toil that women like Vyry endure, and makes observation about the fresh perspective their narratives bring to all of us.

“Lineage” ends with the rhetorical question, “Why am I not as they?” in reference to these long ago grandmothers. Story bearers wonder about such things; they question how their ancestors responded to historic moments in time. They wonder about their own responses to current events. Often, they sift through archival material and the oral memories of older relatives to get a better sense of identity in relation to their ancestral root. It offers them a blueprint to present to future generations; one more clearly narrated than the one they were given. Walker is a pioneer of sorts as a granddaughter who recovers and writes her grandmother’s life history. She is a literary forbear of A’Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione, who are central to this chapter on maternal narrative lineages. Granddaughters like these seek to understand cultural events in history – a black history, black woman’s history, and maternal history – in order to better understand present day issues and events. While Walker is a pioneer in this way, she is not the first to approach life history through a black female lens. Harriet E. Wilson’s Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black (1859), Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), Hannah Crafts’ The Bondwoman’s Narrative (thought to be written between 1853-1861 and rediscovered and published by Henry Louis Gates in 2002) each pre-date Jubilee by more than a century. However, Our Nig, Incidents, and Bondwoman are all what Angelyn Mitchell calls emancipatory narratives on slavery written by women who experienced enslavement. Jubilee is a narrative on enslavement written generations later by a great-granddaughter.

This chapter examines granddaughters, story bearers who mine for family history and who are compelled to carry on as mantle keepers of that history. Through oral interview and observation, A’Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione reveal their

process for narrative recovery, the significance of that recovery, and the resulting projects and missions that stemmed from their efforts. Why granddaughters? Why does a gap in time exist between the story and its' story bearer? Can it be as simple as having enough generational distance to bear down on the subject? The reasons can be far more practical. The women in A'Lelia Bundles family all worked for the family business, and she is the first among them to embrace a different career path as a journalist. Shirlee Haizlip and her siblings lived with the palpable wound their mother always seemed to carry concerning the loss of her own family. Haizlip, who promises as a child to find her mother's family, becomes a media specialist with the time to conduct genealogy work. Ione is the third generation of women in her family with absent mothers and who are raised by their grandmothers or great-aunts. She becomes a free-lance journalist with the idea to write about her maternal history, not realizing how far it will lead. None of them, in fact, begin their journeys to narrative recovery realizing the wider platform that will develop. Story bearing achieves something more holistic than direct genealogical research. It does something greater than storytelling. It sinks itself into the ruptures of relationships and dismantles decades – even centuries - of silences that have been erected. Story bearers recover trauma and allow others to learn from it and heal. The efforts reconfigure lineage, and I argue that the story bearing work of Bundles, Haizlip, and Ione establishes another vein of narrative lineage, not separate from their literary root but in addition to it.

Context is significant to the kind of narrative these story bearers produce.

Bundles, Haizlip, and Ione recognize the significance of cultural context and the layers of sexism and racism that are brought to their individual projects. As they write about their

ancestral muses, Sarah Breedlove Walker, Margaret Taylor, and Frances Rollin Whipper, they address topics of abolition, Reconstruction after the Civil War, black migration to the North and West, and segregation. They also write about black business entrepreneurship, philanthropy, writing and literacy, black wealth, black cultural leadership and artists. Each writer desires to fill the silences within their specific family histories to better understand the greater historical resonances that surround it. Story bearing is the groundwork that utilizes oral interviews, archival research, and ethnographic observation that provides the necessary context and adds a particular nuance to the life history. It brings about an alternate point of view and perspective that result in counter-narrative. Without that type of groundwork – without seeing it represented in an alternative context – it is difficult to get a full representation of American history.

What Jubilee does, just as Bundles' On Her Own Ground, Haizlip's The Sweeter the Juice, and Ione's Pride of Family do, is contextualize the social, political, and emotional issues felt and experienced by maternal ancestors who lived two or more generations prior to their story bearers. Their work continues along a timeline of black women who write life history. That timeline produces a lineage in which I also follow. There are many pathways to this narrative lineage, whether it is developing a compilation of writings by black women, or assembling these writings by genre, or sorting them thematically by moments in time, i.e., writings of the Nadir, Harlem Renaissance, or Black Arts Movement periods. The narrative lineage that I trace for this dissertation is a lineage of life history writing that is specific to black women. Not only are these works conversant with one another intertextually, they are conversant with an American history

that has excluded their input. A'Lelia Bundles, great great-granddaughter of Madam C.J. Walker, the first black millionaire in the United States, is fully aware of the way her ancestor's narrative engages history. As a former television journalist and producer for CBS, she doggedly researches her subject to tell both a factual and engaging history.

Asked why this is so important to her, she shares in an interview:

”As a person who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s at a time when history of women and history of people of color was unimportant in the academy and in public schools, I knew that American history needed to be fleshed out. And, I always saw this story as very much American history, and it was a piece of the puzzle that was missing. I knew that with Madam Walker's life I would tell American history from right before the Civil War through the WWI – a really important time period for America and for African Americans. I knew that A'Lelia Walker represented the Harlem Renaissance and the Harlem history before the 1920s, and that I could use her as a way to talk about the Harlem Renaissance and society, and class and gender. But I'm also informed by my grandfather's mother, who went to Oberlin in the 1880s, and I sort of had this context.... So, I know that in my family I have all the seeds of the great moments in American history. And it's just that I'm able to use the women to tell the story.”

Bundles comments provide an example for what narrative lineage does: it places ancestors as central figures to specific historical events and periods, and as a result it fleshes out history to future generations who now view it as *family* history. From the perspective of the familial witness, granddaughters and grandsons now have a relationship with history and how historical events shaped and impacted their families, even themselves. The use of familial figures to tell an American story is an effective tool, evidenced by the current and ongoing series, “Finding Your Roots”, hosted by Henry Louis Gates on public broadcasting stations.

To establish a story bearing lineage, I explore the lives of A'Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione. Each writer is interviewed in her home or office to

discover who she is as a story bearer, or however she views herself while keeping watch over her family's narrative history. I enter each interview wondering, who is this woman who is called to this work? Are there commonalities? Is the concept that I call story bearing valid – it is comprised of what I see in their work but is it reflective of how they see themselves? Perhaps because I consider myself a story bearer I am seeking my own lineage. I am attempting to locate myself within a literary tradition that expresses a call and responsibility to ancestral memory. I am a medium struggling to construct a beginning, an entry point for story bearing. Therefore, this chapter is also an autoethnographic enterprise.

Ancestral memories are formed close to the ground. The scent of soap and onions and wet clay clings close to the body and brings about the feeling of earthy authenticity. These grandmothers that Walker describes offer memories in their rawest sense, not dressed up or perfumed to be more palatable to audiences. That rawness is genuine. It is *clean*. There is something peculiar going on in this word work. It describes the process about making dirty work clean. The writing is redemptive. Those memories – their words – have nothing to do with grammatical correctness. Their main thrust is to be heard, not critiqued. In order to hear, the hearer must be present and working alongside them. It takes work to prepare a lineage, or to share or build upon it. It takes oral repetition and literary handiwork. The story bearer must respect what is offered to her. She must hone the skills necessary to handle that has been placed into her hands as heritage. It is the story bearer – granddaughters – who must stand under literary scrutiny. These granddaughters develop a different kind of strength through the handling of memory. They form muscle through the practice of researching, writing, revising, and

marketing the original memory. It presents a different form of clean wording. They must interpret the memory into engaging and marketable print, and present themselves as polished and poised before a critical public.

When Toni Morrison delivers her 1993 Nobel Prize Lecture she begins at “once upon a time” and casts an old woman, blind and wise, who is challenged by two youth who ask her to tell them about what is in their hands. In Morrison’s interpretation, what the youth hold is language, which I believe to be narrative. Language, like narrative, has power if presented effectively. There is a stand-off because the woman informs them that they are responsible for whatever they hold. “It is in your hands,” she says. What this passage suggests is that the story bearer is accountable for their narrative history. It is the story bearer’s responsibility to craft it and utilize it with deliberation and care. The younger two are incensed. There is nothing in their hands. There is no narrative because it has not been given to them. “Tell us,” they insist. Morrison’s sketch complicates. It could be that the old woman, and others like her, keep their silence, and with it their life history. However, the absence of a shared narrative causes feelings of pain and loss that lasts for generations. Elders have a responsibility for what lands in the hands of future generations. They too are culpable if history gets mishandled, which is why the ancestral intermediary is necessary. The ancestor, story carrier, and story bearer all work together to successfully recover narrative history. It is important to note the interchangeability of the roles. The old woman is an ancestor for the youth who have come for the narrative. She can be there resident story bearer who holds all of the cultural information or she can be a story carrier who possesses a portion of what is needed for the life history project. Story carriers provide elements of oral history or narrative documentation. They often

share and pass down cultural artifacts that help to reveal history. While story carriers are in a supportive role, as is possibly demonstrated here, story bearers can eventually become story carriers who help advance the narrative for future generations. Morrison affirms this as the old woman finally declares, "How lovely it is, this thing we have done - together." Her comment is preceded by a confirmation of trust. The story bearing processes begins with trust among collaborators; and it also exists as a trust for future generations to build upon.

Story Bearers: An Introduction

"A'Lelia is an unusual name. Are you any relation to A'Lelia Walker and Madam C.J. Walker?" Phyllis Garland asks her graduate student during a meeting about a master's thesis.

This line of questioning prompts A'Lelia Bundles toward the research that sustains her for over thirty years. Though she is nudged reluctantly into family history, Bundles eventually becomes the primary researcher, archivist, and biographer for her maternal ancestors.

As a teenager in the 1960s, Bundles has ambivalent feelings toward her ancestor, Madam C.J. Walker, nee Sarah Breedlove Walker. At the height of the black power movement, Bundles grows an afro and plays down her relationship to her great great-grandmother, the first black millionaire in the United States who earns wealth through her development of hair growing products. She also owns a product distribution factory, a beauty school, and trains countless black women to operate independent hair salons. Madam Walker is respected as a businesswoman, quite a feat for a black woman just shy of the twentieth century. However, by the 1960s any relation to a woman rumored to

have invented the straightening comb embarrasses Bundles. Those feelings only start to change when Bundles stumbles upon an obituary of Madam Walker written by W.E.B Du Bois while she is an undergraduate at Radcliffe College. The obituary is so laudable that her perceptions of her relative are altered.

During their conversation in the mid 1970s, Bundles is a graduate student in the journalism department at Columbia University in New York where Garland, her advisor, is the only black faculty member. Though she initially balked, Bundles submits as her thesis “Madam C.J. Walker: Black Business Woman, 1867-1919” for a master’s degree in journalism in 1976. She credits Garland with giving her the validation that no one else had to pursue her family history research. In her notes on the thesis, Garland writes:

“If you do not tell (Madam Walker’s) story, nobody else will attempt to do so. Thus you have accepted your responsibility as a black writer to examine the past in light of its present significance and to use this knowledge to define future directions”.

Later, Bundles becomes a research assistant of Alex Haley, who intends to write his own book on Madam C.J. Walker. His book does not come to fruition, but he encourages her to write a junior level book on Walker for youth, Madam C.J. Walker: Entrepreneur. After accumulating interviews of notable blacks who knew both Madame Walker and her daughter, A’Lelia, and several documents and material, Bundles realizes she must tell the story.

Alex Haley mentors Bundles in an organizational system of filing documents that contribute to narrative development. As her research assistant, she trains me in that same system as she goes about writing her latest biography, this time on Madam Walker’s daughter, A’Lelia Walker, who is her namesake. The idea of a lineage history that involves passing down systemic training – from Alex Haley to A’Lelia Bundles to me –

is touching. It involves the willingness to share personal space. I am in her home. My hands dig into crates full of her personal mementos. We share ideas, even for this dissertation. So, we talk about mentorship.

Well, you know, with Alex I felt like (his death) was a real - a great loss because I really valued his opinion and his way of dealing with the world. But I think his death allowed me to see his flaws. And I also realize as time went on ... that he had appeared in my life for a season and a reason - to get me to the point where I could have the confidence I could tell the story. In fact, that is something I wrote for *Black Issues Book Review*. There was ... excuse me, I think it was the 25th anniversary of *Roots* and I did a two part series. One was on just Alex and one was on the Roots phenomenon. And, I think I said something like he was a bridge to get me where I could be the one who wrote the story on my own – that he was very helpful in giving me the confidence and helping me to tell the story better. But I had to ultimately do it on my own.

I don't have don't have other mentors, and I sort of wish that I did. At this stage in life I wish somebody would appear. (laughs)

Shanna: Even right now?

Even right now. You go through different phases in your life. There is always somebody who has experienced what you are experiencing – and some of this is just about aging ... but there is nobody.

Her comments allow me to see lineage as an impartation that leaves room for future growth. Generations, whether in literature or as story bearers, build upon one another. Alex Haley's mentorship meant a great deal to her – even his failures as a mentor. It interests me that a faulty mantle can be the best instructional tool, preparation strategy, and illuminating guide. What is clear in our conversations about our mentors is that personal touch makes all the difference. Personal touch in the way of interest, guidance, instruction, and modeling are invaluable to this aspect of story bearing.

A'Lelia Bundles, who is the namesake of both her great-grandmother, A'Lelia Walker, and her mother, A'Lelia Perry Bundles, is a journalist by training. Her career

spans over thirty years in roles as television producer, deputy bureau chief, and finally director of talent development before stepping down to complete her first book, On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker. Bundles serves on the board of numerous organizations, such as the Madam Walker Theatre Center, presents speeches concerning her family history widely, and spearheaded a postal stamp featuring Walker issued in 1998. Her training as a writer, researcher, and media producer, in addition to her archival collection on the Walker family, has prepared her for her role as narrative mantle keeper. It is important to note that it is not just interest and urgency that equips a story bearer, it is her skill set, training, and experience that fulfills the story bearing role.

Similarly, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip is prepared for the role she takes on in pursuit of her mother's narrative history. Margaret Morris Taylor and a younger brother are abandoned as small children by her father and three of her siblings in the 1930s that pass for white and live their lives as white persons. The abandonment, though she is raised by other "black" members of her family, festers into an emotional wound that last throughout Morris Taylor's adulthood. That wound is so palpable to her children that a twelve-year-old Haizlip offers to one day find her mother's family.

Instead of viewing her decision as a particular calling, Haizlip views herself as a loving daughter who wanted to offer her mother a salve to bring joy in place of the extreme sorrow her mother suffers at the loss of her family. Haizlip, herself, was born into a well-to-do family, the daughter of a Baptist pastor, and raised primarily in Connecticut. Throughout her childhood she notices the stark difference between her father's large extended family that adds color and a rich family narrative and her mother's noticeably absent and un-narrated family history. She notes:

“Well, the wound in the family was the wound that my mother had. When your mother is a wounded individual, some of the seepage of that comes down to the children. We knew that our mother was unhappy because she had no family. And it was such a difference in terms of my Dad’s family which was around and present and wonderful and image making. He came out of a very positive family situation that we all knew and could relate to and had images of.

On the other side there was a vacuum and we didn’t know what that side was like. My mother was a melancholy person because of that. She did not suffer from melancholia or anything like that but there was a sadness about her, especially around holiday times and vacation times. And so all of us – when I say all of us I mean my three sisters and my brother – knew that there was something great missing in her life. And, because she felt that it was missing, we also felt that it was missing. So, all of us felt an absence and we were wounded by that absence that to different degrees.”

Like Bundles, Haizlip attended an Ivy League women’s college, Wellesley College. She also worked in television media, managing news stations and becoming a corporate officer. She ends her career working as National Director of the National Center for Film and Video Preservation at the American Film Institute. Haizlip leaves this position to write her maternal family history, The Sweeter the Juice: A Memoir in Black and White. Her training as a journalist, news producer, and preservation specialist prepared her to retrieve this narrative history. More, she locates her mother’s sister, Grace, and several other white family members and arranges reunions among family members. Haizlip’s story bearing did more than recover narrative, it helped repair a deeply entrenched personal rupture for her mother. It also brought together disparate elements of family and stimulated national cultural and racial discussion on the stuff that constitutes “family”.

For Ione, her every day experiences with family life consists of a family of women: living in part with her grandmother, Virginia “Be Be” Wheeler, her great-Aunt, Ionia “Sistonie” Whipper, and her mother, Leighla Whipper Ford. Her parents divorce

early and she only lives with her mother intermittently. Life with a grandmother, a former vaudeville dancer, who gambles and owns a restaurant called the Spuyten Duyvil, a mother who is a journalist and song writer, and great-aunt who is a medical doctor and strict race woman, is unique. However, Ione is fully aware of the silence that surrounds the women in her family:

“I knew very little about the three women I grew up with, and less about the women who came before them. In our family, the men’s lives were well documented, but the women’s were shrouded in mystery.” (7)

The strongest, most often told narrative centers on the men in the family, her father, Dr. Hylan Garnet Lewis, an sociology professor, her maternal grandfather, Leigh Whipper, an acclaimed early actor, and her maternal great-grandfather, William J. Whipper, a judge and abolitionist. Ione is stunned to learn that her maternal great-grandmother, Frances Rollin Whipper, was a biographer, abolitionist, and race woman in the nineteenth century who published under the name Frank Rollin.

Prior to this discovery of her great-grandmother, Ione already carries a notebook to dictate stories of the lives of her mother and grandmother, who often demur. Ione is also trained as a journalist and freelance writes over the years for several publications, including the Village Voice in New York and Ms Magazine, something she shares with A’Lelia Bundles. A featured monthly column, “Lost Women” allows both Ione and Bundles to publish early articles on their forbears. Ione publishes “Discovering Foremothers” in 1973 and Bundles publishes “Madam C.J. Walker: Cosmetics Tycoon” in 1983. Ione’s early articles on her maternal lineage morphs into an intensive narrative once she discovers Whipper, her muse. She writes into the silences within her maternal history in the same way Haizlip does maternal trauma. The inscription for her narrative,

Pride of Family: Four Generations of Women of Color, reads “For my family – may our past wounds be healed”. Narrative production contributes to healing because it puts into print the things that have been open wounds, left undiscussed and unresolved.

After attending Atlanta University for a few years, Ione spends several years abroad and makes her profession as a journalist, playwright, and most currently a dream specialist conducting retreats on creative processes. Like me, her role in the family is recognized and she is given the personal journals of her mother, her great-aunt Sistonie, and her great-grandmother, who she lovingly calls Frank. Her sensitivity to dreams and the ancestral spirits that are her literary muses and her expertise as a writer prepares her to act as story bearer. She points out that it is her track record as a writer with articles that have made a “splash” is what led to her book deal.

All of them – A’Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione all emphasize the necessity of preparation. Story bearing is a mantle; however, the role is meaningless without the proper work ethic, skill set, and supportive backing. Understanding this helps to imagine a formal lineage of story bearing – not just as a spiritual mantle, but as a scholarly addition to the process of retrieving narrative. It is a way of being, a method. It is a middle methodology.

Narratives & Lineage

Margaret Walker’s “Lineage” presents a simultaneous “doing and thing done”, and provides an allusion to Elin Diamond’s definition of performativity. In the nature of performativity, a current of (inter)action provides energy to all players in life situations. There is a purposeful action and reaction among participants that considers, confronts, and communicates. In narrative performance, Kristen Langellier and Eric Peterson argue

that “performing narrative as a communication practice makes conflict over experience and identity concrete, accessible, and therefore discussable and open to change” (8).

Taking it further, with regard to African American women’s narrative performance, D. Soyini Madison argues that “women, particularly those marginalized by race and social class, create and invent spaces where they depict and interpret their concrete and imagined experiences”. She continues, “In examining these forms and spaces, indigenous thought and practice emanating from these tellers’ language, history, and traditions will build, alter, add to, and adjust dominant analyses” (Madison 176-177).

These ideas blend seamlessly with the idea of story bearing, in which the bearers have the urgency and responsibility to *do something with* the narratives they recover. Some use narrative to heal, others correct misinformation, and still others add a counter narrative alongside currently proscribed historical “fact”. Story bearing enacts this type of performative doing, but it also institutes a way of being.

In Haunting Capital, Hershini Bhana Young explains, “The story is bigger than any one person; it is a force that waits for the (story bearer) and her audience out there in the world” (8). Story bearing is this force that uses the story bearer to fulfill a greater purpose than simple story telling. It takes on a spiritual element. The story bearer is a conduit who embodies ancestral memory and its’ resulting oral history, narrative, and archives. Each story, photograph, letter, memento, or document reveals itself through the story bearer. She interprets for them. The story bearer has multiple functions. At times she represents the cumulative project that results from her narrative history. She speaks on behalf of what she finds for the family at reunion, for researchers at institutes like archives and historical societies, and at churches or for cultural celebrations. The moment

she stands as a story bearer, she embodies history. A poignant moment of this is demonstrated when Shirlee Taylor Haizlip brings her mother, Margaret, and her Aunt Grace, and their families together on the Oprah Winfrey Show. Margaret, a black woman, is reunited with her sister, Grace, who lives as a white woman. Viewers listen as Haizlip explains the racial passing that separated these two sisters and their families, even though all are related by blood. While as story bear Haizlip effectively documents that history in The Sweeter the Juice, the bodies of her mother and aunt – and even her own – narrate an even more powerful history. Viewers begin to imagine their own history in these bodies while hearing this family’s narrative history. This moment is a simultaneous doing and being.

Bhana-Young argues that “stories do not insist that everyone tell them and a great deal of skill is required to hear the story, to see the characters, to tell the tale” (8). Her comments affirm what I believe about story bearing; it is a specific calling and assignment. Everyone cannot tell the story because everyone does not have the capability to hear or visualize it. The story bearer, alone, has the skill set necessary for her role. Story bearing involves more than telling a story; it is a holistic experience that requires seeing into the past and hearing beyond what has been told. Bhana-Young’s perspective also helps to shift focus from what the story bearer is doing with her narrative to what the narrative is doing with its’ story bearer. As a cumulative project involving the ancestral spirit, story carrier, and story bearer, story bearing carries with it the expectation that something of the narrative will impact the world (Langellier and Peterson 245, Madison 472). I learned this is true through my own experience interviewing my great-aunt, Rosetta Faulkner Ford. She had expectations of our interview that she did not reveal until

months later. “What did you do with it?” she demanded, talking about our taped recordings. Her eyes bored into mine sharply, impatient as I explained that it is part of a longer project. Aunt Rose, like my mother, is an invaluable story carrier. She is our family’s matriarch, the only living member of her generation mentally able to recall our history. Her health is poor and she repeats often that she will be dying soon. She sucked her teeth in disgust. This tells me how important my *doing something* with narrative matters to others. There is a certain investment in the *something done* by those who carry portions of narrative. Story carriers, like Aunt Rose feel a sense of pride in their contribution and desire to see results. That desire is expressed accurately in D. Soyini Madison’s ideas on a performance of possibilities. For Madison “in the performance of possibilities, the expectation is for the performers and spectators to appropriate the rhetorical currency they need from the inner space of the performance to the outer domain of the social world in order to make a material difference” (476). There is intention behind the telling of oral history and purpose in the narrative research.

