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## Black Baby Boomers, Gender, and Southern Education-Navigating Tensions in Oral History Methodology

ArCasia D. James-Gallaway  
*Texas A&M University*

Francena F.L. Turner  
*Fayetteville State University, fturner1@uncfsu.edu*

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## Black Baby Boomers, Gender, and Southern Education: Navigating Tensions in Oral History Methodology

Francena F. L. Turner and ArCasia D. James-Gallaway

### ABSTRACT

Little to no extant scholarship examines procedural, epistemological aspects of conducting intergenerational oral history interviews with Black elders. Thus, in this multivocal piece, we, two Black women oral historians of education, discuss specific tensions we navigated in our respective projects that focused on Black baby boomers' educational experiences in the