Narrative Fractures & Fissures

There is a sense of urgency within the process of story bearing as the narrative enters new discursive spaces where the ancestor and her story have been excluded. Not everyone is comfortable with new or different aspects of “truth”. This is what makes the role of the story bearer a weighty responsibility. According to Paul John Eakin, “When life writers fail to tell the truth, they do more than violate a literary convention governing nonfiction as a genre, they disobey a moral imperative” (3). Along those lines, Ruth Behar emphasizes the impact of the life-historian as witness, and the risk involved in witnessing. She insists, “Writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance, and willingness

to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does writing invulnerably and distantly” (13). As A’Lelia Bundles discovers early in her research, some of what she finds is disturbing, and if made public, embarrassing. She discusses this with her mother, who is dying of cancer, and reveals the conversation in several of her published articles. “Momma, what should I do about these things that I’m finding?” In a moment of liberation for Bundles, her mother advises her to tell the truth. “It’s all right to tell the truth,” (Jewels 32). Given the permission to present her narrative history in the rawest sense, Bundles sets out to corroborate each detail. For her, truth is more inviting than fiction, and her work ethic contains nothing short of integrity. Acknowledging other written work done about the Walker family, including historical fiction, she reveals in our first interview the importance of telling the truth.

“When you say things as if they are true when they are not, it circumvents understanding who (Madam Walker) truly was.”

Part of Bundles insistence in truth-telling has to do with her journalistic training. But, her relationship to Alex Haley, as his assistant, and the accusations of plagiarism that he suffered also contributes to labeling herself a “maniac for documentation and citation.” Bundles, however, has the permission to reveal disturbing facts in her narrative history. Others do not. Danzy Senna is a writer who has published several noteworthy pieces of fiction, including Caucasia and Symptomatic. Like Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, she reaches into her multi-racial history, and her identity as a bi-racial woman, to develop her plot. Her mother comes from a wealthy, white New England family of politicians and writers. That portion of her history is tangibly noted throughout Boston, Massachusetts, where her Howe relatives have a long and storied presence. Her father’s history is rooted in a poor, black Southern history, one that, for Danzy, is brief and unreliable. When she chooses to

embark on a trip with her father to recover his family history, the narrative retrieval proves to be difficult and complex. Some of her family members are not pleased with her memoir about the experience, Where Did You Sleep Last Night? In an interview with Rebecca Touger, Senna explains:

“I could have made everyone happy if I’d chosen to write only about the distant past—my grandparents’ generation, or even just my father’s childhood or my mother’s childhood—if I’d kept the book rooted in the historical perspective,” adding, “I decided at a certain point in the process that I was willing to take the risk of upsetting some people. I had to risk disapproval. Nobody was going to give me permission to tell this narrative, so I had to give myself permission” (Touger 1)

Story bearing involves accountability to ancestors, story carriers, and to the narrative itself. It is not an easy process. Eakin warns that “life writers are criticized not only for *not* telling the truth – personal and historical – but also for telling too much truth (3). Similarly, Behar notes, “To write vulnerably is to open Pandora’s Box. Who can say what will come flying out?” (19). In this dissertation each story bearer carefully, but determinedly, opens that box lid with the intent of arriving at truth, give voice to silences, and begin the process of healing from trauma.

Sifting through my conversations with A’Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione, my story bearing mentors, I share in what came of their Pandora’s Box experience. In portions of transcribed interview, they help me locate myself within our shared story bearing lineage.

A’Lelia Bundles: Mapping Memory & Mantles

Dear Great-Great-Grandmother Walker,

“As a child, I entertained myself for entire Sunday afternoons exploring your old brown leather trunk, each new compartment more breath-taking than the last. A small lacquered compact of Mme. C.J. Walker’s Egyptian Tan Powder tucked here. A monogrammed hair clip hidden there.

Miniature mummy charms from Cairo here. One drawer overflowed with faded letters and photographs of dignified ebony faces. In another drawer the smell of scented, satin lingerie and musty feather fans sent my imagination spinning. But it was only years later that I began to grasp the legacy those mementos represented ...” (“Radcliffe Quarterly” 11)

An old brown chest beckons a young girl to lift its lid and travel through nearly a century’s worth of mementos lingering inside. Narrative history is stored there waiting to be told; waiting for this girl to grow to become its’ curator. A green Chinese cabinet also lays in wait to draw her eye. Multiple compartments, some hidden, are littered with a Pandora’s Box worth of history. It lulls her into deeper discovery. What would she do with such a history? What should she do with the complexities found in the imperfect lives of her relatives?

Treasure chests in plain view in the family living room, in the foyer of her grandfather’s home, or in forgotten corners of a great-aunt’s basement await her excavation. From curious beginnings, A’Lelia Perry Bundles makes narrative recovery her purpose and story bearing her destiny. She is great-great-granddaughter of Madam C.J. Walker, the first woman millionaire in the United States who created and developed a profitable business from some of the earliest black women’s hair care products. She is the namesake and great-granddaughter of A’Lelia Walker, a flamboyant black socialite during the Harlem Renaissance. Her mother, A’Lelia Perry, also her namesake, and her grandmother, Mae, head the Walker companies left by Madam Walker after her death. But, those facts are the tip of the iceberg for A’Lelia, who navigates the social activism and philanthropy, business acumen and scandal, multiple marriages, divorces, and domestic abuse, and often flawed personal lives of these women. As a child she pulls out

hidden compartments to find curiosities; as an adult she combs forgotten documents to compile a thorough record of an African American lineage.

In her prologue to On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker, I am struck by the ways in which Bundles is touched and commissioned to be keeper of family history. She writes, “The Walker women – Madam, her daughter A’Lelia Walker and my grandmother Mae Walker – were already beckoning me at an early age, sometimes whispering, sometimes clamoring with the message that I must tell their story” (16). A’Lelia Bundles is the story bearer for her family, and as such is a conduit for the ancestral narratives she recovers. Hers is an archival body. She gives voice to her ancestors and their collective life history. Moving through her home and into the upstairs office where she writes is an exercise of time travel. Her great great-grandmother’s green chest sits just off the foyer. Copies of On Her Own Ground, about that ancestor, Madam C.J. Walker, are stacked on the top. A set of keys are also tossed on it. The chest is useable history. Above the couch is a portrait of Madam Walker with several gentlemen, including Booker T. Washington, black leaders of the early twentieth century. Walker’s image is a motif throughout the home. Dolls, figurines, and artwork showcasing black women’s hair in various forms line walls, tables, and book cases. A vision board filled with post cards, photographs, and mementos sits in her home office as she writes the biographies of her maternal ancestors, Madam Walker and daughter, A’Lelia Walker. She lives with the narrative she creates. As a story bearer she is immersed in narrative, and the oral history, archival research, and artifact gathering is a mantle to put on as well as a process to put together.

In taking up the mantle of her family history, A'Lelia Bundles fleshes out the woman called Madam C.J. Walker, an icon in black business history, to reveal Sarah Breedlove Walker, Bundles' great great-grandmother. Life history makes human the "other" that most of us view with skewed vision because of their difference and the exceptionalism of their lives. Imagine telling American history – World War I, Labor Riots of the early 1900s, Stock Market Crash, World War II, or the Cold War – through a black female lens. How would the perspective add to the legally proscribed history?

How did Sarah Breedlove make her way from life as an impoverished single mother in antebellum Mississippi to wealthy business owner in St. Louis, Missouri, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Indianapolis, Indiana? How did she transform her identity from washer woman to hair products distributor? In essence, how did she move from Sarah Breedlove to Madam C.J. Walker? More curiously, how did she do so despite the existence of racism, sexism, White Citizen's Councils, Lynch Laws, and Jim Crowe? The answer is found in a passage of On Her Own Ground, where Walker is described as assertively informing those assembled at Booker T. Washington's 1912 National Negro Business League convention:

"I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. I was promoted from there to the washtub. Then I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there I PROMOTED MYSELF into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations ... I have built my own factory on my own ground" (135)

Media often makes heroes of ordinary people without revealing the process that is so significant to the outcome. By incorporating points in history, Bundles allows her readers to gain an understanding for what it meant for Sarah Breedlove Walker to speak up in this moment, using the language that she did. Without context as to how a back

woman moves from cotton fields to washtubs to kitchens to business entrepreneurship, a mythical narrative develops that is inaccessible to the average woman. Madame Walker positions herself into the foreground rather than in the margins, where the men may have preferred. Bundles often gives dramatic performance to Walker's words while delivering speeches across the country. In this moment, she performs as her great great-grandmother in what Robin Bernstein calls a scripted performance. To Bernstein, this moment "denotes not a rigid dictation of performed action but, rather, a necessary openness to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation" ("Dances With Things" 68). To their audiences, particularly women, both Walker and Bundles embody self-actualization. Bundles' mantle is not to simply pay homage to her ancestor, but to continue her great great-grandmother's platform of leadership, entrepreneurship, philanthropy, and service.

Madam Walker's above quote has particular meaning for Bundles, who often delivers it in her speeches and talks. I observe her delivery during a church service we attended together at the Peoples Congregational Church in Washington, DC. A petite woman, she speaks powerfully and even more so when she utters her great great-grandmother's words. In the time we have spent together, I know that Bundles plans to donate material artifacts to the National Museum for African American History and Culture, her papers to Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library, and her voluminous book collection to a women's prison. After hearing Walker's words so strongly emphasized, and having filed many articles on philanthropy in Bundles archive, I assume this is Madame Walker's influence. Instead, she speaks about her parents, Henry and A'Lelia Perry Bundles, and their devotion to good citizenship:

So while on the one hand when I make speeches and I can say, “Madame Walker was a philanthropist and gave back to her community and all that”, that’s sort of “over there” (implying distance in relational time). With my parents I had real life day to day examples of what that was. And, I don’t think I could learn that from essentially a famous figure that I never knew if I hadn’t gotten it in a way I could touch it and feel it every day.

Where I Enter

Journal Entry, July 3, 2008 – Written on the redline train to Friendship Heights,

Washington,

On the train again to A’Lelia’s. Tuesday we met and talked awhile in her living room about our shared interests, her project, and my beginnings of research. She showed me her office filled with crates of files – her organizing system. There are specific crates with files for minor characters, for chronological years, for various black periodicals, and places of importance. All of these touched the life of A’Lelia Walker, her great grandmother. She has a very organized system. She collects and catalogues anything that speaks of her great grandmother’s life and times. I’ve got a lot to learn of order, of organizing. I like her. I like knowing her. We are both carriers of stories.

Entering the room with a tray topped with a mug of steaming hot tea – usually African Roobios – and a bowl of fruit – almost always grapes - I set to work. Radio turned to NPR and Michele Martin, I sit on the bed and decide which pile or box or crate needs my attention. It is March 4, 2009 and Paula Giddings talks to Michele about Ida B. Wells. It is a well established routine now: heading up the stairs to remove my shoes and put my things away, retracing my steps into the kitchen for hot or iced tea and fruit, and carrying them into the spare bedroom adjacent to A’Lelia’s office to work. Each week I look at the bed, the back end of which is covered with boxes and crates filled with papers. A’Lelia has made a thirty year habit of collecting historical or contemporary material that interests her – articles, magazines, newspaper clips, correspondence, and the like. My job is to make sense of them and determine how she could use them. Then I make piles, verify their categorization with her, prepare files, label them, and put them in the one of

the many other crates or specialty boxes under her organizing system. Often, I read the documents eagerly; other times I jot useful notes and thoughts in my journal.

As I bend to lift from the boxes and create files from the contents, I realize I help make sense of A'Lelia's memories. I help to organize them and categorize them. Her life is a series of squares: drawers from a family chest to pull through, documents detailing genealogies of belonging, transcribed interviews to verify findings, even a journalistic career of discovering news and check-finding for accuracy. Through them she has laid claim to a vast matrilineal story that parallels the major shifts in post-bellum African American history: Reconstruction, the Great Migration and the Exodusters, Harlem Renaissance, Depression, and moments in between when Black Nationalism and social service mushroomed in rural and urban communities. I bend over boxes that contain these histories in letters, genealogical records, articles, notes, advertisements, and especially the early black newspapers, whose columns keep record of a black *herstory*. Such herstories provide nuance to the news, detailing social customs, activity, and decorum, family relationships, accomplishments and admonishments. These items contextualize historical moments. Record of her life and the lives of countless others are mounted in hanging file folders and kept in crates, stored in boxes, and are stacked in piles. They are kept in her spare bedroom, storage facilities, and in her office until they later come alive in her mind and on page. Each piece touching her life and touching the outcome of her life: her writing, her books, her collecting, and her speaking engagements. Precise squares that all connect. Because of my proximity, I am also touched.

In the process of going through a vast assortment of memorabilia, I take note and make piles of:

Articles written by A'Lelia on Madam C.J. Walker. Articles written by others on Madam C.J. Walker. Articles written by A'Lelia on Alex Haley. An Ebony Magazine issue with a photo of A'Lelia in a wagon on Alex Haley's farm. A stack on Indianapolis Magazines kept in chronological order. A higher stack of Ebony Magazines particularly about black women from the 1970s and 1980s kept in chronological order. A thick manuscript for Ms. Magazine along with correspondence and the published copy found in Ms. are bound together. Miscellaneous black history articles. A copy of a reading guide featuring Madam Walker as one of the prompts. Biographical material on Breedlove family members wait to be filed. A Mary Kay national conference brochure. A letter to A'Lelia from a woman who is losing her hair and wanting advice and Madam Walker products. A polite response from A'Lelia to the woman providing websites and downloaded information on black women and hair loss. An article on "the problem of black women" from the 1970s I keep for myself to read and push near my tea cup on a shelf above the bed.

I make neat stacks from the random piles found in a large, unassuming box and organize them wherever there is room on the bed. Then, I reach into the bottom of the box for a report folder: A'Lelia's master's thesis, "Madam C.J. Walker: Black Business Woman, 1867-1919". "Oh, wow!" I exclaim loud enough to pique her interest from the hallway. "What did you find?" she asked, though used to the excitement in my found "treasures". She knows I spend just as much time reading from the endless piles and crates and boxes as forming files and organizing. No longer afraid of being "caught", I read and take notes and request copies of the most provocative tidbits. "Your thesis," I tell her, handing it over and sifting deeper into the box. "Wow!" she says, leafing through the pages and laughing. She pauses a minute by the door before giving a more delighted laugh. "You need to read this," she said, thrusting it back to me. It was not the thesis itself that gave her so much pleasure, but the carefully typed two-page note written to her by her advisor, Phyllis Garland in 1976. Closing the note that admonishes Bundles to carry out her narrative history were the words, "I do hope that you'll carry out this work to its highest level of fruition". Garland's inscription that now resurfaces gives confirmation to the

direction A'Lelia's life has taken. Her words are prophetic, considering that A'Lelia, is still in her twenties at the time when the Black Power Movement had little regard for Madam Walker and her hair straightening products. Those words affirm the decision A'Lelia makes to carry her Walker legacy like a banner.

“Thank you!” A'Lelia calls out happily, walking back to her home office.

I think about the inscriptions I have collected as reminders to stay the course for this dissertation and for future work with oral history. “Stay strong!” most of them read. Stay strong. Susan Taylor, former editor of Essence Magazine, Pearl Cleage, feminist author and playwright, and Dr. Joanne Gabbin, English professor each scrawl these words across pages of books I present to them. These are also writers that I admire, who produce work illuminating black women's narrative and generational responsibility their through articles, novels, and academic articles. Like the youth in Toni Morrison's tale, I come to them with open hands asking them how to be a writer. “Stay strong” seems to be a riddle in place of the answer I seek. What is it about black women writers and endurance, because surely this is what they mean? The process is worth the effort.

Each writer I interview – A'Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione spend decades researching ancestral history and writing their narratives. Twice weekly I sank my hands into the piles of papers Bundles has collected to better inform her writing. Accuracy is key. Getting it right gives personal satisfaction and collegial respect.

Shirlee Taylor Haizlip: Straddling Worlds

Shirlee Taylor Haizlip is a change agent. She identifies with straddling worlds to bring about mutual understanding. She does not identify with being a story bearer.

“I don't say that I was touched from above or anything else. My older sister was a professor at the time. She was still doing full time work as a

college professor and she was a writer and a lecturer. So she was very busy. My younger sister was a principal. My brother had died. So I was the one that had the most time. I think any of them could have done it. But I think the opportunity just came to me and I made the decision to use this time to solve the mystery of the family and what had happened to them.”

In our conversation on how she comes about recovering her maternal history, Haizlip is matter of fact. Her mother’s spirit was wounded due to the loss of close family members and Haizlip wanted to help ease that wound. However, in the course of explaining to me the circumstances around how she came to write, The Sweeter the Juice, she reveals something interesting:

I made a promise to (my mother) when I was twelve that someday I would find her family. And, so I decided that had the time ... I had a little bit of money and I was going to see if I could complete it. There were tools available to me now.

Story bearers not only act upon the urgency to recover narratives and insert voices into the silent spaces in their family histories, they are filled with a sense of accountability to their ancestors and to their work. For Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, her initial goal was to present a gift to her mother who had never known the whereabouts of most of her immediate family who had passed for white in the 1920s. Blacks who were fair-skinned, with Caucasian features, sometimes chose to pass for white in order to secure better jobs and a way of life. There were some who straddled both worlds, who worked “white” and lived “black”. Haizlip’s relatives – a grandfather, several uncles, and one aunt – completely absorbed themselves into a white identity, leaving Margaret Taylor and her brother Michael behind. Michael dies young, and Margaret, raised by black relatives is severely wounded by the loss of her family. Haizlip is determined to recover a history for her mother, one that will fill in the gaps and ease some of the trauma.

What was it about her twelve year old self that is determined to embark on narrative recovery? What is it in Haizlip that not only remembers the vow but utilizes her training in order to complete the task successfully so many years later? Change agency.

We sit together in her office at the Ebell Building on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, California. She is president, at the time, of the Ebell Club, a prestigious women's service organization founded in 1873. Until 1993, the Ebell Club is made up of white women, only. Shirlee Taylor Haizlip integrates it and becomes president. It is here that she understands her role as a change agent. Outside her office is a large framed poster of Josephine Baker, which Haizlip notes with pride that she installed there. I study it as I wait for her, before she greets me with a hug and ushers me inside her sanctum. Now we sit as she serves me lunch – salmon and rice – in a silver covered dish. We chat, and when we formally begin our interview I start with her views on being a change agent.

Shanna: So, you were just saying something about change agents. And, it just seems to me that you are the change agent here.

Shirlee Haizlip: I think I am. I hadn't intended to be. I didn't know that change was needed or should it come. But, I think it is very true. I am a change agent here at the Ebell Building. It was founded by a group of non diverse, white fairly well to do ladies. And it has become a club of middle and upper middle class people of about every race. That has only happened since 1994. It happened very easily and very happily. And nobody left. So, people enjoy each other's company. People are making new and different friends from what they've had before. And that is a tremendous pleasure for me because I have always seen myself as a person who has tried to people together.

Shanna: Is that how you see yourself in your family as well as with organizations?

Shirlee Haizlip: Yes. It wasn't perhaps as grand a notion as that. I simply wanted to bring my mother together with her sister and then find out and meet, hopefully, the family that has been missing for so long. I knew that was what I wanted to do But in doing it I did not consciously think of myself as a change agent; I simply saw myself as a loving daughter who

wanted to heal a really bad wound in the family. And, to bring some happiness and closure to my mother in terms of her lost family and regaining that family.

What began as a gift for her mother ended as a public memorial which represents not only her maternal history, but an American history of families fractured by various aspects of “passing”. It enables individuals choose to assimilate completely into other racial, ethnic, or religious groups. The implications of passing are complex: white, Anglo-Saxon identities have been viewed as more acceptable at points in American history. Individuals who chose to pass for white did so to advance socially and economically, often leaving family members and cultural identities behind for good. Issues of abandonment and rejection linger in the hearts of those left behind, and fear of the discovery looms in the minds of those who walk away.

Members of Haizlip’s family, white and black, came together in a 1994 segment of the Oprah Winfrey Show a week after her book, The Sweeter the Juice, was released for publication. The episode, “Denying my Race”, brings two sisters, Grace, who passes for white, and Margaret, who identifies as black, and their families together to discuss choices of race and the impact of division that racial passing has had on the family. Haizlip’s mother, Margaret, is abandoned by her father, brothers, and sister as a result of their decision to pass for white. This abandonment results in the deep wound Margaret has throughout her life. “When your mother is a wounded individual, some of the seepage of that comes down to the children,” Haizlip explains. The palpable pain that Margaret Taylor expresses during holidays leads the twelve year old Shirlee to determine that she would find her mother’s family for her. She recalls:

I was twelve when I found out why the family had separated. I think that also motivated me to study sociology. I wanted to see what was it in America that would cause a family to separate this way. By the time I was

twelve I was in the eighth grade and she felt I was old enough to understand the concept of passing. And, I couldn't – it didn't compute for me. It was just that when a child is twelve they have a great sense of justice and injustice. They want everything to be right. Easing her mother's wounds through family narrative and a possible reunion becomes the mission she wants to achieve; however, the release of The Sweeter the Juice and appearance on a nationally syndicated talk show – particularly the Oprah Winfrey Show – becomes a lightning rod moment. Much like Alex Haley's Roots, The Sweeter the Juice ignites interest in genealogical roots, but more, it leads to deeper questioning about cultural and ethnic identities within families. It forces conversations about relationships between black and white members of a common ancestral vine.

Haizlip establishes a narrative lineage, like the other story bearers, but hers is narrative of passing. It is narrative that is inclusive of other races, ethnicities, and faith walks. As a change agent, she transforms a conversation that is normally limited to black audiences to a national one. Though it is not initially why she begins her project, Haizlip is fully aware of powerful this type of racial conversation is – one that blurs the lines of who is considered “family” and what is considered “lineage”.

Anecdotes of her white relative's reactions to their relationship were both amusing and introspective:

I had some cousins in Minnesota ... I call them my new cousins now. And, there were seven year old twins, boys blonde with blue eyes. They watched the (Oprah Show) and their mother told them we were their relatives. And, the next day they went to school and were doing “Show and Tell”. Both of them raised their hands. They said, “Guess what? We're black!” They were in a small town – Ridley, Minnesota – where there are very few black people. So, it was quite a revelation for the class. But they took it in ... they were just thrilled. Given the times it would be more likely to have a better ending than it would have forty, thirty, twenty years ago.

One (relative) told me that after she heard from me and I told her why there had been a family separation and that our common ancestor had been

a black slave, she said after she hung up the phone she went and looked in the mirror. Someone said, “Child, what did you expect to see?” She said, “I don’t know. I’m just looking at myself closely”.

The closer look into family identity involves a close investigation of sensitive points in American History. There are economic advantages to being white in America. Blending into the American fabric and living the fabled American dream often meant that all who were able altered their names, shifted customs, and hid their true identities. This impacted immigrants, but also bi-racial and multi-racial citizens.

The story of Haizlip’s family is compelling, and the star of it is her mother, Margaret, who carries the pain of her father and siblings decision to pass for white. She carries the wound of abandonment, yet survives and rises above it. At one point, Haizlip muses how her mother’s lifestyle was outwardly more financially secure and successful than her family members who lived a white working class life. There is a belief that hurting people hurt other people. The role that Margaret chooses to play after the release of The Sweeter the Juice demonstrates that hurting people can also heal. Haizlip reveals that prior to a book signing that she and her mother attend a young woman is crouched at the door, waiting. The moment she sees Margaret, she bursts into tears. As Margaret comforts the young woman she reveals:

“I know exactly how you feel. I am Jewish; I tried to pass for non-Jewish. And I grew up here in Orange County and they weren’t very nice to me as a girl. So I straightened my hair and I changed my name and I abandoned my family”. She said, “I did what your sister did. When I read your book ... I finally came back home. When I read your story, it just touched me and I had to come and meet you”.

Margaret came to represent something more than a “tragic mulatto” figure or abandoned child. Her life became a sign for re-membering family. Shirlee is the one who retrieves the family narrative and ushers it into public discourse; however, Margaret is

representative of the tears within the family. Ruptures pull apart, and also leave splintered fragments scattered around. Fingers running across sites of rupture, even unknowingly, are caught with a splinter that re-wounds. That splinter is an offshoot of the original wound. If like broken glass there are multiple shards that remain to potential cause harm, someone comes to sweep the pieces. Shirlee sweeps the pieces together; her mother re-members them. The young woman identifies with Margaret and makes steps to repair the ruptures she has caused. She recognizes her part in the rupture and attempts to heal her family's wounds, and her own. Margaret's story provides her a starting point for healing *and* an entry way to discuss and deal with past bigotry.

The 1990s are presented several opportunities for raw discussions of race, racial difference, and how American's have handled it poorly throughout history. The Oprah Winfrey Show, where Haizlip is an invited guest in 1994 is one platform; President Bill Clinton's dialogues during his 1997-1998 President's Initiative on Race are another. The strong reaction that white viewers of the Oprah Show had causes Haizlip to wryly consider herself a race detective. White audiences, especially, send her clips of hair and photographs to enlist her help in identifying suspected black racial bloodlines. However, she attributes this way of being directly to how her parents lived their lives and modeled what she calls "parallel living" for her and her siblings.

My parents lived two lives ... they had a black life and they had an integrated life. We had white friends. We belonged to black clubs. And we belonged to clubs that were black and white. And, so I saw that from the time I was a little girl. Very little. So we maneuvered very well in both worlds. I was very comfortable. I didn't know that wasn't the way most people lived until I got to high school. I assumed everybody had two groups of friends, a mix of friends. It wasn't true. I knew that wasn't true in the South certainly, but not beyond the South. But, that's the way Harold and I lived our lives, as well. We consciously did that because there was no reason to turn off or turn away from white friends that we'd

had once we got out of college, just because they were white. We always had a parallel track.

Filmmakers interested in Haizlip's family narrative are turned down. "They wanted to dispense with the history and just start with the search. They didn't see the necessary aspects of laying the groundwork as to why the search was necessary", she tells me. Having ownership over one's own family narrative is significant to Haizlip and each of the other story bearers presented here. Each has a particular vision of the outcome stemming from the life histories they present, even the unexpected outcomes. In addition to exploring the blurring lines of race, Haizlip adamantly addresses class, particularly in terms of a black upper class identity. This is why it is so important to her that film makers meet with her on her turf, in her own – for the white "other" to see a differently classed black "other".

I wanted them to see me comfortable in my environment. What I wanted to say to them was that "I don't need your money to have a nice home. Or to travel, or do things that I've already done. I want you to understand the space where I already come from in terms of my experience, my education, my job history, the things that I like, the things that I am culturally interested in. And, I want you to see the whole me. I don't want to meet you in your office, where there is only part of you there".

They'd see the pictures I have on the wall and how much of my life was influenced by the family pictures and sense of family around me. And the memorabilia that I have collected ... the memorabilia of my life, not things from trips and things like that. Things that are important to me.

Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's narrative helps to answer the question left in Margaret Walker's poem "Lineage". "Why am I not as they?" it asks. The root in Haizlip lineage splits, and yet remains intact. Familial lines that extend from the root identify differently and have different experiences. What she does through The Sweeter the Juice is prompt a conversation about those differences within a common lineage. Story bearing is

conversant with trauma, difference, and the silences that surround them. It is meant to be a provocative process.

Ione: Rebel Daughters

What does it mean for a granddaughter to fully embrace lineage, and to choose to name herself as part of that lineage? Ione, born Carole Ione Lewis, identifies herself as a lineage holder, her term for choosing to bear the narrative history of the women in her family. In our interview, she thoughtfully considers:

“In so many traditions there is a lineage holder, holder of the lineage. In a way – in a very important way that is what I am. It is a big responsibility. I knew it when I first opened (my great-grandmother’s) diary that the responsibility would be big. And, it’s great. It’s quite ... it’s very satisfying.”

Ione grows up the only daughter of an only daughter, and is raised only intermittently with her mother, Leighla Whipper Ford. However, she notes in her memoir Pride of Family that she spends her girlhood constantly looking for her mother. Raised in part by a strong grandmother that she lovingly calls Be-Be and a great aunt she names Sistonie, Ione is aware of the silences that linger among them. Silence is the crippling legacy among the women in her family that damages their relationships. Ione notes in her memoir that “none of the women in my family, neither my mother, my grandmother, nor my great-aunt had ever talked about private things – sex, childbearing, abortion. All along I felt alone in dealing with these issues” (85). Ione is often embroiled in the conflicts between her mother and grandmother. She realizes, “They were caught up in their own story, and I felt like an intruder in their lives” (129). The story bearer is positioned to be caught by the collective narrative rather than a single story.

These were women bent on reinvention. Be-Be is a dancer who becomes a restaurateur in Saratoga, New York to be close to her the horse racing she loves. Leighla is a journalist and Calypso songwriter who constantly travels. Like her mother, Ione is a vagabond traveler. She is a freelance journalist and is constantly armed with a notebook and endless questions to barrage her mother, grandmother, and great-aunt with. Perhaps this is where she comes to the realization that she is a lineage holder – because of a longing to grasp onto something of the lives that they withhold from her.

“I started to realize that there was something essential they weren’t telling me; some reason why it was so difficult for us to feel at home with one another and with our lives. I was a rebel daughter, not knowing that my mother and grandmother had each, before me, been a rebel daughter.” (6)

This rebel daughter is different from the dutiful daughter that Shirlee Haizlip is or the anointed daughter that A’Lelia Bundles is as they embark on recovering their maternal lineages. Haizlip begins her journey as a gift for her mother; Bundles begins hers as a tribute to her great-great grandmother. Ione begins hers rebelliously seeking answers.

As an adult, she decides to write about her foremothers in an article for the Village Voice. Remembering a journal that her mother tells her about a little mentioned great-grandmother, Ione asks for it. It is delivered to her by Dorothy Sterling, who uses it to write We Are Your Sisters, on nineteenth century black women. Holding the journal of Frances Anne Rollin (Whipper), her great-grandmother, is a lightening rod moment for Ione. Poring hungrily through the pages, she takes note of a kindred spirit, long gone. She is satisfied that Rollin is “my beacon, the foremother who would finally share with me our collective past” (7). Handed this journal, and discovering an ancestor who is a black female writer in the nineteenth century, is astonishing. Frances Anne Rollin is one of five sisters, daughters of a well-to-do landowner in Charleston, South Carolina. All

are active in the women's suffrage movement; there is written correspondence that shows a few of the sisters disagreeing with suffrage leadership on their lack of racial inclusion. Rollin leaves Charleston for Boston to continue her education, and begins her writing career there. She ultimately writes a biography of Martin Delaney, a leading black abolitionist of his day, and publishes it under the name Frank A. Rollin. Ione learns that "Frank" a nickname for Rollin, and to this day she lovingly refers to her ancestor as Frank.

After studying the journal, Ione is compelled to unravel the mysteries surrounding the women in her family, in particular. She is riddled with questions: Why hasn't she heard of this ancestor? Why wasn't she told of her accomplishments? In possession of Frank's journal, which she considers her talisman, her research then begins in earnest. She reflects on her feelings concerning this gift:

Ione: "The importance of this discovery was slowly dawning on me. I had always felt that there was something missing in the way my family presented itself to me. Frances Rollin, her whole life, her guidance, had been lacking. I wondered why my mother had shared her knowledge of Frank with me. Why had it taken me so long to find her? But somehow I couldn't help feeling that it was *she* who had found *me*" (105).

Shanna: It almost seems like you were meant to have that diary.

Ione: Yes, it was like it was waiting there.

Her belief is secured more as she reads a passage where Frank describes that during a séance, "the table was clearly lifted and twisted about and the spirit answered to C.L" (105). Ione is chilled at the words. She is "C.L." – Carole Lewis. She eventually abandons her birth name, but at this moment she wonders, "Had our two spirits been allowed to connect?" (106). It is a connection she craves, and one that is centered in loss.

There is the loss of her mother, who is often away, and the loss of a maternal history. In interview, we talk about the damage brought about by narrative silence.

Shanna: There was absence and then there was silence. Am I wrong – or am I right – that this book is about recovering the silences between mothers and daughters?

Ione: Yeah, I desperately wanted to do that. The silences were enormous. And, I think it is not unusual. I think it happens in many families. When the book came out I had many people ... so it's not just people of color. A friend of mine was re-reading the book and was getting inspired for her own writing. And, I was remembering that it transcends color and the concept of race. And, it goes into the family constructs and constructs of immigrant families and constructs of nature. So yes there are silences and it took me years and years and years. I'm still figuring things out. And everyday you get, oh, another revelation. I had to finish that book because the publisher had to have it, but there is more and more and more. There is more to understand. And, of course our perspective shifts. It's just an amazing journey.

The process of story bearing helps bring back the dry bones in her family narrative – the unnamed legacy of women extending several generations. Ione coins a name that explains her connection to the narratives she discovers, *foremothering*.

Ione uses the term for the first time in “*Discovering My Foremothers*”, an article she writes in 1973 for *Ms. Magazine*. It is a taken-for-granted term now, one that seems to have always been in the lexicon. I am fascinated that she lays claim to it. It is her term of tribute.

Ione: So, yeah I coined (*foremothering*) in that article. Now, I've never seen anyone (use it) prior to that. So I'm claiming it! (chuckling) If anyone else did they are going to have to speak up.

Shanna: What made you come up with the term?

Ione: Well at the time it was very shocking to people. It's hard for people to understand that now – what it was like in the 60s, even in the 70s when things were changing and shifting. In the 70s when things were shifting and changing (the use of) *forefathers* was a given. And, my book is quite specifically saying my *forefathers* are great. And, I am writing more.

And, I am doing a sequel to this book so I am writing more about them. They're wonderful. But I thought they're far more accessible – their lives – at the time than the women in my family. So, it was very important to me to use that term.

Mothering, and the lack of mothering, is a central theme in Pride of Family. Birth mothers are often in the periphery, absent to their daughters. Ione is mothered, her grandmother and great-aunt contribute to her care while participating in “othermothering”. The “othermother” shares the responsibility of raising children, a concept common in various cultural communities. However, Ione is in constant need to find her mother, and as an extension, locate her maternal history. Discovering her foremothers accomplishes a personal sense of pride in being a woman. In Pride of Family, Ione constructs a complex, sometimes difficult, but proud matrilineage.

What Ione's contributions do for story bearing is consider the difficulties in piercing through familial silences. She is successful because of her tenacity, and more so because she utilizes material artifacts like journals. Ione is in the possession of journals not only belonging to Frank, but to her mother, Leighla, and her great-aunt, Sistonie, as well. They are a family of diarists. It is part of her legacy. Lineage is built upon several aspects. What is unique about Ione – what her life history reveals – is that lineage is in progress even during a breakdown in communication. Perhaps Ionia Rollin Whipper sees her mother, Frances Rollin Whipper, write in a journal. Perhaps it is what inspires her to write in one of her own. Perhaps, Leighla Whipper Ford notices that the aunt she lives with, Ionia, writes in a journal regularly. And, perhaps as a result, a young Carole Ione Lewis is constantly aware of the journaling done by her mother and aunt during the times she lives with them. Ione absorbs the silences, but she also absorbs the habit of journal

writing. This is not all she absorbs living among these women. Ione absorbs the spirits of her ancestral intermediaries through dreams.

Today Ione is a dream specialist, in addition to the narratives, plays, and individual performances she develops. As noted in Pride of Family, she has always dreamed vividly. Often featured in her dreams are ancestral guides, her deceased Aunt Sistonie or deceased grandfather, Leigh Whipper. They are often guiding and directing her. Ione discusses the impact of dreamscapes in her life and experience:

“Dreams have always been an important part of my existence, paying attention to them, and enjoying them, and receiving them, and teaching about them. And creating what I call dream community. And as a therapist working with dreams as well because we always have the truth of our feelings in the dreaming. So whatever the dreams are about we always have a truth about feelings in them even if we don’t know what they mean. And they are the closest way that we can communicate with the beyond. What we call the beyond are people who have passed on. For us humans my sense is that this is the easiest way to have communication without going into the realm of ghosts and what you’re using of the term haunting, and haunting of that nature. So I consider that there are many dimensions and that dreams are able to take us through those dimensions or open up those dimensions to us. So there is a way for the dreams to help us connect to the ancestors.”

For, Ione, Sistonie is prominently featured in her dreams. Sistonie is the primary ancestral guide who leads her to the process of narrative discovery. As a young woman, Ione dreams that Sistonie leads her through a forest of bodies that eventually stir with life. Startled, she describes the dream to her grandmother, who assures her that her aunt is looking out for her. Ione comes to interpret from the dream that “the dead are still alive” (90). In other words, her ancestors come to life through her narrative recovery. Dr. Ionia Rollin Whipper is a physician for women, a 1903 graduate of Howard Medical School who opens the Ionia Rollin Whipper Home for Unwed Mothers. She is also the daughter of Frances Rollin Whipper. That relationship brings clarity to why “Sistonie”

exists as an ancestral guide for Ione, as she is a bridge to the ancestral past that Ione seeks to know and understand. Ione declares that Sistonie speaks to her “as much as she use to when (she) lived with her as a child” (71). Shortly after her first son is born, Ione dreams of Sistonie and recalls a Native American ritual in which a “special woman” in the family initiates the new mother “into the mysteries of all the women in her family and gains entrance into their circle” (90). Sistonie’s presence in Ione’s life after her death reinforces what I believe about story bearing: communication among family members two or more generations apart is a necessary function for hearing into the silences – and seeking them.

There is something in the spirit world that unsettles. Perhaps the unsettled feeling in the story bearer heightens the urgency felt by her to locate the lost narrative. I have come to appreciate the honesty of the story bearers I research, the disturbances they feel, the push back from relatives they receive, and the trauma and loss they experience. Story bearing is not a continually high moment of ancestral anointing. It is a privileged position, but one that takes hard work and involves pain. Of the ancestral spirit, Ione says:

“Spirits are the feelings that survive us, and for a time the spirits of all the women in my family past and present came to reside with me in my Saratoga room, not happily. I felt only their loss here” (246)

“Each woman longed for a lost home. Each mourned a time and place where she had been truly valued, where her true self had been honored” (247).

As intriguing as spiritual connections are, the work of story bearing is often connected with tangible objects, artifacts, documents, and oral narratives. Like other story bearers, Ione travels to home spaces that define her narrative history. She travels to Charleston, South Carolina in hopes to retrieve the spirit of her beloved great-grandmother, Frank. There is a danger in story bearing in believing that spiritual high experience with the haunted space, and ancestral intermediary, is continual. These spaces and intermediaries are guides, and they only leave traces of memory behind. Black feminist critic, bell hooks warns about the tendency to romanticize the past, arguing in

her text, Belonging, that “writing about the past often places one at risk for evoking nostalgia that simply looks back with longing and idealizes” (4). The past is not meant to get lost in. In her disappointment, Ione reveals:

“Something is bothering me – the truth is that I realize that I had thought I’d come her and find her, really find her. That one day I’d not exactly see her but somewhere feel her turning a corner. But she is not here.” (157)

This episode is reminiscent of the closing refrains of Toni Morrison’s Beloved, “this is not a story to be passed on”. Story bearers cannot bear to pass up a good story. They diligently work to recapture stories that others refuse to pass on to them. Like the house on Bluefield Street, an all-female house that is tainted with a ghost, Ione’s maternal home is a woman’s space that is overcome with ghostly silences. As story bearer, it is up to her to break through. Ione has varying conversations with her mother and grandmother concerning her role as a lineage holder. Her mother agrees and tells her that she believes Ione is meant to tell their shared history. At that moment Leighla gives her daughter a ring belonging to Ione’s beloved great-grandmother, “Frank”, that is given to her by Frank’s husband, William. Be-Be also agrees, but leaves it to Ione to figure out how to retrieve their lost heritage.

Ione concludes her narrative with the decision to continue her search for familial lineage. She declares, “This is my mandate - to continue my foremother’s good fight, to tell our stories, to make us all proud” (260). She realizes that as story bearer she is commissioned to recover narrative as a form of continuation. To this end, she now includes her sons in the process of narrative recovery. Ione’s ideas are expansive. She intends to develop her next work, Pride’s Daughter, as a digital memoir, and therefore embarking in the digital humanities. Through this she plans to incorporate a digital archive and media images. Her new endeavors cause me to also consider men as story

bearers, and how they differ from the women I discover. While this is a future project, Ione’s work is still very much invested in developing the lineage of her foremothers.

Conclusion

At the start of this chapter, Margaret Walker begins with “Lineage”, which paints a portrait of knowledge transfer between grandmothers and their granddaughters. The transfer is taught through the grandmother’s actions as well as her words. These come together to make, share, and pass on memory. It is a demonstration of the lineage that story bearing establishes between generations of kin. Story bearing is a be-ing and a doing. That is, it is both a calling and a work ethic or strategy in the area of narrative recovery. Each of the writers presented here, A’Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione reveal their own call and demonstrate the processes that allow them to be successful in their preservation of narrative history. They offer a blueprint for others who act as story bearers and help foreground a story bearing as methodology and a lineage.

The idea that a story bearing lineage can be developed among these writers is not unusual. While sorting through boxes of material in Bundles spare room I found several correspondences between them. These included copies of emailed conversations from Carla Peterson and Lalita Tademy, featured in the next chapter. Other story bearers not presented, like Connie Briscoe, also had emailed notes on file. Then there is the personally penned note from Ione that is slipped into the pages of *Pride of Family* that Bundles loans to me. In fact, Bundles considers Ione and Shirlee Haizlip her own forebears in terms of publishing life history. Their work comes out in 1991 and 1994, respectively, while A’Lelia Bundles publishes *On Her Own Ground* in 2001. In many ways, this dissertation is mapped with Bundles at the center. She is my first living source

that is representative of story bearing, and working with her helped me contextualize it further. I saw my idea at work and began to formulate this lineage, of which I am a part. It haunts me still.

CHAPTER THREE
BELOVED HAUNTING IN CARLA PETERSON'S BLACK GOTHAM AND
LALITA TADEMY'S RED RIVER AND CANE RIVER

“(Narratives) should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way.”

from “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”, by Toni Morrison

“Tell me,” said Beloved, smiling a wide happy smile. “Tell me your diamonds” ... It amazed Sethe because every mention of her past life hurt ... The hurt was always there – like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it – in any case it was an unexpected pleasure.”

from Beloved, by Toni Morrison

Sethe’s diamonds are so tucked away into the recesses of her mind and into a purposefully forgotten space that remembering is an unexpected pleasure. She is startled by this pleasure, not just because she is asked to retell a story about a pair of lost earrings that her daughter mistakes for diamonds, but because she realizes that her story telling is of value. Her life history has value. Not much about her life on the Sweet Home farm in Kentucky was enjoyable. But, experiencing the pain of remembering and to tell her narrative is what she can offer Beloved, who grieves her brief life and the brutal way it ends. Recounting the past is what she owes this ghost-daughter as a testimonio^v to explain the violent circumstances leading Sethe to murder Beloved, and how Sethe’s actions terrorized and isolated her family. Yet she has clamped down on uttering the unspeakable for so long that forming the words feels like a horse’s bit jammed into her mouth. Her mouth is an open wound that can expose vulnerable moments she would rather not re-member^{vi}. Forgetting is a way for Sethe to control her past and what gets remembered. She does not want to recall the past, which is what remembering does, or dredge up mental pictures of trauma, which Morrison defines as rememory, or reconstruct a life history she would rather not pass down to her daughters, and re-member every aspect of the trauma. It is ironic that a haunting – the presence of Beloved, who now

begs for her mother's story – can persuade Sethe to relinquish it, and even more so that she can derive any pleasure from it.

This chapter examines the ways in which story bearers and the stories they tell are haunted into being. Like Toni Morrison's Beloved, Carla Peterson's Black Gotham and Lalita Tademy's Red River and Cane River offer haunting as an effective tool to precipitate narrative recovery. "Tell me" is the mournful and haunting refrain. "Tell me" leads story bearers like Peterson and Tademy to wonder about their silenced paternal histories and begin the process of story bearing to painstakingly recover it. In Beloved, haunting is a palpable terror that demands reparation for crippling wounds of the past within family history. Reparation only comes through the re-membering of narrative and the ghosts that haunt generations of a family. There is fluidity among the terms remembering, rememory, and re-membering. The differences, with regard to this dissertation, are how they are used in narrative and applied by the story bearers. Remembering is calling forth memory, rememory is recovering forgotten memory for particular application, and re-membering is reconstructing scraps of memory to form a nearly complete picture of the past.

African American families are known to speak of trauma and traumatic behaviors that are repeated among family members as generational curses. That trauma – or curse – is replicated by abuse, dysfunction, separation, or in the case of these writers paternal histories, aching silence. Beloved demonstrates for Peterson and Tademy, among others, how family ghosts and ghostly narratives are remembered and account for lost lineage. The body of the family does not function well without its various parts, often missing

without explanation. The image I see of this kind of family is one that compensates for its' lost limbs but constantly aches with the pain of the “ghost leg” or “ghost arm”. Story bearing is the work of re-membling, the painstaking process of restoring the familial body.

Carla Peterson writes an all-encompassing memoir, Black Gotham, to recover her paternal history and ultimately recovers a little known history of upper class blacks living in New York during the nineteenth century. Lalita Tademy pens creative historical fiction that is based on the oral history she grows up hearing about Colfax, Louisiana. Each text, whether it is a work of fiction or non-fiction, recovers a homeplace for these writers as much as it does a narrative history. Homeplace is a site that is representative of family, of home, and a return to historical origins. In addition to ancestral haunting and oral history, homeplace helps launch narrative recovery efforts. All of these stir the urgency to recover ancestral lineage and create a narrative history – a living history project that impacts the family and broader community well beyond the written word. Story bearing is at work. The process is a collaborative experience involving ancestral intermediaries, story carriers – often older relatives who offer oral history and preserved artifacts – archivists and researchers, and story bearers, themselves.

Remembering Beloved

Beloved is Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize winning work of fiction, won in 1988, and is based on the real life of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who kills her infant daughter during an attempt to escape slave-holding Kentucky and cross into Ohio, a free state, in 1856. Morrison’s work is considered a neo-slave narrative, common in the 1980s among black women writers including Sherley Ann Williams and Gayl Jones.

Neo-slave narratives touch on the trauma that enslavement continues to leave on black families. Beloved, juxtaposes two sisters: Beloved, a ghost who returns to haunt her family, and Denver, her long-suffering sister. Patterned after news accounts of Garner's history, Beloved is murdered as an infant, her throat slit by her distraught mother as the family is confronted by slave catchers. Her ghostly presence does not demand justice as much as it yearns for acknowledgement. She wants her story told, and her mother is reluctant to offer it. Denver has lived with the oppressive, weighty silence that surrounds such a traumatic history. The haunting presents a tableau: Sethe, whose past history is "unspeakable", Beloved, who haunts the narrative into being, and Denver, who preserves their newly revealed life history. This tableau establishes a model for story bearing, which includes a story carrier, ancestral intermediary, and story bearer, respectively. It takes all three operating in their roles for their collective life history to be recovered.

Often overlooked by the large, looming presence of Beloved, the ghost-presence of her dead sister, Denver's role is unassuming but significant. Caught in the process of escape, Sethe lashes out in attempt to kill all her children rather than see them kept enslaved but only manages to kill one - Beloved. Shunned by the black community after the incident, the house on 124 Bluestone Road is ripe for a haunting. The house is labeled "spiteful" and its inhabitants are alienated. Beloved's arrival in the home – a dead spirit demanding answers – brings a reckoning. In a discussion on the effects of haunting, Avery Gordon argues that "the ghostly haunt gives notice that something is missing – that what appears to be invisible or in the shadows is announcing itself – however systematically (15). Knowledge of narrative history is what is missing and its' absence is haunting the entire household. While Beloved hungers for her mother's stories,

Denver is there to collect the fragments and remember them in order to heal the familial wound.

Sethe has valid reasons to keep silent. She is terrorized by her memories. At the Sweet Home Farm where she is enslaved, a teacher and his pupils brutally suckle her breast milk which is meant for her newborn child. This is a form of rape. In another incident, Sethe is whipped to the extent that the whelps form a tree-shaped keloid on her back. Her husband, Halle, distraught at his inability to protect his wife, disappears. Worst of all, she kills her own child as slave catchers confront the family after an escape. This unspeakable act ostracizes Sethe from her neighboring black community. This event haunts the entire household, shaking the home and tossing objects around the rooms. Once the haunting begins, her two sons, Howard and Buglar, abandon the home. Sethe buries all of this pain beneath her tongue. Unspeakable, until Beloved physically arrives.

Beloved's haunting shines a light on the darkness experienced by all of the women in the household. The haunting speaks to a return of the past. Not only does the ghost-daughter, Beloved, return, but Paul D, who worked with Sethe on the Sweet Home Farm also re-enters her life. His return encourages Sethe to reflect on the past. Her stories are safe with Paul D. who acts as co-performative witness to corroborate her traumatic experiences. His account adds detail to her version of history and helps her to further contextualize the events that occurred. The moments of shared narrative helps Sethe to heal. At Beloved's arrival, she has already begun to give voice to her trauma. The timing of both returns – Beloved's and Paul D's – forces the narrative to be fully revealed.

Beloved's motive for her return is greed. She is greedy for her mother's love and attention. Beloved is also intent upon a reckoning for her grisly death; however, her intentions do not destroy the family. Prior to this reckoning Denver is paralyzed with the weight of her mother's trauma, and is unable to venture past her porch. When she realizes that her sister has their mother in a deadly emotional stronghold, she begins to fight back. Denver has her own ancestral intermediary, her grandmother, Baby Suggs, to help guide her.

Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked – and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. "You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my."

Then what do I do?

"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (257)

Baby Suggs' admonition propels her from the porch. Denver is given two directives, to "know" and to "go". Her grandmother realizes that Denver's lack of an informed history - and her connection to it – stunts her growth. In this instance, the long-dead Baby Suggs acts as ancestral intermediary for Denver and encourages her to move forward with her life. Denver must move off the porch and into the community. She must rely on what she "knows" about Beloved's intentions and get help from the neighboring women in order to save her mother. As story bearer, she must break the silence that has isolated her family. Sethe is so steeped in the pain and shame of her history that it threatens to choke the life out of her. However, speaking up brings about communal support. Denver's throat itches in anticipation as she finally gains the courage to use her voice. She moves past the confines of the yard and out of the constrictions of her life history.

Denver, who survives her mother's silence, the absence of her father, the loss of her two brothers who run away, and the death of her grandmother, is isolated. Her mother's murderous actions have driven the neighboring community away in horror. Though she loves to learn, her shame keeps her away from school. She is aware that her home is haunted by a ghost and realizes, when Beloved appears, that Sethe is the sole focus of Beloved's attention. Denver yearns for a connection of her own, a place in history where she matters. Beloved's arrival into the home coaxes Sethe to share some of her past history, which Denver alternately resents and desires.

“This was the part of the story she loved. (Sethe) was coming to it now, and (Denver) loved it because it was all about herself; but she hated it too because it made her feel like a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it. But who she owed or what to pay it with eluded her” (91).

What does a story bearer owe to her life history and to the family members that share it? She owes them the truth, a factual excavation placed in context, and a sympathetic rendering of the circumstances and feelings that lay beyond truth and facts. Since Carla Peterson selects Denver as a doppelganger of her narrative retrieval for Black Gotham, we must look at why she does so. The answer is more than in Denver's desire for scraps of her heritage; it is in what Denver does with those scraps. She uses what little she knows to build a relationship with her sister, who also craves knowledge. She makes a quick decision to share painful details of what is going on in her home with neighbors, who come to her family's aid. She decides to build on her knowledge by further educating herself, and potentially attend Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio. By weaving together her scraps of history, making interpretations of it, and intervening by refusing to remain silent, Denver grows as an individual. She is able to seek employment to support

her family and begin to build stronger relationships in the community. Denver does not simply harbor her family's narrative history - she builds upon it. Story bearers like Peterson come to understand that narrative recovery is an active way of repaying the past.

Story bearing offers orality as a mechanism for reparation. When Denver finds her voice, she discovers a use for it within her community. Her immediate – most pressing – need is to protect her mother from harm. She confesses to her neighbors what is happening to her family to rally their support, not realizing that orality will be the major factor that breaks the stronghold that grips her family. Orality is more than uttering words or story telling; it utilizes the voice for the purposes of action and change. I subscribe to Brenda DeVore Marshall's point of view that for black women, "orality becomes the primary rhetorical vehicle through which self and community are called into existence and through which harmony, a principal social value, is created collaboratively" (Telling Political Lives 25). As she approaches Ella, and the other women, she fully understands the danger of silence and it prompts her to action. "Nobody was going to help her unless she told it – told all of it" she realizes. (240). First speaking out, then blending her voice with her female neighbors, strengthens her. It unites her with them, and provides a testimony that they understand. The women in the black Cincinnati community understand that a looming, overwhelming, and unforgiving past can kill, especially if embodied within the ghosts of guilt and condemnation. Modeling the power of orality, Ella calls for the women first to pray, then to act.

“And then Ella hollered.

Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all know what that sound sounded like” (245)

The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (248)

Some memories are meant to destroy; they serve no other purpose than to terrorize those who remember. What the hollering women did was to exorcise Beloved and the memories that demonize Sethe. These are women who had been through their own terrors during enslavement. They understand about mental bondage. Their collective sound – praying, crying out, moaning – pierces the haunted space to release Sethe, and in some ways, themselves. To bell hooks in Talking Back, black women like these fight to “change the nature and direction of (their) speech” in a way that compels others to listen, and to transform their immediate landscape (6).

“Tell Me”, said Beloved: Narrative Haunting

The pre-text for Beloved includes a haunted home with a ghost whose tantrums were considered spiteful. Haunting drives the story. The character, Beloved, is unrelenting in her demand for recognition, for her story to be told aloud and remembered, and for recompense from the mother who kills her. This type of haunting is much different than the haunting experienced by Carla Peterson and Lalita Tademy. Haunting drives these story bearers to recover and re-member narrative history. It is present in the way Lalita Tademy recalls being “driven by a hunger I could not name” as she begins to retrace her family history for her first book, Cane River (xv). Haunting is a force comprised of what Carla Peterson considers in Black Gotham “shameful secrets” kept hidden by family members of her father’s generation who are reluctant to share narrative history (17). Those secrets come to “haunt the younger generations like ghosts” and

place within Peterson the urgency to “put the ghosts to rest” (Black Gotham 17). The way Peterson and Tademey describe their haunting experiences, particularly an ancestral haunting that “demands” and “confronts”, suggests a negative experience. Instead, those demanding and confrontational spirits infuse them with the urgency to recover family history. Black Gotham, Cane River, and Red River are the result. Through this perspective haunting can be viewed as an influential, and at times, inspirational force of productivity. Lalita Tademey earns recognition for her life history work in 2001 when Cane River is selected for Oprah’s Book Club, leading to a guest appearance of the Oprah Winfrey Show the same year. In 2011 Carla Peterson wins acclaim for her life history work when Black Gotham is awarded the New York City Book Award in History. Recognition for the literary contributions of both writers helps to ground my argument that, for these story bearers, the act of haunting brings about the urgency to preserve memory, an urgency that is integral for successful narrative recovery.

Toni Morrison’s neo-slave narrative, Beloved (1987), fits like a palimpsest^{vii} in conversation with the life history narratives of contemporary black women, including Peterson and Tademey. The question of why this work of fiction resonates so strongly in the non-fiction and historical fiction of these writers is answered through the influence of haunting. Unspeakable personal experiences, unarticulated family history, or severed relationships haunts them. Peterson is acutely aware of the silence surrounding her paternal history, and has no connection with it more than a generation deep. Tademey is also strongly aware of the gaps in knowledge concerning her own paternal history, unlike a maternal history that is spoken of openly. Both realize that it is up to them to fill in those gaps. In Beloved, Morrison opens wounds incurred during slavery and the impact

that those wounds have on subsequent generations after enslavement. She delves into the impact of the unspeakable and the effect of the unspoken.

Beloved is involved in a rich intertextual exchange with Black Gotham, Cane River, Red River, and others, not merely because it presents the depth of haunting and narrative loss, but because of the existence of a story bearer, Denver, the use of orality, and community social engagement. It also presents the residue of enslavement, which is strongly significant to both of Tademey's historical texts. That residue, which is the remains of the palimpsest, demonstrates links to history and the unresolved and unaddressed social concerns that continue to plague families today. Some residue is useful, such as an orality that empowers historical characters to resist in the face of ghosts intent on destroying life (Beloved), stand by businesses and neighbors in the face of race riots (Black Gotham), or revolt against white marauders set against new Reconstruction laws (Red River). That residue continues as the story bearers struggle to recover their histories despite lack of information, written documentation, or cooperation among family members. The finished product – the literature produced – involves itself intertextually in an ongoing historical dialogue. Intertextuality demonstrates themes so strong that various authors can engage them and presents questions so broad that countless generations of authors can advance the discussion. The alluring feature of intertextuality is that it allows space for ongoing thematic conversation within and among texts. One author picks up a theme from the literature of another and begins her own thread, tightening or expanding the thought and making it her own.

Haunting is a part of middle methodology in that the ancestral spirit is in constant negotiation with the story bearer. That spirit is set between recoverable history and the

one who retrieves it. The presence of the ancestor as intermediary is a textual cue throughout literature, and especially African American literature. Those presences foreshadow events to come, provide historical context, and offer guidance or warnings to the protagonists. My use of ancestral spirit and ghost is used interchangeably here because “ghost” is the term Toni Morrison uses to describe Beloved and her influence on the plot in the novel, *Beloved*. However, the ancestral spirits spoken of by Lalita Tademy and A’Lelia Bundles, in particular, refer to the very real ancestors of these writers. Each describes haunting in reference to their great grandmothers, more than two generations removed from their own lives. Tademy and Bundles, along with Carla Peterson, use haunting to signify the urgency they feel to produce a family narrative.

Haunted spaces are not unique to Toni Morrison, who often uses home sites as catalysts for uncovering long buried secrets. In *Beloved*, the ghost of the dis-remembered continues to haunt the open areas behind Sethe’s home space:

“Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there” (260)

Beloved’s ghostly footprints by the stream are on slippery ground. Perhaps the water washes them away, again and again, while lapping against the muddy bank. Perhaps her footprints are trampled away by others who also visit the stream, making hers undistinguishable. This particular scene signifies the slipperiness of narrative recovery. History that is contained in oral memory and scraps of referential material is elusive, at best. However *Beloved* arrived, she did not enter on firm foundation. Sethe’s decision to remember, and Paul D’s corroboration, helps to establish a foundation for which *Beloved*’s existence can stand. The reappearance of the forgotten, even for a moment,

opens the possibility for re-membering it. A story bearer, like Denver or Peterson, Tadmey, and Bundles, places her feet into the elusive footprints of the past and attempts to locate a trail of history. That action allows the story bearer to be taken up by their ancestral spirit. It is the ancestral spirit that draws the story bearer to the path on which to recover family narrative.

Haunting in Beloved has multiple impacts. Sethe recovers her memory and begins to rebuild relationships with her daughter, Denver, with Paul D, and with her neighbors. Denver develops a sense of self because she now has a lineage from which build. Lineage suggests a sustaining familial line, a connecting vine linking past and present, yet straining for the future. There are roots here with room for newer shoots to develop and grow. Lineage is the valued missing link necessary to facilitate Denver's growth. Being in possession of hers provides a foundation significant for her continued identity formation. The sequence of Denver's movement from off the porch, to neighboring homes, to steady employment, and to possibly pursue her education at Oberlin College demonstrates the positive impact that ancestral haunting gives her.

Denver in Black Gotham

Carla Peterson calls her work with Black Gotham, part detective tale, part social and cultural narrative. She is an English Professor who specializes in nineteenth century African American Literature. Born to cosmopolitan parents who raise her and her two sisters in Europe, Peterson has said she felt no sense of an American home. Recovering the narrative of her paternal history set in New York City allows her to establish roots there. Through Black Gotham, she recovers home. Of her paternal history, she is given

little information. Like Denver, Peterson writes that she has “no memories of my own” (1). In fact, she feels a kinship to Denver because both make do with the scraps of narrative history given to them.

Peterson opens the prologue of Black Gotham with a passage that features Denver sharing with her sister Beloved what little she knows:

(She) “anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother told her Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it” (73)

In this section of Black Gotham, Peterson emphasizes the idea of being handed scraps as a metaphor for the loss of family history and for the lack of value placed on it. Scraps are all that she feels that she is given of her paternal history. Because few relatives exist who can share their narrative history, and she has little documented material that sheds light, she is left to begin her detective work. It is significant to note that as professor, she already has the research expertise to recover her history and the writing skill necessary to produce the narrative. It is her skill and desire to retrieve her narrative that makes her a story bearer. However, as an academic, Peterson also secures several fellowships and receives sabbatical time away from the classroom to enable her to complete her work. At a point of privilege, she has the skill, the training, the resources, and the drive to recover history and shape it into public discourse. With it, she builds upon little known histories of her family, upper-class nineteenth century blacks, and the everyday lives of black New Yorkers.

Peterson arrives at the Schomburg Library in Harlem to begin reconstructing her family history with a single name, Phillip Augustus White, and encounters a moment of

serendipity. She finds two obituaries: one of White, her great-grandfather, and Peter Guignon, White's father-in-law and Peterson's great great-grandfather. Discovering these obituaries in the midst of a vast collection solidifies her enthusiasm for her project and the determination to continue on the long, tedious trek to recover lost history. While closely reading Guignon's memorial tribute she learns that Alexander Crummell, nineteenth century race leader, is its author. Her research takes on a different turn by providing clues that not only links family history but helps to construct a lineage for upper class black New Yorkers.

When prior generations believe that their story is "not one to pass on" it opens a void that descendants like Peterson have the desire to fill. Like Denver, she devises the means to retrieve memory and give them life blood. Both enter the realm of ghosts in order to give voice to the silences around them. Peterson reveals:

"I now realize that what my father had passed on to me was a legacy of silence... (My father's generation) were unable to put to rest whatever 'shameful family secrets' they possessed, so these lingered on to haunt the younger generation like ghosts, leaving my sisters and me feeling empty and unsettled. I'm hoping to put these ghosts to rest" (17)

With these declarations, she positions herself into the story bearer's role. With little to go on, she presses forward with the strong desire to discover family history. As a result of what she finds, she adds to the under-researched history of New York's black elite. This elite class is ghosts in the family who "needed an interpreter to bring them alive" (19). Peterson places class, particularly a black upper class, front and center in her text. Race and class has always been a fruitful topic of research, and in work that focuses on New York, Harlem is usually its signifier. This time New York City proper is given its due, and the blacks who are native to it and successful within it are the focus. She presents a

patriarchal history in particular because she finds little on the women in her family. If locating the histories of male members of her family is comparable to finding a needle in a haystack then retrieving a maternal history is even more elusive. What is unique to Peterson's quest in relation to the other story bearers featured in this dissertation is that there is no extensive oral narrative with which to corroborate. Peterson's search for her father's family history is similar to Lalita Tademy's research for her own father's history in Red River. Both women hear long-told family rumors. Peterson hears that her great-grandfather flees Haiti and Paris for New York City, but the story proves false. Tademy learns of her family's participation in a nineteenth century race rebellion, and it is true. Both women are given only the briefest of detail concerning their paternal histories, but their research is supported by historical documents and cultural markers.

Quite poignantly, Peterson notes, "I began my quest with empty hands" (18). Peterson is a leaf on a branch that is cut off from its source. Systematically, she prunes away at deadened ends to restore the life blood, just as Denver does in Beloved. Denver is able to move beyond the limitations of her childhood and realize her uniqueness. Others lack "the downright pleasure of enchantment, of not suspecting but *knowing* the things behind things" (Beloved 40). It is what Peterson does with what falls into her hands that is equally significant. Like contemporary life history writers Lalita Tademy and Sherrill Cashin, who also construct paternal family histories, Peterson advances understandings of class and privilege in terms of race. With her skill set, she publishes an award winning book, designs an online archive, and conducts talks nationwide on narrative history. Her thoughts behind recovery of family narrative intercept with my own. Aspects of forgetting and remembering history, utilizing archival material, and

viewing the narrative search as a peculiar, urgent call mirror ways that I view story bearing. Peterson demonstrates what can ultimately be done with scraps of the past.

Re-membering/Rememory

Sometimes the entire story develops in jigsaw pieces, using one artifact here, one anecdote there until the entire picture is nearly complete. It is re-membered. As Peterson points out:

“Remembering shapes and reshapes the past as it reinterprets this past from the perspective of the present, assesses how it affects the present, and reflects on how it might influence the actions of future generations” (9)

R-remembering patches together recovered history and takes into consideration the purposeful act of forgetting. There are reasons behind forgetting and then re-membering; the trauma to Sethe’s body gives evidence to this fact. The weight of trauma is eased as she shares her now healed scars with Paul D and releases the hold of silence enough to share some of her story with her daughters. Throughout Black Gotham, Carla Peterson seems both titillated and troubled while chasing things forgotten and re-membered. She acknowledges that:

“Forgetting is not the same as erasing, destroying, obliterating. The past has survived, if only in the form of scraps. The archives in their many guises became a place for safe keeping, for storing memories of the past that were simply waiting to be brought back to light and life in the ripeness of time” (393).

Here, she acknowledges the trauma that forgetting helps to salve. She also suggests the necessity for distance. Forgetting is utilized as safe haven until enough time has passed for the story bearer to re-member without the severity of the wound.

The act of re-membering is a tedious and time consuming effort. Within the span of generations, a story bearer is assigned certain portions to recover. As Avery Gordon argues, “A sympathetic magic is necessary because in the world between us as analysts and the worlds we encounter to translate into world-making words are hauntings, ghosts and gaps, seething absences and muted presences” (21). One of those presences, for Peterson, is her great great-aunt, Maritcha Lyons. She is a teacher and leader in New York’s black women’s club movement. Lyons is also interested in preserving family history, and is asked by her father, Albro Lyons, to write a book about his life. The book is never written beyond his suggestion of a title, The Gentlemen in Black. Maritcha Lyons does write her own memoir, Memories of Yesterdays, All of Which I Saw and Part of Which I was – An Autobiography. Interestingly, Lyons does so by referencing what she calls “fugitive scraps” of information. Discovering this ancestor – an educator, race woman, and memoirist – delights Peterson. She appreciates the lineage that she readily connects with, and resolutely confirms her role as mantle keeper for her generation. “Now it is up to me,” Peterson notes (25). She is determined to complete her narrative history as as “an act of reparation” (31). She joins Lalita Tademy, A’Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Haizlip, and Ione in a growing sorority of black women who re-member life history in an academic, yet tangibly accessible way.

Come Closer, Red River

Lalita Tademy is haunted by her ancestors. During an interview with Oprah’s Book Club, Tademy is asked about her relationship with her ancestral intermediaries:

“I very much felt the spirit. But I felt it in a different way, and it was pushing me towards doing this. It was pushing me not to give up ... I believe these women are a part of me now.”

“I don’t think we should ever forget them (ancestors). But I do think we have to use them to figure out how to go forward.”

Raised in California away from the Colfax, Louisiana hometown of both parents, it seems she is least likely to be given a narrative mantle. However, it is because of the distance that she is imbued with the desire to learn more of her maternal and paternal histories.

Tademy, an executive with a Fortune 500 technology company, left her career to embark on the narrative recovery for her first book. In 2001 she recovers her maternal history and publishes it in Cane River, an Oprah Winfrey Book Club selection. Soon after this success, she wonders about her paternal history, and the rumor that some of her family members died in a race rebellion. With not much to go on within family lore, she painstakingly conducts the research that becomes Red River, dedicated to her father.

Both texts are written as historical fiction. The ordinary black family, without the famously documented history that the Walker family has, cannot produce the kind of truth-telling biography that A’Lelia Bundles does. Tademy desires to write a compelling narrative. She uses fiction to help the history come alive for the reading audience.

Red River and Beloved are engaged in an intertextual conversation; where one ends, the other begins. Between them is a discussion of what gets remembered and what in narrative history should be left unremembered. The closing refrain to Beloved is “this is not a story to pass on”, yet an alternative reading of the phrases suggests that the narrative is one not to miss rather than one not to tell. In context, it affirms not allowing traumatic memory to be a cumbersome weight that is carried, unchallenged, from one generation to the next. In response to this, Red River’s introductory chapter begins with the call to “come closer.” “This is not a story to go down easy, and the backwash still got

hold of us today” (1). There is no question that an uncomfortable history will be told; it acknowledges the trauma and its effects upon generations that refused to deal with it. Like bad tasting medicine, it is told, but this time to a story bearer who will accept the family history in its entirety and make something redemptive from it. In a single statement reflective of the struggle to expose or not expose trauma within a family narrative, Toni Morrison constructs an entry point for Lalita Tademy to consider the effects of silence in her paternal history.

Tademy’s Red River is about re-membering blacks who participated in the 1873 Colfax Race Riot in Louisiana. The riot is a result of a bitterly contested Louisiana governor’s election. Black men in the community armed themselves to defend the new leadership at the county courthouse. Angry white townsmen descend on the courthouse, which culminates into a battle that leaves nearly one hundred black men and three white men dead. The “official record” honors the three white men as heroes against “carpetbag misrule”. That record names the event the Colfax Riot. There is no mention of the black men who are killed, by name. The unofficial record in the black community calls what happened on Easter Sunday, April 13, 1873 the Colfax Massacre. Red River gives a name to the men and a face to the events that happened that day.

With the riot at the center, Red River provides a genealogy of survival among members of Colfax’s black community. Even as the narrative of the brutal event is silenced over the years, its’ presence hovers over the families that remain. “We been writ out the history of this town” complains Polly, Red River’s narrator (2). Polly Tademy, Lalita Tademy’s great great-grandmother, gives voice to dissatisfaction with the “official record”. Her husband, Sam Tademy, survives the massacre and becomes a leading

citizen. Not only is there no satisfying recorded history of black participation in the event, Tademý's family eventually stops speaking on the subject. Tademý family narratives are reluctantly told. This comes of utmost concern to her. The real story is read in the silences that surround the grudgingly offered answers to direct queries. The power of orality has been reduced to textual clues in brief conversations with her family members. "Our people were there. Some got out, and some didn't" is all Aunt Ellen reveals about her family's participation in the Colfax Riot. It was all Tademý needs to ignite the fiery desire to discover more. Unlike a maternal history presented in celebratory fashion, her paternal history is guarded and elusive. Tademý notes:

"There is also a different type of family story, lacking shape and enthusiasm, only stingily disclosed, rationed within vague hints or whispers, and only then with great reluctance and obvious discomfort by the teller" (415).

Tademý is determined to develop a narrative to pierce through the silences in her narrative history. She chooses to re-member it. Paring brief, unelaborated upon family lore with archival research and visits to memorialized grounds, she forms a counter-narrative. Counter-narratives enter slippery terrain by presenting an alternative perspective that runs parallel to the official record. However, like the palimpsest, counter-narratives show through the thin skin of what is considered "official" and offers a more nuanced record. Tademý understands this and uses Red River, as she writes in her author's notes, to "overlay the rich anecdotes passed down in (her) family lore with the times in which they unfolded, a blend of fact and fiction told from the point of view of people whose voices were lost in official records" (417). Her use of historical fiction as the vehicle for narrative production is intentional. Filling in the gaps of silences necessitates it. However, it also provides the space to re-imagine and address the

complexities of race and racial issues, class and social movement, and the politics and ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Counter-narratives are part of what I call a middle methodology that is situated between what is heard and overheard. The counter-narrative is a negotiation of “truth” found in officially recorded history and other “truths” that offer opportunities to re-conceptualize historical narrative. A middle methodology operates centrally and is always in flux and negation for narrative recovery. Story bearing is middle methodology, in addition to the development of the counter-narrative. What is heard is the official, oft repeated history that is established as legal narrative. There is an expression that “history is determined by the winners”, and in the case of Red River, that type of sentiment is memorialized on a historical marker located in front of the town courthouse. Visitors to the site are constantly reminded that the 1873 Colfax Riot marks for some “the end of carpetbag misrule in the South”, a belief etched permanently into the stone. That belief is established by white residents opposed to the late nineteenth century Reconstruction laws that set progressive black and white men into political offices. This citizenry also dedicated a memorial stone that Tademý describes as a “massive marble obelisk almost twelve feet high” to the three white men who died “fighting for white supremacy” (417). She is disturbed by bigotry that passes as historical record. Her counter-narrative rests in the reluctantly told oral history of the Colfax black community that considers the “riot” to be a “massacre”. The names of the black men who participated, including Tademý’s own relatives, and other details of the massacre are part of another, “illegal”, under-articulated record. Tademý situates herself between the two narratives: one official, the other unofficial.

Ushering in the counter-narrative in Red River is Polly, Tademý's great great-grandmother, who narrates. She voices Tademý's own frustration with the silences that surround the massacre and details that are left out of the official record. "The ones with the upper hand make a story fit how they want, and tell it so loud people tricked to thinking it real, but writing down don't make it so" (2). Polly's words echo the sentiments of the contemporary Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's warning in her speech "The Danger of a Single Story":

"It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person".

For subaltern² communities, like the black residents of Colfax less than ten years after the Civil War, the counter-narrative is valuable currency with which to market social uplift. Inserted into legal narrative – imprinted into "authorized" history – it represents power. For the cultural communities that Polly and Adichie speak for, oral history is a vehicle for that kind of representation, inclusion, and empowerment. Oral history is viewed with more veracity because it is inclusive of a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and accounts. It does not to replace written record, but enhances, corrects, and verifies it. Emphasizing its significance, Polly insists that "real stories somehow carry forward, generation to generation. Those of us what was there catch a retold whisper, and just the mention got the power to stir up those old troubles in our minds

² Subaltern is a term primarily referring to third world citizens who are an underclass represented politically and spoken for by the "elite" upper class or colonizing country. In Gayatri Spivak's work in "Can the Subaltern Speak" the term is expanded to those in the margins, women, or belonging to underprivileged or underrepresented racial groups (blacks, Latinos, and other people of color) who are a "silent, silenced center" (78).

again like they fresh, and the remembering lay a clamp over our hearts” (2-3). Again and again, telling stories and having them heard are linked to power, which manifests itself in social action. The orality that is privileged in this moment is one that, according to DoVeanna Fulton, “resists or subverts oppression, and controls representations, thereby substantiating subjectivity.” (13)

Lalita Tademy offers orality in Red River as a gift to her silent/silenced ancestors by providing them the authority to speak about the black experience in Colfax, Louisiana. Their story is no longer a whisper but a voice represented in text and delivered on a wider scale than the county courthouse and cemetery marker. Red River is needed in order to correct the flawed, singularly voiced history of the Colfax Riot and white Colfax community. It is what makes the function of story bearing necessary and the story bearer’s role vital to cultural/historical preservation. Even in the form of historical fiction, Tademy’s work invites the subaltern to become voiced and provides space for oral history to become “legalized” text.

Without an archive of letters, diaries, and taped interviews composing a straightforward and factual family narrative is difficult. Historical fiction re-imagines the past, and it does so by utilizing historical records in the letters, diaries, periodical clippings, and census records that closely align with the family narrative. The scraps of oral history, photographs, and saved memorabilia are paired with archival record. It results in a fictionalized account of factual events, and takes skill, time, and care to present with authenticity. “Like a taboo that is always being approached in the act of avoidance, when sociology insists on finding only the facts, it has no other choice but to pursue the fictive, the mistake it seeks to eliminate” (Ghostly Matters 26).

The retold whisper that Polly alludes to galvanizes narrative tellers and listeners, and subsequent story carriers and story bearers. Orality is part of the process of remembering narrative. Like Tadey's relatives when she quizzes them about family history, in Beloved, Sethe offers fragments of her past to her daughters. Sethe no longer remembers her own mother's narrative, or the African language that she spoke it in. She comes to realize that the message her mother struggles to convey "was and had been there all along" (58). It was waiting for her to re-member. She is then able to "pick meaning out of a code she no longer understood" (59). Counter-narrative is the code; story bearing is a means for deciphering and revealing it. Tadey, like other story bearers including A'Lelia Bundles, Ione, and Carla Peterson, is haunted by the counter-narrative which looms as it waits to be revealed. Avery Gordon argues:

"Through an elaborate tapestry of oral-become-written storytelling, stitching the movements between past and present, between victimhood and agency, between limits and possibilities, a system is denounced" (149)

Tadey's reconstruction of the reluctant family narrative works in this way. She offers Red River to provide new ways of thinking about and speaking about the Colfax Riot and other historically erased/raced events.

Slippages

The work of engaging ancestral spirits and utilizing aspects of haunting to retrieve narrative history is slippery business. So is contesting official history through the construction of a counter-narrative. Slippage represents the constant weaving in and out of time and messiness involved in narrative retrieval. Slippage, as applicable to the story bearing process, is defined as loss, lost footing, oversights, indiscretion, and error. Story bearing furthers scholarly discussion of haunting done by Avery Gordon and Hershini

Bhana Young and grounds it as an insightful, valid entry way for narrative recovery. It gives additional depth to cultural, ethnographic, and literary studies. The story bearer is a conduit who opens realms of possibility, much like D. Soyini Madison's possibilities of performance. It is the story bearer, like Lalita Tademy, who communicates the effectiveness of haunting in a tangible way. In preparation for her first narrative history, *Cane River*, she speaks of the influence of her ancestor, her great great-grandmother, Philomene:

“Philomene came to life before any of the others. She visited my dreams, urging me to tell their stories. No, “urging” is too tame a word, too remote. Philomene *demand*ed that I struggle to understand the different generations of my family and the complexities of their lives. She made it unacceptable that any of them be reduced or forgotten ... There were demanding days in the beginning when I feared her, a shapeless apparition, usually in the aftermath of her unrelenting hand at my back and the unnerving certainty of her voice in my ear. But the fear was always tempered with respect” (xv)

Tademy's thoughts concerning Philomene re-imagine the idea of the specter, transforming it from description as a menacing presence to one that is invested in the future. In this case, the ancestral spirit is connected to memory shaping. To Avery Gordon, haunting and specters are a “social reality” in African American literature, which has “the capacity not only to live with specters ... to engage the ghost, heterogeneously but cooperatively, as metaphor, as weapon, as salve, as a fundamental epistemology for living in the vortex of North America” (151). The specter – the ancestral spirit – does engage in a battle with memory and its fight is for the family, for a future with memory intact. The unrelenting nature comes from a place of determination; the story bearer must not only retrieve memory and preserve it, they must tangle with the trauma and get it right.

Is it possible that the ancestral spirit and story bearer are for a moment located in the same space? Both occupy a transitory space that operates in two worlds. The “space” is place of mediation, which provides an opportunity for understanding the past and connecting it with the future. This is where hearing and overhearing are presented. It is the place where middle methodologies begin. Hershini Bhana Young considers this haunted terrain, which she describes as “seething with ghosts who embody those stories about the relationships between power, knowledge, and experience” (11). She takes into consideration the fact that academic disciplines have differences in what is considered “Real”, especially when it comes to the high art of literature. However, she also locates the author as “both individual creator *and* embodied articulator, possessed by the spirits of the novel” (10). The story bearer who writes life history is more than an author possessed by characters; she is an intermediary between the truth of the past and present day understanding.

Piercing through time in a way that rouses attention is the purpose of haunting in each text discussed here. Those roused are the story bearers needed to perform a specific function in the present day, and who lack the foundational information or context to move forward. Patricia Hill Collins discusses that “piercing through” generations of black women in intertextual dialogue in Fighting Words:

“Although fostering dialogues among Black Women in the here and now is important, of greater significance is reconceptualizing Black women’s intellectual work as engaging in dialogues across time” (75)

Re-membering life history is an intellectual exercise and story bearers designated to engage in it are equipped and prepared for it. Dialoguing across time involves more than the passing of a torch. It is a rich engagement that contextualizes history and provides

directives for the future. In the temporal space where the ancestral spirit and story bearer commune together in a suspended moment to recover jewels of the past, one has to question why. Why *this* ancestral spirit and *that* story bearer? What is it about that moment that summons the ancestral spirit? What is happening in the present time that is calling for a decision to be made by the story bearer? Something more than a simple visitation is happening at the moment of haunting because disturbance is left behind. As intermediaries, both ancestral spirit and story bearer must be willing to take the disturbance on.

Ancestral spirits who haunt have a strong affinity for family and/or who feel a particular investment in an unmet need. Beloved is killed at the onset of reaching freedom. Maritcha Lyons dies before completing the narrative she promises her father. Philomene dies with only her name left behind in a two page account. Their story bearers pick up their mantles because of the desire for completion, and for the opportunity to present something new. Story bearers are risk takers. Lalita Tademy, disturbed by a “nagging and unmanageable itch” and “driven by a hunger (she) could not name” quit her executive career to follow a compulsion to recover family history (Cane River xv). She gives in to the disturbance in her gut that she knows is caused by Philomene. The passion in the story bearing mission is felt by the story bearer and her accomplices, the story carrier and ancestral intermediary. This is why Tademy feels the “unrelenting hand” of Philomene as she writes. Story bearing intermediaries are positioned mid-point and often at mid-stride in their lives and as such are engaged in middle methodologies.

Middle Methodologies

Middle methodologies incorporate the hidden transcripts Patricia Hill Collins discusses that provide access to knowledge through hidden positions and resources. She cites, in Fighting Words, kitchen tables, bus stops, and church as locations that black women use to freely express their knowledge – a resource that has been absent from legal narrative. (7) These locations are positioned en route – at a point moving toward a specific destination. Middle methodology exists mid-stride as work, worship, and daily activity take place. They are revelatory. The spirit world offers another location where alternative meaning-making takes place. Collins offers it as a space for black women to “grapple”, struggling to get ahold of themselves, their identity, and future possibilities.

“Without listening to those who have come before, how can Black women prepare an intellectual and political space for Black women who will confront future, reconfigured injustices?” (75)

Story bearing gives access to the spirit and spirit world by revealing the hidden transcripts and entering them into public discourse.

African American women who write about ancestral memory in literature and life history are often receptive to the authority or guidance of the ancestral spirit. While I was an assistant to another writer, Estella Conwill Majozo, I was given opportunity to see this type of grappling at work. An English professor, poet, and dramatist, Majozo designed her last name from the names of her sheroes Mary McLeod Bethune, Josephine Baker, and Zora Neale Hurston. So attuned to the spirit world, if a book fell while writing she paused and ask, “What does (the author) want to say?” She offered herself as a conduit and modeled for me a story bearing moment long before I considered it. In this way, her body is on the line midway between past and present, hidden history and revelation. This middle position is one that is welcomed by story bearers. The technical aspect of archival

research, ethnography, and literary production is combined with haunting and access to the ancestral spirit. These women insist on the legitimacy of places in the middle that may not always be accepted or understood.

In an interview, Bundles insists, “Some people feel compelled to be an investment banker and make as much money as they can. And why is that a more legitimate compulsion than ‘the ancestors are speaking to me?’ You do have to grapple with the spiritual piece”. Grappling is primary to a middle methodology, which includes ethnography and life history work, particularly with regard to developing counter-narratives. As bearers of the communal/familial story, these women do not simply carry or tell stories, but they shape and develop social justice projects of their words. As journalists, corporate executives, and academics their reputations are built on intellectual capabilities, solid research practices, and business savvy. However, it is because of their skill set and middle positioning that they are effective story bearers who are able to translate multiple worlds with credibility. Already on the table is the understanding that story bearing draws a certain skill set, access, agency, time, means, and urgency in order to accomplish it. Like other African Americans who code switch across racial and class divides, these story bearers discern and communicate language on multiple levels and are able to translate across varying realms and time.

CHAPTER FOUR HEIR/LOOMS AND LANDSCAPE

“We kept our familiar territory as familial territory”
from Lemon Swamp and Other Places, by Mamie Garvin Fields

“When I left my native place for the first time, I brought with me two artifacts from home that were emblematic of my growing up life, braided tobacco leaves and the crazy quilt Baba, mama’s mother, had given me when I was a young girl. These two totems were to remind me always of where I come from and who I am at my core.
from Belonging, by bell hooks

Something magical happens when a word is written on page. Sometimes it is not the power of the word or word placement or even the word selection. It is the written word itself and what is seen while unpacking it visually. Story bearers, in the way I see them, value language. The inflection of the story telling resonates and commands the hearer to remember. Every portion of it is to be remembered: the place the telling occurs, the storyteller and the actions that lead to the telling, the reasons why the telling happens, who is in the room and their actions, even the food shared ... all of it is necessary to draw memory. This chapter examines the ways in which material culture informs narrative history. Artifacts that the story bearers use uncover details reflective to a time period or culture. They serve various functions and purposes. Journals are read; chests are read into. Journal writers express thoughts and feelings, and incorporate subjective detail in their passages. Chests contain artifacts that story bearers interpret. They imagine the use and meaning, and the context for which the objects are stored. From them, story bearers develop a narrative that expresses the lives of ancestors who are the original owners of the artifact. This is a chapter about inheritance, and the heirs that not only receive an heirloom or lineage but participate in the restorative process of narration. The heirs – story bearers – narrate the cultural history that surrounds the heirloom. They narrate a more fully nuanced lineage as a result.

For bell hooks, artifacts that have special meaning represent her at her core; they establish her identity. Like the kin that offer her these heirlooms, she works with her hands. She comes from a Southern black working class community in a small rural town. While bell hooks spends over thirty years away from Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and leaves feeling like an oddity in that community, she writes, often locating her home place in the periphery of her thoughts. Braided tobacco leaves and a hand sewn quilt are symbols of home while away from home. They also bring about unresolved issues. The leaves are braided and the quilt is sewn by relatives she loves; however, Kentucky is for her a place of unhappy memories. She recalls, “They (Kentucky hills) represent the place of promise and possibility and the location of all my terrors, the monsters that follow me and haunt my dreams” (6). Hooks uses her text, Belonging: A Culture of Place, to resolve some of the conflicts she has with her childhood home. The wrestling she does to resolve her feelings of attachment and terror is reflective of many heirs who struggle with the lineage they are given. Heirlooms do not always bring feelings of joy. They are wrought with the complications of relationship among family members, of punishment, of favoritism, and of trauma. Narrating lineage can be making peace with the past in order to move on. Story bearers in previous chapters, particularly A’Lelia Bundles and Ione, strongly value material artifact, and they are especially informed by the heirlooms they hold in their possession. For Lalita Tademy, and for Danzy Senna and Mamie Garvin, home place directs their narrative search and is invaluable for adding color to their narrative histories. Artifacts and landscapes are opportunities for archival and archeological digs, and use the familiar as a site for the unfamiliar.

How does an old chest reflect value? How does that value go beyond the craftsmanship or the cost and cut of the wood? For the story bearer, chests contain valuable treasure. Each compartment stores trinkets that tell stories. In one, a pair of earrings that a child mistakes as diamonds sits. In another, an ornate vial of lipstick with its' gummy residue lay. A long drawer contains a stack of obituaries, a few love letters, and store receipts. The story bearer uses these to establish relationships, gauge passion in them, discover personal interests, and take stock of fads or costs of living. She gathers the details that bring color into the lives of the ancestors she researches. Material culture – ancestral heirlooms, family land, personal letters, homes – bring about personal connections to shared history. Life history is made in the personal. The story bearers reflected in this dissertation expand what is personal for them to contemporary issues of the day. They use features of the everyday through material culture to tell their stories. And, they are able to connect life history with the common, everyday experiences of others.

Artifacts have deep significance for these black women, story bearers whose bodies are living archives. The artifact is a talisman that transport them through time; a communicative device that allows for the transmission of narrative or narrative evidence. The story bearer's body is impacted by what she inherits and collects. She becomes the archive and is physically representative of her history. For example, A'Lelia Bundles *is* a Walker, descended from a fabled family of wealthy, socially connected woman. She embodies the archive of her maternal history, none more clearly than when she embraces her great great-grandmother, Madam Walker's, persona during speeches. A message of independence and social responsibility reaches across four generations to her

contemporary audiences. Her body is used as performative space. Ione utilizes that performative space through her dreams. It is in her dreams that ancestors like her aunt Sistonie and grandfather, Leigh Whipper, whom she calls Uncle Billy, guide and direct her. Her dreams are an archive that reveals artifacts that are significant to her narrative history. An example of this is shown in a dream she has of her grandfather's death.

“Uncle Billy comes to me and shows me two outlines on a sheet of paper. He says, “Here is a footprint of your great-grandmother. And here is a footprint of your great-grandfather.” I begin to color them with beautiful colors.” (128)

Ione's role is to follow the footprints and determine where they lead so that she can color her narrative history correctly. Clearly, for Bundles and Ione, representative of other story bearers, their archival bodies contain rather than merely obtain artifacts. Those bodies demonstrate in their daily lives, in their professions, and in the work they produce all that is contained there.

Prior to this type of demonstration the story bearer begins to build her archive as an heir. She is heir to her narrative history. Because of her specific role to recover and restore it, that narrative looms in memory until she is led to retrieve it. The story bearers use artifact and memory to weave together portions of what becomes a more complete narrative history of the family. The woven image is not always pretty; it fades and it frays. It is stained in places and has been mishandled. It is an heirloom that has not always been valued or stored properly. Yet it remains even in fragments. Until the heir arrives at her task, the revelation of the full story is left incomplete. Story bearers cherish fragments of narrative and revel in the sleuthing process of narrative recovery. Each ancestral guide, landmark location, and material object is a fragment that helps to complete the image of the narrative.

Heirs

Within two heirlooms, a trunk and antique chest, a curious little girl finds her calling. She is drawn to them, their many compartments, and the irresistible mysteries inside. Who is this little girl that spends hours of visits to her grandfather's apartment lifting lids and opening drawers to unearth trinkets three generations old? What is it about her that makes her so determined to tell their stories? She knows there is something important to do with what she finds. A'Lelia Bundles grows up to write stories for a living. Her fascination with compartments, and "*knowing* the things behind things" alluded to in Beloved leads to her effectiveness as a journalist (40). For Robin Bernstein, "A thing demands that people confront it on its own terms; thus, a thing forces a person into awareness of the self in material relation to the thing" (70). Bundles feels at home among her ancestors things. In fact, it is her relation to the heirlooms – in proximity and relationship – that firms her belief that she is anointed to the role of narrative mantle keeper. She writes in On Her Own Ground, "The Walker women – Madam, her daughter A'Lelia Walker and my grandmother Mae Walker – were already beckoning me at an early age, sometimes whispering, sometimes clamoring with the message that I must tell their story" (16). It is in the process of reaching among their heirloom pieces that she hears the whispers and is beckoned. As she inherits items and collects them in her home, and diligently organizes an archive of their papers, Bundles becomes story bearer.

Of all the priceless antiques she inherits, Bundles points to a tall green chest as a catalyst for her research. All of its many compartments represent the amount of sleuthing she has done in her efforts to retrieve Walker family history. The chest is among her earliest memories.

A'Lelia Bundles: I always had that memory that I carried with me somewhere in the back of my mind ... about being in my grandfather's apartment. And the way the apartment was set up, this is this green piece of furniture that was at the entry way.

Shanna: Remember I told you the quote that I found that I said "ok, this is story bearing ..." (reading a line from On Her Own Ground) "The Walker women were always beckoning ..."

A'Lelia Bundles: And that's from being in that bedroom - and that apartment.

Shanna: And that is what drew you to (narrative recovery) - the chest with all of the little compartments?

A'Lelia Bundles: Right.

Treasured items are displayed with love and respect in Bundles' home. These are not merely aged artifacts, but things continually meant to be used. Her home is not a sterile museum; it is warmed by a variety of blue hues. Her beloved chest sits near the entry of the living room. Though it once belongs to her great great-grandmother at the turn of the twentieth century, it is not cordoned off like an untouchable object. Despite the four generation it has remained in her family it is still a much used piece of furniture. On the last day of our visit a set of house keys and copies of On Her Own Ground are tossed – not arranged – upon it. For some collectors, it would be enclosed in an area separate from the public. For Bundles, who plans to donate it to the National Museum of African American History and Life one day, it is meant for every day use. Her reverence for history is performed differently. Hers is much like the point of view taken in Alice Walker's short story, "Everyday Use", when one sister, Wangero "Dee", with sudden interest in heritage, decides to take ancestral quilts and butter churns for art instead of using it like the other sister, Maggie, plans to do. Like Maggie, Bundles lives with the

ancestral every day. Madam C.J. Walker is family, and her things take on a meaning that is deeper than high art.

Bundles' handling of the heirlooms passed down to her marks her with the imprint of family.

In popular culture, a “big reveal” is the dramatic outcome for the tedious process of restoration. In the restoration process, a valued person or object is restructured or revitalized and brings something new to its foundation. Audiences look forward to the “reveal” after participating by proxy with the restoration process. The story bearer is that participatory audience who climbs into interior spaces and helps to bring about something new as the life history project is revealed. That climb into interiority is risky. Some ancestral containers are marked private, and unearth deeply personal or unsavory information that the story bearer must navigate. A'Lelia Bundles has not only made a career of climbing into these interior spaces, she has made a home for herself in interiority. She has developed two rooms – an office of story boards, bookcases, dolls, art, and figurines and an archival space of file cabinets, crates, and packing boxes. Each artifact adds, informs, or provides nuance to her ancestral biographies. It is tedious, solitary work. Yet she takes the responsibility for story bearing work as her mantle, and as a devoted heir. This responsibility is demonstrated poignantly when she says to me:

“You’ve seen my upstairs ... the ancestors are there. They’ve left their pieces of paper. You think of ... why are there Historical Societies? Why are these there? They are to preserve (primarily white American) history. They have this compulsion to preserve their history ... so they survive, so they know they exist. That’s what we do. That’s why we do what we do. We want people to know that we existed. And that is the ancestors who are telling us that from their graves.”

The sentiment of ancestors calling from the grave also matches Ione’s feelings about her own maternal history. Growing up frustrated with the silences among the

women who raise her, her mother, grandmother, and aunt, she connects readily with her newly discovered great-grandmother, Frances Rollin Whipper. What she connects with most is the journal Whipper leaves behind. In Pride of Family she describes poring over the pages from the moment she receives it, staying up all night. More, in our conversation she talks about the personal impact that this journal – and this great-grandmother’s presence – has on her life:

“It was completely profound. It was referred to as a depth charge. Completely did what a depth charge does ... it opened things up. It was also wounding. It was going to involve a major part of my entire life. In fact my discovery of this person who’s writing this diary and her life, which I knew absolutely nothing about (was going to be an important part of her life). And, it was also kind of scary in that sense. It was frightening; it was exciting; it was intriguing. And I knew it was changing my life.”

Depth charges refer to underwater bombs that are pre-set to detonate against a particular target at a specifically timed moment. Ione already feels that she and her great-grandmother have an especially symbiotic relationship. Whipper dies in 1901, thirty-six years before Ione is born. Yet, through her comments Ione believes their meeting through journaled pages is a pre-ordained moment. Ione understands herself to be the story bearer – the lineage holder for her narrative history. The moment she holds the journal in her hands, her story bearing in earnest begins. The journal is representative of the detonated depth charge. At the moment of paradox – explosion and illumination – she accepts her mission. While it is her personal mission, she soon realizes how much of her life history is in public hands. She is an heir but not the only heir to her family’s private artifacts.

What happens when personal memorabilia becomes public, or in possession of the public? Dorothy Sterling uses the copy of Frances Whipper’s journal while writing We

Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century in 1984. Sterling eventually gives the journal to Whipper's great-granddaughter, Ione, who uses excerpts of it for her own memoir, Pride of Family: Four Generations of Women of Color in 1991. Whipper's journal is reflective of the experiences and personal reflections of black women during the nineteenth century. It adds revelatory perspective to American history. Sterling sends the journal to Ione, who, entranced, waits until late at night when her children are asleep to begin to read. She discovers an ancestor that, like her, is a traveling vagabond who journals and writes, is a free spirit and strongly independent figure. However, Frances Whipper does so as a black woman in the nineteenth century, a time when it is nearly unheard of and dangerous. Whipper's journal is deeply personal for Ione but is also invaluable for the general public as a rare, tangible artifact that expresses daily life for a free and educated black woman. She is the unmarried Frances Rollin at the time that she writes of attending literary salons to hear Charles Dickens. Whipper socializes with Lewis Hayden and his wife, whose home is a station for the Underground Railroad. As a writer, she asks for critique from the well known abolitionist, Wendell Phillips. She is commissioned to write a biography of Martin Delaney, another famous abolitionist and prominent race man. Ione goggles at this ancestor, noting, "I remembered my grandfather's pronouncements about the Whippers – all those great men of worth. But Frances Rollin's diary seemed to be about a different world, and it was begun before she was even married to a Whipper" (103). The journal is among the earliest known diaries written by a black woman, and still well preserved. It is the epitome of a counter-narrative, quite an heirloom for Ione to hold in her possession.

However, Ione writes about feeling resentful that other artifacts are out of the hands of the family – out of her hands. Her grandfather, Leigh Whipper, donates a scrapbook and other material to the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. In shock, she studies the scrapbook and finds herself listed in the pages. There is an inscription that reads:

Autograph Album of
Mrs. Frances Rollin Whipper
Nee
Frances Ann Whipper
Wife of Judge William J. Whipper
Mother of
Alicia Whipper, Winifred Rollin Whipper, Ionia Rollin Whipper, Mary
Elizabeth Whipper, Leigh Rollin Whipper
Grandmother of Leighla Frances Whipper Ford
James Myles Whipper
Leigh Whipper, Jr.
Great Grandmother of
Carole Ione Lewis

Ione describes feeling, “a bit like going to the moon and finding my name inscribed there on a rock” (139). She finds herself inserted into a public history – a lineage listing that is similar to scriptural passages of the Bible. Yet, she is conflicted. “I wanted to take the album with me; I didn’t have enough time to study it. It seemed that it should belong to me, but it was the property of the library now, and I had to leave it there” (141).

Life history that is written and published by story bearers, especially those with a public platform, is used by them as a public gift. The artifacts and archives belong to story bearers, they often believe, and to the family. And, their research and constructed project is a communal offering, one they can all share in.

Landscapes and Lineage

Story bearing is personal project with communal intentions. For a large portion of this “Tell Me My Diamonds”, literature is the resulting project. However, narrative is expressed in multiple ways. The story bearer chooses how family history and memory is to be preserved. Film is another avenue to express narrative, and two women-directed films, “Down in the Delta” and “Eve’s Bayou” present elements of story bearing the ways they are utilized in this dissertation. “Down in the Delta” offers particular attention to landscape and home place. Ancestral figures and heirloom artifacts are equally tied to the Mississippi Delta, the site of the family home. “Eve’s Bayou” offers an element of ancestral “touching” where particular familial traits are passed down generations. The young Eve Batiste, who is the film’s narrator, is given a mantle as ‘seer’ by her Aunt Mozelle Batiste Delacroix. The mantle is an unhappy one for Mozelle, who is viewed as a black widow who betrays and outlives her many husbands. Each film ties together the fortunes and misfortunes that arise in any lineage. However, both “Down in the Delta” and “Eve’s Bayou” offers hope and familial restoration at the end.

Lineage

Eve, the young narrator in the film “Eve’s Bayou”, is born to carry out her role in the family. She notes early the lineage of her family, that hers is descended from Eve and Jean Paul Batiste. Not only is she named for her ancestor, she embodies the ancestral gift of “sight” that is passed among the women in her family. Not all have this gift; Eve has it but her older sister, Cecily, does not. “Sight” is a gift she shares with her paternal aunt, Mozelle Baptiste Delacroix. However, the role of seer is demonstrated by the touch of hands. The seer reaches out her hands and the one who needs insight touches hands with her. That touch uncovers the truth and the seer visualizes the trauma. These seers

literally bear snapshots of narrative from all who engage them. They bear narrative and help heal what has occurred.

Kasi Lemmon's 1997 film explores the black woman's body as "seeing" archive, whose touch retrieves memory. The seeing woman is story bearer. Her hands see and feel and file away significant portions of narrative. However, this position is carefully nuanced to reflect an ancestral gift given to select family members and the burden that this gift creates. It is Eve, as seer, who narrates the trauma experienced by her family during the summer her father is killed. His death is only the culmination of several traumas that family members face. Eve is nine and she spies on them, collects information. She knows about her father's affairs, her aunt's inability to keep a husband alive, and her sister's obsession with their father. Everyone has a point of view concerning their problems, but the "seeing touch" reveals the truth. Sometimes that truth is unbearable, and viewers witness the seer – Eve or Mozelle – struggle with what they are shown. In the touch is a transfer of power, the seer decides to comfort or profit from what they know.

What the film ultimately demonstrates is the process of a story bearer's development. The child who is the story bearing figure is not mature enough to operate fully in her role. This is where development, whether through education, training, or professionalization, come in. There is not always a mentor to model behavior after. Eve has her aunt, but Mozelle is a troubled woman. She uses her gifts as voodoo, and profits by selling her sight in private consultation. We are not clear how Eve ultimately uses hers as an adult. However, the film reveals her championing her sister when her sister experiences severe trauma by their father. She uses her gift to bring closure to that

trauma, and eventually narrates the events that unfold that summer. Perhaps her narration is a life history that, like Shirlee Haizlip, exposes deep familial pain that is common to her audience. Life histories presented in this way prompt discussion, revelation, and change.

As a story bearer, Eve privileges memory. She opens the film with her belief that “memory is a collection of images, some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain. Each image is like a thread, each tread a tapestry woven together. And the tapestry tells a story, and the story is our past”. Her sentiments express what I believe about story bearing, which is process of weaving together narrative history. As written earlier, sometimes the product is worn and unattractive. Over the years narrative history accumulates stains and tears, and it can come unraveled. However, the process of story bearing repairs damage done in families. Its narrative is an artifact, woven by hands that express what they see of it.

What happens when that artifact is separated from its site of origin? What can the site of origin tell of the artifact and narrative history?

Landscape

“Down in the Delta” a 1998 film directed by Maya Angelou, brings together lineage and location to explore tension and rupture within a family. Relationships among Sinclair family members have splintered sending various branches to urban centers away from the southern familial home site. Personal failures, poor communication, even contemporary urban “contamination” contribute to the dysfunction. Yet, the coming together of family and formal retelling of its lineage – dysfunction and all – help repair and restore its value. Close proximity to family members upon their return exposes

ruptures in relationships and allows for needed confrontation. The value of proximity can be examined here in various ways. Chicago housing projects, where Loretta Sinclair and her children live with her mother, Rosa Lynn, are cramped and confining, and lends itself to the contamination of drug addiction and under-employment. The Atlanta suburbs, where her cousin Will Sinclair lives with his family, houses a prosperous middle class that forms elitist attitudes towards the working class Delta of Mississippi. Both branches are ambivalent about the family history. A distant proximity to home sites can reflect a distant attitude and mindset against it. When family members are drawn together and housed in a small home within a lush rural landscape, none of them can get away from confrontation. They cannot escape history. The Mississippi Delta is bruised, and the blacks with history there have been harmed by racism and poverty. However, the bruised location in this film becomes a space for healing. Ruptured space offers opportunity to investigate the ruptures; somewhere in it is a mechanism for healing. For the Sinclair family, the only escape from trauma is to confront it on its' own ground.

Some of the most interesting things about the film are the varied dysfunctions of the family. Featured are the effects of Alzheimer's disease, autism, parental drug addiction, urban crime and poverty, class difference within families, and lack of communication among parents and adult children. Those dynamics contribute to the remembered, disremembered, and recovered family history. Each dysfunction is exposed but not all are addressed or comfortably resolved. But, the process for restoration is begun. This is the reality for contemporary families. Perhaps resolution is not the point. The point is restoring relationship and opening lines of communication. The point is that each person is a member of one familial body. In the body, each limb functions

differently but is still connected to one another. One part may not function at capacity or not at all, but the body as a whole is still able to survive.

Landscape is significant for reuniting the familial body. Variations of return, whether to the South, to rural areas, or to the countryside, symbolize home and home sites. In fact, the title “Down in the Delta” implies a slip back/ward and signifies as a site for a painful black historical past. However, it is home. The home site may be impoverished or in pain but remains a place of origin. For many black families a “homecoming” is a welcome return to places of origin in order to recapture relationships and re-acknowledge kinship and a shared past. For many black families a homecoming is a celebration; a welcome return to sites of origin. It brings about a time to recapture relationships, kinship, and a shared past. Often these homecomings stir up tension, pain, and trauma. They also offer forgiveness, acceptance, and love. Home and home sites are where certain knowledges are stored: knowledge of history, nature, and survival. Leaving home - for example, leaving for urban environments - does not necessarily mean progress. In the film, urban areas appear to bring about the disintegration of the family. Alfre Woodard’s character, Loretta, is drug addicted, under-educated, and unemployed. Living with her mother in the Chicago projects, she is unable to provide for her two children effectively. For Loretta, coming home means being in a “wholesome” rural environment, learning a new skill in the family trade, and ultimately becoming the story carrier for the family.

Location is also a factor for the cultural artifacts that stores family narrative. Artifacts help initiate story telling. Often they are central to a plot and operate as participatory figures in a narrative. For the Sinclair family, a central figure is a

candelabrum that family members name “Nathan”. The naming of the candelabrum is also representative of family history. “Nathan” is handed down among generations of the family. The designated handler of the candelabrum in that generation is responsible for the narrative attached to it. In essence, that person is the story bearer. The Nathan that this heirloom is named for is the patriarch of the Sinclair family. He had been sold during enslavement and carried off in front of his family. Nathan is sold to pay off a debt that his owner incurs. Enraged, his son, Jesse, steals a valuable candelabrum from the plantation owners in retaliation. That item, named “Nathan” represents the traumatic moment of losing his father, the impact that enslavement has on the family, and his feelings about keeping his family intact. “Nathan” is reflective of traumatic memory but the family keeps it in order to keep Nathan’s presence with them. A paradox, “Nathan” is representative of the dissolution of family *and* of familial connectedness. “Nathan” as a storytelling object is interesting. A point of contention within the family is in determining who “owns” Nathan. There are multiple story carriers within a family; however I maintain that there is one singular story bearer within a span of generations. A few of the characters in “Down in the Delta” struggle with “owning” the family artifact, “owning” the family narrative, and deciding who is designated to pass down the narrative. Another conflict within the film is where “Nathan” will be kept. At the start of the film, “Nathan” is kept in Chicago with Loretta’s mother. However its rightful home is in the Mississippi Delta, where the family home is located and where the original “incident” takes place. The tension presented here raises several questions:

- Is the story transferrable?
- Is the story owned by the collective family or by an individual, and how is the individual selected?

- What happens when the storytelling object is no longer in the family? (At one point “Nathan” is pawned)

Loretta becomes the story carrier in the film. “Nathan” comes into her possession and it is likely she will pass it on to her son, Thomas. She is selected not only because her father was the last designated “owner”, but by the films end, she becomes the one invested in the family land and business. Story bearing and class take on a different trajectory. Though the outliers for A’Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Haizlip, and Ione as story bearers connect directly to their education, experience, and skill set, for Loretta, what matters most is her devotion to the family and to her heritage. She is the one who takes up the mantle for remembering the narrative and caring for “Nathan”. Loretta is representative of the story carrier, who carries the oral narrative and who ultimately corroborates with the story bearer who preserves the narrative in writing or as a public memorial. Her position – and class, lifestyle, and education difference - is juxtaposed with her cousin Will, who is college educated lawyer living a middle class lifestyle in Atlanta with his wife and children. However, he has a strained relationship with his parents, does not have a strong connection with the family property, and does not ensure his children’s relationship with either. His wife discourages visits to his childhood home. He is not likely to return and remain “home” in the Delta as Loretta chooses to do. He has the means, but does not have the urgency or desire to be story carrier or story bearer. All of this highlights the fact that the story carrier and story bearer positions are “called” positions. Not everyone in the family carries out these particular roles.

The fractured nature of some familial relationships causes story bearing to be a necessary function within families. Family connectedness is the most significant component. Relationship is the hinge on which everything else is built. Knowledge of

family narrative is significant; however, there has to be a willingness to hear *and* remember it, and to pass it forward to succeeding generations. Care for heirlooms – narrative or artifact – surpasses any educational gap, lack of skill set, or difference in class dynamic. Craft of the written document is secondary to the careful handling of oral narrative.

Place and Personhood

Home place as a site of origin and homecoming is significant to narratives discussed, to the extent that several locations including Cane River, Red River, and Lemon Swamp are used to name life histories by Lalita Tademy and Mamie Garvin Fields. The imprint of the location looms heavily in the memories of those who live there and the descendents who make their return periodically. Those locations are meaningful as starting points in the story bearing process as places to retrieve information and identify material culture that informs life history.

In the life histories of the black women I study, home places are prominent characters within the family narrative. Familial landscapes are portrayed with distinctive personas; they act in ways that shape, direct, and alter the lives of human characters. It is also a living figure; it has shape and dimension and its reach is felt in positive and sinister ways. Whether looked upon with fondness or fear, home places exist as an ancient relative that upon the story bearer's return sheds light on family, community, and culture. It also brings about a revelatory experience for the story bearer about their role in the family and unique connectedness to the narrative, history, and landscape.

As a home place, it is a site for return. Home place serves as a locational marker that determines relationship, direction, community map, and warning. In Lemon Swamp,

Mamie Garvin Fields navigates her past by re-membering her homeplace and utilizing placement. By recalling place with her granddaughter and co-author, Karen Fields, she re-members and restructures it visually. *This* place is connected with *this* person who means *that* to us. *That* place affected our family *this* way and *this* is why it is significant. Place establishes connection and placement determines the meaning of those connections. Examples of the fluidity of the character of place and its significant in terms of memory are shared below, from the recollections of Mamie Garvin Fields:

Place as warning:

“One white family lived in our neighborhood that I would just as soon lived someplace else. They had a three-storey house one the corner of Rutledge Avenue and Spring Street, and one night I saw one of the men come to the window, dressing, and he saw me. What made me look up I don’t know; maybe the light caught my eye. But good Lord, when I looked up, there was this man putting on the sheets of the Ku Klux Klan. I went off from that corner, put my head down, and ran, ran, ran, ran like the devil was behind me. I told Mother and Dad. Charleston had a law to keep the Klan out, but I don’t believe they reported. You couldn’t know what might come of going downtown to report – and those white people were close by, our neighbors” (19)

Place as relationship:

“Delia searched all her life for the family she had lost in Louisiana, but in the meantime she claimed all the people in our two houses kin Cousin Delia never went back to Red River, White Bank. She just lost all her family to slavery. When she died, our people in Charleston had to bury her” (16)

Place as community map:

“Because of Aunt Harriet and later Cousin Lala, No. 7 Short Court was a kind of neighborhood headquarters. Insurance day became a regular social hour for the community. People from way around the corner came. Everyone would get around Aunt Harriet’s big table to pay their premiums and have the books marked. After finishing the business, the women would put their children on the porch or in the yard, then come back inside and exchange news” (22)

Place as direction:

“If you went on down that block to Bogard and turned, you would come to the home of Dr. Hubert Miller, one of our black general practitioners, and

then to the home of Reverend Gandy, pastor of our Central Baptist Church ... But let's keep walking down Bogard and turn at the next corner, onto Ashley's Avenue. There we would find the Perry family, the Blythewoods, and then the Bricklayer's Hall, built and kept up by the men of the union" (19)

As she shares memories of her home place with her granddaughter, Mamie Garvin Fields bequeaths her a memory map to serve as a backdrop for their family history. Names, dates, and disconnected stories and identifiers are tied to something significant: a community. Disparate details come together and take on various attributes and personalities. For Fields, one place held warm memories of mother's socializing and children playing *while* acknowledging the serious business of women organizing to care for the sick, the dying, and the poor. A singular place can maintain dual purposes in different, yet significant ways. Another place can bring about sinister feelings and serve as a warning on the proximity of danger. As a child her reference point was a supportive form of neighborliness, yet she discovers all residents do not proscribe to the being or doing of neighborliness. However, she can still recall points of pride in a sort of landmark parade. Fields can present her granddaughter a mental walking tour of key figures and locations to shed light what and who makes up the neighborhood. Place has a hand in rearing children and in establishing kinship relationships, as done with the displaced Aunt Delia.

Through her life history, Fields brings a perspective of family and place as a crest or shield that identifies the lineage, history, and all of the nuances brought about by the family name and homeplace – character, purpose, and reputation. In the introduction to Lemon Swamp, Karen Fields acknowledges that “this familial coat had the special property of making the (homeplace) home” (xvii). The familial coat acts as a crest

extending a banner of introduction, verification, and protection. It is representative of the individual only as she is connected and covered by all of the many branches of her family, and its reputation. For Karen, in relation to her understandings of Kongo people, “knowing how the village was built, how one belongs to it, and how one must therefore conduct oneself amount to the same thing” (xvii).

Lemon Swamp offers an additional perspective to the experience of story bearing, and the peculiar relationship of the ancestral spirit and story bearer. Karen Field’s ancestral intermediary is still living, and both Karen and Mamie Fields participate as story bearers. Mamie Garvin Fields is not content to merely inspire the narrative as a guide, as ancestral spirits often do, nor is she satisfied to inform it through facts, material items, and storytelling, as story carriers provide. Grandmother and granddaughter write side by side to collect, transcribe, and correct the manuscript, and operate uniquely as story bearing team. This is unusual. Both felt the urgency to do the work and to produce Lemon Swamp as a narrative legacy to present to the family. In her 90s as the oldest living member of her family, Mamie Garvin Fields understands her role as memory holder. Poignantly, she recalls her own grandfather, Hannibal, who stridently prays over his family.

“He went on praying for everybody there, and then he prayed for everybody not there. He would remember in prayer all who had passed on. He wouldn’t consider himself through praying until he had remembered even “the unborn children” (245)

She insists to her granddaughter that other children are waiting to hear and lay claim to the narrative, which is why they *must* do the work – together. It is one thing to share the stories during reunion; it is another to reveal it in a particular context to create an aural and visual picture of history and place it in context with greater American history. This

relationship – this collaboration among family members two or more generations apart – provides context for Sherley Ann Williams description in *Dessa Rose*, when Dessa insists that her grandchild write and orally repeat their narrative history.

“This is why I have it wrote down, why I has the child say it back. I will never forget Nemi trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands. Well, *this* the childrens have heard from our own lips” (236)

In this scenario, Dessa, an escaped slave, shares her narrative with her grandchild, the “child” who is the one designated with the responsibility to preserve it orally and in writing. Throughout a significant portion of her life Nehemiah (Nemi), a white male writer, seeks to use and re-imagine her story as a fugitive for his own financial gain. However, Dessa stresses the importance of possessing one’s own story. Both grandmothers – Mamie and Dessa – recognize the necessity of leaving a narrative inheritance behind for future generations. More than that, it is understood that at least one child needs to bear it. For them it means the grandchild must have a contextual understanding of narrative history, hear it correctly, and value it. It is especially significant that each grandmother takes ownership of the narrative and its production, and insists upon certifying a correct rendering of it. At one time, black writers of slave narratives needed to have a notable white figure authenticate the narrative in writing, lending credibility to it. Here, the ancestor authenticates her own story.

Crooked Paths: Faulty Narratives

For Danzy Senna, the process for narrative recovery proves difficult while piecing together her paternal history. The narrative her grandmother tells contains gaps and what little narrative her father tells of his home place is shrouded in mystery. “He seemed to have sprung from nowhere” (8) she writes of him in her memoir Where Did You Sleep Last Night? Like Carla Peterson, Senna makes do with scraps to direct her search. She

uncovers the dimensions of both her maternal and paternal histories from what she considers a “sideways” perspective. A “sideways” perspective constantly reads cultural markers and signs, and reads into silences, in order to recover narrative history (13). For Senna, the use of the term scraps does not completely reflect her absence of narrative. She additionally employs terms like fragments, shards, and gaps to express her disappointment with how little she knows of her family. Senna describes her mother’s privileged, blue blood Boston history as having a lengthy tail that leaves its mark on American history widely while her father’s underprivileged, black Southern history leaves nearly no tale at all (16). Juxtaposing “tail” and “tale” as representative of her understanding of her maternal and paternal histories suggests a legacy of pain, whether by weighty, serpent-like influence or through fabrication. Already ensconced in her mother’s storied Howe and Quincy lineage, she chooses to take on her father’s history – her faulty narrative inheritance.

Senna begins to look at her paternal grandmother, Anna, whom she calls Nana, and sees her name as an anagram reflective of a life out of sync. To her, “Nana’s” identity is “a scrambling of signifiers that kept her safe from detection” (28). Her memoir, Where Did You Sleep Last Night?, is her attempt at “reassembling” of her grandmother, her father, and even herself. She struggles to provide them all a consistent narrative, one that can tuck more securely around the family body that presently makes due with tattered remnants of truths and faulty information. Senna’s story bearing begins with her grandmother Anna because her life is where her father life history seems to begin and end (30). Her father, Carl Senna, is an alcoholic and intermittent in her and her sibling’s lives. The memoir appears to be an attempt to rectify their difficult relationship

and fill in the gaps of his particular family history. He shares with his children an article about his father, Francisco Senna, a Mexican boxer with the moniker, “The Cisco Kid”. She writes, “We clung to the few details we gleaned from the throwaway article, repeated them when necessary, to explain our name, to explain our features, and it was the very lack of information that allowed Francisco to become a man of myth” (33). Despite what Senna describes as “strange cracks in the official story” and the uneasy notion that her grandmother seems to have been “impregnated by a ghost”, the story was accepted because it was all they had . . . until she begins to connect dots from very thin air.

There is a children’s nursery rhyme, “There Was a Crooked Man”, that aptly describes the trek Senna and her father take down South together to unravel his narrative history. It reads in part: “There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile” (67). Their travel led them to small Bayou towns outside New Orleans with names like Houma and Jennings. On the first day touring the towns, with her father narrating his memories of the culture and his childhood, they looked for landscape markers in vain. The Verrett family home had been razed, “Ma” Verrett’s gravesite unfound. Even their search for “authentic” soul food is in vain, unable to locate it under various on-the-street-told directions. They could not find the past they were looking for. To preface the trip, Senna says of her father:

In place of a flesh-and-blood black family, in place of black roots, in place of a coherent black community with a history w could touch or feel, he grew obsessed with the idea of blackness, the idea of race, and how to hammer racial consciousness home to his three light-skinned children” (35)

Part of the difficulty of their travel is the perception of race. Danzy Senna is bi-racial, yet reads “white”; she appears to be a young white woman traveling South with her older

black boyfriend. They both endure hostile looks on their simultaneous heritage tour. “The fact was, nobody thought we looked related” she says. She later reveals that a university official refuses to share her grandmother’s college records because, as she is nearly Caucasian looking, she does not resemble her brown skinned grandmother. Story bearing involves more than surface-deep narratives and experiences. It unearths pain, unresolved conflict, and errors in understanding that is often tangled into the landscape of origin. The shotgun house where a family (un)comfortably lived is gone, but memory of it, how it made various occupants feel, and what happened there remains. The difference in Danzy Senna’s story bearing is that like Karen Fields, she is able to take a forebear along for the journey as a witness. Carl Senna does not participate in the writing, like Mamie Garvin Fields, nor does he view the experience, history, or revelations that Danzy does in the same way. Ultimately, her memoir causes contention within her family, who disagree with what she chooses to present publically.

Senna comes to realize there is a multiplicity of perspectives found on their journey, shown through various eyes. There is her father’s nostalgic yearning for recognition, her own curious, often disappointed gaze, and the view of the long-time neighbors, who see Danzy and her father as hometown folk who “made good” as writers. Senna’s awareness of these perspectives, and her particular feelings and disappointments, reveal the complexity of story bearing. The initial expectations are often not the reality of what is found while going through the excavating process. Her father’s crooked path becomes her own. After time together in Louisiana, she travels again alone, with her father’s written instruction, to Alabama. What is interesting is how she arrives at her point of reckoning. She asks herself:

“So why was I here, hundreds of miles from the comforts of my home, in a parking lot to a Catholic church in dirt-poor Prichard, Alabama, formerly known as Africatown, searching for a witness who had known my father fifty-plus years ago?”

Senna's question and her bluntly honest memoir bring an added feature to my understanding of story bearing. Initially, the vision of A'Lelia Bundles and Lalita Tademy as anointed into story bearing by long-dead ancestors – the idea of haunting – is alluring. The idea of generational touching is attractive; however the reality of the actual process for story bearing is more tedious than seductive. The presence of Danzy Senna, who mentions nothing about haunting but admits her disillusionment with the recovery process, is refreshing. She describes unfruitful treks and the personal and financial cost of the journey. These are practical things that are not mentioned in the notes or narrative of the other story bearers. Senna's experience is important to this study because she signifies that a call is not enough. Home places may not be truly a home, but a site of origin. Though the haunting here is not viscerally seen, it is felt. As is noted in earlier chapters, there is a certain amount of privilege that is assigned to the position of the story bearer. Senna is an English professor and acclaimed writer, but in the South she is a foreigner. She arrives with questions and leaves with more.

Life history writing grapples with Danzy Senna's unsettled feelings. To John Caughey, in his text Negotiating Cultures, life history research is shifting ground, an uncertain terrain that reveals possibilities for struggle. He argues that “The comparison between one's own life and someone else's sheds important light on the cultural dimensions of both lives as well as on the cultural nature of the issues with which all humans struggle” (xii). Exposing breeches in understanding offers possibilities for new insight. Life history work is uncomfortable business. The story bearer is positioned

outside the fray and inside the moment of disturbance. Her gaze has the ability to move from protective distance to that of the vulnerable observer. In order for story bearing to be accomplished in life history, the story bearer must be willing to be vulnerable to access all elements that direct her to completion. Story bearing and life history making involves accountability to the self, as well as to story carriers, intermediaries, and other invested members of the life history. There is also accountability to the narrative. Where does narrative take you? What does the narrative reveal? Full participation is not only necessary in the story bearing tradition, it is required.

Despite her misgivings, Senna, like other story bearers, feels the urgency to continue her research. As found in Red River, there is the official documentation of history and then there is the oral history. It is the whispered rumors that are believed. Danzy Senna is told two stories about her grandmother, Anna's, birth. Anna is told that she is adopted after her sixteen-year-old mother dies in childbirth. Senna is told, on one of her visits, that Anna is raised to believe that her sixteen-year-old mother is her sister. Anna is never adopted into her family, she is already a member. The adoption story saves face for the entire family. Danzy is uncertain of the facts and uncertain of her relationship with the family she visits. However, "Danzy" is a family name. Another young cousin shares the name and roots are entwined despite uncertainties of bloodline or narrative fact or fiction. She admits, "The information about my parents – both my father's childhood of poverty and displacement, and my mother's childhood of privilege – had always been there for me to find and to see. But I had never looked" (119). However, for her own infant son, she has other desires:

“I want history to be something he’s heard of, read about, knowledgeable about, but something he’s no confined by, controlled by, limited by. And of course I know this is impossible” (166)

For Senna, travel to the South is uncomfortable, sometimes unfruitful. Or is it?

In the narratives of Lalita Tademy, A’Lelia Bundles, and Carla Peterson, travels to the family home place brings about a sense of heritage and pride. Their life histories exist as memorials to the location of the home site as much as it is to their families. What happens when the home place is not home? What happens when there is a disconnection and uneasiness – even a suspicion – of the grounds that are covered? At the end of the first leg of her journey to Louisiana, unresolved issues with her father remain even after they part. As she moves forward, she questions every person she meets as if doubting the authenticity of their kinship. Does it matter? Kinship ties do not always equate family ties or blood relationship. She gains a better understanding of her parents and how their crooked past directly impacts the narrative she is told. She is given a faulty narrative inheritance and must decide how to proceed. By the end of her memoir, she has married and given birth to a son. She tells about a holiday dinner her divorced parents, siblings, and all of their families share together. Gathered around the table are the members that make up her family: people who are black, white, Indian, British, Pakastani, and their multi-racial progeny. At the conclusion there is left a sense that Senna recounts her trip to bring resolution to her conflicting feelings of family before she starts her own. The image here demonstrates that bringing a variety of tastes to the table does not mean that every dish is enjoyed, but that by the end everyone is satisfied.

There is no heirloom talisman that ignites a passion in her for story bearing. She is not visited by an ancestral spirit and feels no home place connection with her father’s

Southern roots. Yet, she is still a story bearer. She is still driven to do story bearing work in ways she cannot articulate. Perhaps the root of story bearing does not always reside in outside visitations, but in internal disturbances. Her father is her talisman – a living emblem of what is unresolved in her. His – and her grandmother’s – past is rich with untapped resource, and this is alluring for her writer-self. In all, Senna’s journey to her home place does not endear her, nor does it have to in order to effectively produce her life history. It is sometimes difficult to determine whether story bearing is a call to or a call from the past, or if the present is merely calling for resolution.

Troublesome relationships with home place are not unusual for black feminist social critic, bell hooks. Growing up in Kentucky, a complex state that borders both the Mid West and the South, she looks forward to finding a new home anywhere else but there. As she considers places to make home, hooks journals these thoughts:

“Like many of my contemporaries I have yearned to find my place in this world, to have a sense of homecoming, a sense of being wedded to a place. Searching for a place to belong I make a list of what I will need to create firm ground. At the top of the list I write: “I need to live where I can walk ... Walking, I will establish my presence, as one who is claiming the earth, creating a sense of belonging, a culture of place”.

And at the time it would never have occurred to me, not even remotely, to consider returning to my native place. Yet ultimately Kentucky is where my journey in search of place ends.” (2)

The expansive gap of silence that surrounds her parent’s histories, her father’s history in particular, leaves Danzy Senna unable to articulate for herself a complete narrative history.

Her trip South, accompanied in part with her father, provides her an articulable history through direct verbal exchange with family and family-like figures of her father’s past.

For bell hooks, it became important as a young woman that she create a “narrative map of

the past, to write down the experiences of childhood that ... were vital imprints” (17).

The narrative map that hooks establishes is both visual and aural; it recalls the narrative she tells of herself, the representation she presents by rote. She does this view herself as whole, instead of the fragmented self she often believes herself to be (18). Senna intentionally recreates footprints, rendering visible the missing aspects that shapes her father’s dysfunction and, indirectly, her own. She also views her life as one of fragments, partially viewed and partially hidden. The difference between the experiences of the two is obvious: they experience the return to home place differently. Danzy Senna’s return is to the home/not home; places she has never lived nor visited, had not context for or narrative understanding. Oppositely, bell hooks’ return is to her state of origin, a place with whom she has a history of running to and from.

How significant is making such a return home, in either writer’s context? In the chapter entitled “Kentucky is My Fate”, hooks writes:

“As the elders who had given generously given of their stories, their wisdom, their lives to make it possible for me, and folks like me, to live well, more fully, began to pass away, it was only a matter of time before I would be called to remembrance, to carry their metaphysical legacy into the present”. “They revealed to me the treasure I was seeking her already mine. All my longing to belong, to find a culture of place ... was waiting for me in Kentucky to remember and reclaim” (21).

Both Senna and hooks realize they owe a debt - for hooks to the ancestors who nurtured her, and for Senna, to herself. However, what hooks alludes to in her comments reflects her call to story bearing. As discussed previously, story bearing is more than a mystical call from ancestral spirits, more than the seduction of the haunting. It requires work, skill, and preparation. It costs. Home places are not always comfortably home, family can be difficult, and kinship often implies other than blood relationship. From hooks’

experience, her feelings with exile brought her closer to home and perhaps prepared her more for her role as story bearer. Distance brings about an alternative perspective. It enhances the role and position of the middle, and its subsequent methodology. Again, the position of the middle allows for one to hear and over hear; to synthesize the call to the life history and present the life history project as social action with clarity. The middle is a fluid positioning. It is how the initial artifact melds with landscape, working together to create the narrative and make home place home. Both artifact and home place reflect the “there” that story bearers must make their return to in order to reassemble what has been missing, lost, and waiting for recovery. As hooks also notes, what she needed was there all the time. From that position of “there”, how does the story bearer then develop her project in a way creates new ground, new sites for preservation, new ways for articulating the narrative? For many of the story bearers I research and interview those new sites are found in digital culture, yet retaining empowerment through intertextual and personal exchange.

CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSION

STORY BEARING: BOLD SPEAKING LEGACY

“I claimed this legacy of defiance, of will, of courage, affirming my link to female ancestors who were bold and daring in their speech”
from Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black by bell hooks

I come from direct, plain talking women of Kentucky who, with the exception of my mother, lived their whole lives within ten miles of their birth places. In small rural communities named Danville, Stanford, and Persimmon Knob, it was at their tables that I sat absorbing the narrative histories of my family. My coterie of bold speaking women – my grandmother, great aunts, and older cousins – talked about my softball playing great-grandmother, about some nameless girl-child bartered for a pint of whiskey, and about maternal ancestors who were seamstresses, playwrights, business women, and domestics. It is in the now imagined spaces of these homes that I return to construct that history. Among them, I am the one who graduated college and taught school, the dream of at least one great-aunt who was unable to fulfill that desire. I am the one who not only sat silently in their midst to capture stories I was not meant – at that time – to hear. Except, it eventually became clear to everyone that my position in their midst, not merely to overhear but to authentically hear the stories, humor, anecdotes, and history told around the table, was my familial role. This is where my understanding of story bearing was born, though it was years before I gave it a name and found a community of women operating under the same compulsion.

My place has always been in the middle: in the middle of the table, in the middle of the story ... the middle child. That place has afforded me the opportunity to hear from multiple perspectives. There is the one directly told and then there is the one that is the syncopated echo, murmured under the breath and in response to the official narrative.

My place at the middle means that I am always in negotiation of what I hear and overhear. Those pressed to my sides implore me to understand their view against the “other”. This is the position of what I call the story bearer, the one selected to recover lost or silenced narrative. The story bearer utilizes that space in the middle to dig into archival documents, handle material artifacts, and retain oral history. It is from a position in the midst, and with the accumulation of various mediums of resources, that I consider story bearing to be a middle methodology. Story bearing, as a middle methodology, places the story bearer in a continuum much like while I was seated at my grandmother’s table.

Feminist scholar, bell hooks, also a native Kentuckian, finds herself in this type of continuum. Hooks escaped the feeling of constriction she felt living in her rural Kentucky town after leaving for college in California. While she desired a location to nurture her free thinking sensibilities, she took with her the legacy of voice passed down by her maternal forbears. Her memoir Bone Black is embedded with the voice of her grandmother, her muse, who she names Saru. Hooks recalls a dream in which Saru gathers female family members around a charred hope chest. Within it are the remains of familial memory which the women remember together. Saru tells hooks that she is at the heart of that memory, and the dreamed encounter spurs hooks to realize:

“Saru, my mother’s mother, is the interpreter of dreams. She tells me that I should know the storyteller, that I and she are one, that they are my sisters, family. She says that a part of me is making the story, making the words, making the new fire, that it is my heart burning in the center of the flame” (3)

I offer this as a strong example of a story bearing moment. Saru, as ancestral intermediary, appoints her granddaughter, bell hooks, as the heart of the family – the

central figure that retains the collective memory of the family. This scene captures the same story bearing feature found in Shirley Ann Williams' *Dessa Rose* and the same sensibility that A'Lelia Bundles felt when unearthing treasures in her great-great-grandmother's desk. What makes story bearing different than journalism, academic writing, or simple biography is the moment when the story bearer realizes she has the responsibility of a "charge" from within the family. The "burning heart" describes bell hook's role in the family as well as the urgency she feels to retain memory through narrative.

By using examples in fiction (*Beloved*, *Dessa Rose*) as well as historical fiction (*Cane River*, *Red River*) and biography or memoir (*On Her Own Ground*, *Pride of Family*, *Black Gotham*) I am demonstrating not only the range of story bearing as a tool, but as a method for arriving at truth. Truth-telling and its risks, courageousness, and complexities in relation to life history writing has been discussed extensively by writers such as Paul John Eakin and John Caughey. Both discuss truth in relation to the trust that readers place in life history writers. For counter-narratives, work that black writers present to either add to "official" knowledge or to correct perceived understandings, truth is culturally significant to bear witness. In *Life Notes*, both Marcia Ann Gillespie and Patricia Bell-Scott discuss the "dangerous activity" of life writing that, for black women, transforms, empowers, and provides means for social change. So, whether A'Lelia Bundles doggedly corroborates her truth with journalistic fact or Toni Morrison presents her truth metaphorically, story bearing is central to bearing witness. Often, African American narratives parallel "official" accounts of history, but offer perspectives and detail that remain widely unheard and unknown. When familial and/or cultural memory is

sparse and narrative history is largely unknown, story bearing is an interceptive tool for its recovery. Toni Morrison and Sherley Ann Williams are giving voice to the lost voices of enslaved black women and their experiences using fiction as a cumulative representation. Lalita Tademy blends the lived experiences of her family's history with fiction to construct a cohesive story, one that gives her characters dimension while delivering narrative history. A'Lelia Bundles, Ione, and Carla Peterson recovered enough archival material and/or family narrative to present well documented histories. They are all demonstrating the significance of story bearing relationship: someone feels strongly that family memory must be preserved; someone else is given the responsibility for that preservation. Story bearers have a stake in the process of narrative recovery and the narrative outcome. Story bearing becomes a mantle and method for narrative preservation. While story bearing is a lived experience for Bundles et al, story bearing that is represented in African American fiction validates its significance to African American culture. It is more than sharing "truth"; it is continuing a line of oral history and cultural representation among generations.

In each of the life history narratives presented in this dissertation, among others not mentioned, here is a woman designated as story bearer called to collect fragments of familial memory. Here is an ancestral intermediary, usually a working class grandparent, who calls upon a grandchild who possesses the education, skills, means, and most significantly, the desire, to recover narrative history. Story bearing is a privileged position, and certainly most of the story bearers presented here come from privileged backgrounds. However, story bearing is not merely for or by the privileged. Angela Davis discusses how working class black women use the blues as a form of providing

voice, sharing painful narrative history, and calling for social change in ways similar to those employed by life history writers featured in this dissertation.

Through his epic work of historical fiction, Alex Haley is strongly credited with laying a blueprint for writing narrative history. As his research assistant during a time he was gathering material for a potential, but unrealized, work on Madam C.J. Walker, A'Lelia Bundles considered Haley a mentor and guide. In a tributary article, Bundles spoke of Haley as being “a bridge to the shore I needed to reach in order to write On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker” (5). Bundles remarked that she understood that Madam Walker’s story would never be his priority, and that his lapse allowed her to complete her great great-grandmother’s biography, a task she believes she was meant for. This is the difference between a story teller and story bearer: a story teller is compelled to tell a story, a story bearer is compelled to tell a narrative of which they are directly linked, impacted, and are a part. Through On Her Own Ground, Bundles has become the standard bearer for her family’s narrative history and prides herself for keeping this mantle.

While bearing narratives the way that story bearers are described doing implies “giving birth”, a gendered role, it also encompasses holding firm to the narrative recovery process. There is a weightiness to bearing narratives and carrying them into the life history projects that produces books, archives, and social justice platforms. It confirms facts, directs the writing, and makes connections that are relevant to society and social issues. The totality of this gives birth to narrative, and story bearers, as mantle keepers of family history, note their particular urgency to both protect and project it. It so happens that writers I discovered to have deliberately claimed that sense of responsibility – and

accountable to their ancestral muses – are black women. Other women – and men – can be story bearers, but it is black women who I have found to own their roles as designated story bearers. In The Ties That Bind, Bertice Berry writes:

“I rejected my mother’s version of history without ever bothering to check out the facts. I know that verifying her story would not be easy” (8)
“I can hear my mother telling me from the grave, “Get to it, Bertice. Just tell it. Make it plain.” (9)

Her words mirror similar views by Lalita Tademy, Ione, and A’Lelia Bundles, to name a few. These women are not griots, selected to train in by-rote accounts of history as in African traditions, or bards, recognized as storytelling performance artists who recount history as in European tradition. They are story bearers with a palpable urgency to recover, re-discover, and re-inscribe lost accounts of family and subsequent family memory. Having said this, Alex Haley, a black male, can also be considered a story bearer, admittedly noting that the oral history which led to Roots was shared while he was a young boy at the feet of his older female relatives. This position, sitting at the feet of elders, is a metaphor for the position and subsequent role of the story bearer.

There are male writers, like James McBride in The Color of Water, who recover lineages, maternal and otherwise. However, as in bell hooks’ that open this concluding chapter, it is the defiance of these women who spoke out and challenged others with their speech despite gender *and* racial oppression that makes the female story bearer a particular lightning rod. In ways similar to Toni Morrison and Sherley Ann Williams, Austin Clarke, a widely respected Bermuda born male writer, signified the significance of story bearing among women in his novel, The Polished Hoe. His protagonist, Mary Mathilda Bellfeels, is commanded to bear witness for the history of sexual oppression that both she and her maternal ancestors have suffered by their white and Creole masters

and bosses. “These narratives are the only inheritances that poor people can hand down to their offsprings All that we possess to hand-down is love. And bitterness. And blood. And anger. And all four, wrap-up in one narrative” (355). Clarke recognizes the value – both implicit and explicit – of narratives as inheritance. His words corroborate the fact that narrative recovery through story bearing is a privilege that crosses socio-economic status. It requires willing vessels that risk being a conduit to a story that involves pain.

As a living archive, story bearers put their bodies on the line. “Tell Me My Diamonds: Story Bearing in African American Women’s Life History Narratives” attempts to shed light on the ways in which these women bear the histories of their families. These story bearers practice narrative midwifery, coaxing and sometimes pressing narrative histories into being. Story bearers are called to the deeply personal aspects of birthing narrative and are often entrenched with the trauma found there, which Ruth Behar, Paul John Eakin, and Hershini Bhana Young address in their work on life writing. Story bearers are asked, as Toni Morrison does, to re-member it, and consider if it is one to be passed on. They sit with elders to hear oral history, then verify it by seeking to locate corroborative material. They act as sleuths while digging into archival material and holding artifacts and heirlooms in their hands. They have the responsibility of placing the narrative into context with larger history. They do these things to shape a narrative lineage. Performing in these ways they act as craftsmen taking scraps of material to develop into a preserved document, often published and sometimes to acclaim.

The hallmark of story bearers featured in this dissertation is that they are all professional black women, skilled in their fields of writing, well educated, and with the means to travel, research, and obtain publishing opportunities. Most have backgrounds as journalists, yet some are academics or business women. They all have a passion for the narratives they recover, whether their literary contribution is respected, or in Danzy Senna's case, rejected by family. What these story bearers are doing is performing possibilities of transformation through their narrative work. The term, performance of possibilities, is used by D. Soyini Madison to describe how narrative can be an active function that promotes social action. Story bearers featured here offer counter-narratives that speak of societal issues concerning race, gender, and socio-economics and offer a platform for discussion, healing, and change.

Understanding the cohesion among what I call story carriers (tellers) and story carriers (hearers), Madison also writes in her article "That Was My Occupation", "In oral narrative analysis two symbol systems (teller and interpreter) are brought together where they each inform the other, but more importantly and unlike the conventional case study approach, the teller's symbol system uses its own theories of itself to tell us what it means" (177). This describes the relationship among all participants in the process of story bearing. However, the story bearer becomes the face of the resulting project. Story bearers are trained in research, interviewing, writing, and editing, and are knowledgeable in marketing their product. Those skills are a necessary function of how these writers perform as story bearers. They have laid before the public the opportunity to discuss race, gender, and history in new and far reaching ways. This is the legacy of orality that bell

hooks describes in her opening quote, one that links the past with contemporary measures.

Story bearers use their voices to advance social issues and make change. What they produce through life history is more than a written account, but a way to engage new generations intertextually. It forces conversation and debate. More, life history is a way to place value on life that is subject to be lost or ignored.

Rupture. Silence. Trauma. These are pained spaces that story bearers delve into in order to recover life histories for their families. In any life history there are areas of disturbance where silence is warranted. In the literary works of Bundles, Haizlip, and Tademy, those disturbances center on the lack of value placed on women. They describe scenarios in which young women and girls are abandoned by family members, refused knowledge of their respective lineage, and abused sexually. In another, an astute businesswoman is dismissed by the businessmen who are her colleagues simply because she is a female. In still another, a gifted young writer adopts a male pseudonym to get published, and yet her accomplishment does not get shared among her descendents like the male histories do. Each story bearer is influenced by the silences that surround her maternal lineage or the pain that hovers heavily around her mother, aunt, or grandmother. Those silences haunt the story bearer until the urgency to fill in the silence with narrative is unrelenting.

As these story bearers complete their personal lineage, they create another literary one. To bear the life history of generations of maternal ancestors and to make meaning of both the triumphs and traumas is a peculiar call. Unlike what I believed at the beginning of my ethnographic interviews, the story bearing role is not merely a mystical

calling across time. The story bearer is prepared and equipped for her work. Patricia Hill Collins address the cross-generational dialogue that she believes must happen, calling “writing across time”. She continues, in Fighting Words, with the question: “Without listening to those who have come before, how can black women prepare an intellectual and political space for Black women who will confront future, reconfigured injustices?” (75). Story bearers have a responsibility to the narrative, as well as to the ancestral intermediaries, story carriers, and generations coming after her. For her contemporaries, she must tell a good tale to be published. She must tell a provocative tale to be read and discussed in a way that evokes thought, questioning, and change. The story bearer is accountable for the counter-narrative that she presents that is read alongside the “official” record of American History. Her assignment is to bring context and an added nuance to that history. From all of this the story bearer builds upon a narrative lineage of life history writing by black women begun by Harriet Jacobs, Hannah Crafts, and Margaret Walker.

To accomplish the task of completing the life history, story bearers must negotiate aspects of remembering, rememory, re-membering, and orality as argued by Toni Morrison, Angelyn Mitchell, DoVeana Fulton, and others, which I build upon. To remember is to call forth memory, to re-member is to reconstruct memory, and rememory is a snapshot of the forgotten memory. Story bearing re-members – in other words, reconstructs - the narrative body of the family. Operating for too long with ghost limbs of a forgotten or silenced past, the familial body is in dysfunction. Story bearing is restorative. The haunting refrain “tell me” seeks to recover what has been missing. Paired with this element, “tell me”, is another one, “don’t forget about me”. Often in

order to arrive at the narrative the story bearer is tapped by an ancestral intermediary, who the writers describe as urging them to recover the lost narrative. Or, the story bearer is lured by an heirloom and the history it evokes. Lalita Tademy is tapped by her great-great-grandmother, Philomene, and Ione is lured by a journal kept by her great-grandmother, Frances Whipper. The desire for the recovery of narrative history is just as strong as the insistence not to forget it. But then in the case of Carla Peterson, there are only remnants of history and very little to re-member. The urgency is still there for her to recover it. Haunting permeates all of these experiences. Hershini Bhana Young argues, “The body, both flesh-and-blood and ghost, bears witness at great cost, whispering in the corners of our mind”, a belief that captures how story bearers are pressed into service (4).

Haunting, as argued by Young, Avery Gordon, and Joseph Roach, is an effective tool to precipitate narrative recovery. Building upon this approach, “Tell Me My Diamonds” demonstrates the impact that haunting has on the process of story bearing. It is extremely influential in kick-starting the process and also revealing the intertextual nature black women’s life history narratives. The image of the palimpsest, which leaves behind residue of what comes before is powerful in this regard. For example, among life histories beginning with Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, to Jubilee, to On Her Own Ground, and Cane River, enslavement and its’ traumatic effect on black women’s bodies are a concurrent theme. Differently, a text like Pride of Family which features a free black woman who is an abolitionist during the nineteenth century adds a parallel discourse around that same topic. All of these texts, primarily the last three, evoke haunting.

Story bearing literature recovers the past and often features the residue of enslavement; yet story bearers build upon the history of the family in the generations that follow. They are the ones who are commissioned to not forget the past, and instead to make a written memorial of it. Literature as memorial not only revisits the past as testament but offers space for redirection. Ancestral intermediaries shake them into awareness. Snippets of family lore seduce them into learning more. Material artifacts encourage story telling. All of these – the presence of the ancestor, the family lore, the artifact – urge the recovery of narrative history.

Once Shirlee Taylor Haizlip appears with her black and white families on the Oprah Winfrey Show in 1994, she begins to get letters in the mail. White viewers send photographs and locks of hair with notes attached asking her if they possibly have black relatives in their family. She jokingly calls herself a “race detective” for these persons who believe she has an eye for “blackness”. Not only do they believe that blackness can be read, by someone with the skill to do so, but that their material artifacts can also be read. Operating a second sight like a Braille reading of these artifacts, story bearers come with an expectation to see further into things. Perhaps because they are positioned in the middle – of narrative, of the recovery, of the surrounding artifacts, of a collection of ancestors and story carriers – story bearers utilize the middle as a methodology. Middle methodology offers the gift of being in-between. The middle has been described as an insignificant space, neither first nor last, yet what can be more significant than being given the opportunity to inhabit a spirit of Sankofa to look back and move forward. It is a way toward a more nuanced understanding of history and the behavior of the players. The middle offers an objective way of presenting it. Material culture – ancestral

heirlooms, family land, personal letters, homes – have stories to tell. Heirs of such material culture see narrative history as a portion of inheritance.

Story bearers utilize material culture to help interpret narrative history. Many of them see themselves within a lineage of other black women who develop life history projects. Narrative histories are often in-development and represent the oral history and written drafts of what ultimately becomes a life history. Black women writers, like the ones engaged in “Tell Me My Diamonds”, have crafted life history projects. Meaning, they have published the narrative and gone on to develop digital archives, blogs, websites, or present speeches around their recovered history. Life history does not stop with the writing narrative, but it is a continuation of it.

New directions for story bearing involve digital humanities. Current story bearers, like A’Lelia Bundles and Carla Peterson have already designed a website or built a digital archive for their narrative histories. These sites are used to communicate with other researchers, genealogists, life historians, and students that share their interests. It is a way to incorporate photographs, family tree charts, maps, and video that provides visual documentation as companion to the written narrative. Their efforts are significant because they utilize advanced technology that younger generations are attracted to, which expands their reach. Story bearing reaches into the past to collect history, but is always aware that this history is for a contemporary audience. Story bearing must constantly be evolving.

When I was a young girl quietly listening to relatives gathered around my grandmother’s kitchen table, I had no idea it was for any other purpose than being there. I liked being there, in the middle. I remember that my grandmother had a way of locking

eyes with me and daring me to look away as she said whatever she had to say. It was with her that I learned that to hear you must also see. Maybe, by witnessing my attention she knew I was *this child* and would preserve our narrative history. The narrative of my family, like the narratives of other story bearers, is not separate from the material culture. Kitchens. Boiling greens. Round tables. Laughter. Dark liquor in squat glasses. A cacophony of several voices talking at once, together. Cigarette smoke. Country twang. Jewelry boxes. Climbing trees. Danville, Kentucky – this is one narrative. Grape juice. Comic books. Clacking balls on wire. Pianos. Wooden puzzles. Ice cream. Tuskegee Airman Uncle. Three passing-for-white great great-aunts. Infrequent visits. Silences. Louisville, Kentucky - this is another narrative. I am only now discovering my dual lineages, a family lineage and story bearing one.

In their life history projects, A'Lelia Bundles, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, and Ione hone identities for themselves as mantle keepers, change agents, and lineage holders. Digital humanities offers new ways to keep those mantles, store record of lineage, and make change. Whether these story bearers create websites, develop digital archives, or utilize social media and blogs, they understand that their audiences retrieve information in a multiplicity of ways. Story bearing is not stagnant. For Dhiraj Murthy, “a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography not only gives researchers a larger and more exciting array of methods to tell stories, but also enables them to demarginalize the voice of respondents” (“Digital Ethnography” 839). While Murthy goes on to argue about the limitations that class, race, and gender places on access to and use of digital culture, each writer presented as part of this dissertation fully engages it to advance her project. These are black women whose ages range from mid fifties to mid seventies.

They are securing a foundational story bearing structure in the digital humanities for other generations to plug into.

Building upon Pride of Family, which highlighted her maternal lineage, Ione currently collaborates with her son, Santiago, to build a multimedia project called “Pride’s Daughter”. This is her way of continuing the story bearing process, by incorporating the expertise of younger family members and encouraging their interest. In addition to the narrative she writes is the graphic design he produces. Ione is the first to cause me to consider digital media as a way to expand my ideas on story bearing. We are introduced on Facebook; she responds to my request for an interview within an hour of my posting. She suggests that we skype the interview, which fails because of the lack of technological skill on my part. However, we meet again in person at her home in upstate New York. This time, looking at her ... coiled locks piled on her head and with an easy smile ... we talk about the differences among her projects. For Pride of Family, she needed her muse, the great-grandmother Frances Rollin Whipper that she lovingly calls Frank, as an ancestral guide.

Ione: (Frank) spoke through her words and now the urgency is more my own - my own wanting to expand (Pride’s Daughter), wanting to create this for my kids and for posterity. In relationship to myself. So in a way you might say that she was able to give me what I needed to become who I am. To become Ione - which was the idea. I think it worked. (chuckles) So now Ione can manifest for her, for herself ... or is wanting to do it.

Even though, as I say in the book, I was already a grown woman when I started doing it there was something unfinished and I knew it. Not that we ever finish learning or developing. That was the layer that I hadn’t noticed that was missing. And, so I grabbed hold of it.

Shanna: So would you say that the missing piece to complete was this?

Ione: Yeah, it was like a birth, let’s put it that way. So, that was a gestation and a birth. So, in that sense, freeing. And, so that was when

my name was no longer. I had been publishing under Carole Bovoso for quite a while. But I was also separating – or divorcing – from my husband at the time. I was beginning to call myself Ione, which was my middle name. Ionia was my great- aunt's name. And, I was changing. I was changed.

Shanna: How is Ione different than who you were?

Ione: How is she different?

Shanna: Yes

Ione: She's a completely new person. Completely born. She's born again. (chuckles again)

For Ione, her story bearing experience transforms her profoundly. She is able to confront the ghosts and silences of her past and come up with a new way to articulate her identity. Completing Pride of Family firms a maternal foundation for her that enables her to begin anew in Pride's Daughter. She maps for me the benefits of being digitally savvy and incorporating those methods for a different type of posterity.

Ione: This is not only a book, it's a digital memoir

Shanna: How is it a digital memoir?

Ione: It's a web based memoir with digital files as well as literary files with images and with links to data. So ... so I have a great deal of information that is my father's interviews with him and some of his writings. My father, my mother, my grandmother, the West Virginia area – all of them are in there, in Pride's Daughter.

Well, actually it's the kind of thing where I will be adding to it. Because it also involves panels and animation that my son (Santiago) is doing. What do you call it – a graphic memoir?

Shanna: How has this one been a different experience?

Ione: Oh well, it's a huge difference. It's different because one, I didn't have the immediate impetus – a real immediate impetus to write another book. Once I had created (Pride of Family) I felt that, well, people would say, "You ought to write another book". But I didn't have the same draw, push, and urgency that I had related to Frances Anne Rollin. Because I

really felt that she needed to make her own mark related to the literature world. And, I wanted to create that, to give her that. In a way I felt I had done that - or, begun it in an important way. I knew there was more. For example, there are more writings I am looking for in Washington. That is going in the next chapter. Then I thought, well wait a minute. What I am really doing these days and the way I am is much more innovative than that. So I was realizing that it did not have to be a straight literary book in that sense. It could open up and have a living presence on the web. So, it is web based. And, it could also be interactive. So scholars, for example, could contribute to it or link to it. So I could link this and Pride's Daughter to your pieces. You see what I mean? That would be great! I'm excited about it. So when I hit up on it, when it came to me, I said, "Yes. Yeah!"

Ione uses story bearing as an interactive device. This time, Ione no longer needs her ancestor to inspire the desire to retrieve family narrative. She is her own narrative conductor fueling the desire to discover more about her family, expansively. As a body on the line, Ione is open to new interactive experiences including a digital presence. What digital humanities her is access. It is through this access that Ione and I meet.

Dear Ms. Ione –

I am hoping to interview you as part of my dissertation, which is a life history project on African American women life history writers. I am a doctoral student at the University of College Park and met your cousin while working at the National Archives. She gave me your contact information and also suggested I send a message by Facebook. Please let me know if you would be available for an interview and if there is a good place/time to meet. I emailed you a copy of my project description.

Thanks so much,
Shanna Smith

I send the message at 11:51 am and by 12:12 there is a response:

Hello Shanna: This sounds very special. I'll be happy to be a part of your research. I'll also check out your email and will respond. As for a time and place to meet – You are in Maryland? I suggest a SKYPE meeting which could be quite productive – I do use all the time for important meetings. Sending best your way! IONE

With the success of communicating using social media, I make similar requests of other writers, including Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Lalita Tademy, and Danzy Senna. Only Haizlip responds months later with the note:

Dear Shanna: I'd be happy to be interviewed. My phone number is –

Digital culture has informed this dissertation despite itself. It enabled meetings with women that would not have otherwise taken place. Though some aspects provide an artificial atmosphere that is not conducive to the relationship that I believe story bearing brings, it allows for opportunities to connect in unique ways. In Ione's case, and later with Shirlee Haizlip, story bearing through either means – digitally or personally – provided opportunities to develop bold and daring speech among black women. These are women in their seventies who engage in the ways of technological advancement skillfully. They are able to communicate across generations differently than the way Patricia Hill Collins first suggested. We do not have to imagine the voices of our foremothers or are limited to intertextual exchange in literary form. Imagine the impact of the preservation of voices in new ways; imagine continuing kitchen table talk. Imagine the potential for new possibilities and new platforms to make change. The range of story bearing is transformative and participatory, and compels those involve to proclaim, as Toni Morrison's protagonist does in her 1983 Nobel Prize Speech, "How lovely it is, this thing we have done - together."

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ⁱ Geneva Smitherman explains in Talkin' and Testifyin' the African belief that *Nommo* is a significant part of craftsmanship, and is a powerful tool of necessity to 1) actualize life and 2) prepare for warfare (78). Both Smitherman and Eileen Julien discuss the transformative power of *Nommo* in their work on African/African American speech patterns and orality.

ⁱⁱ Lone, as she currently chooses to identify herself, published Pride of Family under the name Carole Lone and also produced articles during her journalism career as Carole Bovoso.

ⁱⁱⁱ Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)

^{iv} Margaret Walker dedicates Jubilee to her maternal great-grandmother, Margaret Duggans Ware Brown, whose story is told here, although "Vyry" (protagonist in the novel) is the name of her maternal grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier, who told her the story.

^v Testimonio is particularly used in Latin American Studies to express individual traumatic histories and provide a painful socio-political commentary as an allegory for the community. The story teller may have been silenced, yet is offered the opportunity to testify to trauma through literature.

^{vi} Re-remembering is a reworking of Toni Morrison's concept of rememory, which are memories that linger or haunt as "thought pictures" to remember "what you thought you knew" (Beloved 58). Often, rememory is associated with trauma; re-remembering is discovering traumatic ancestral memory and bringing it forth as

a way to heal generational wounds. DoVeanna Fulton uses the term re-member to describe ways in which black families, their stories, and cultural traditions are recaptured in the present (Speaking Power)^{vii} A palimpsest is a reusable manuscript; a page that has been previously written upon and erased. A trace of what has been formerly written lingers like residue upon the newly written manuscript. This suggests that the past is never really gone.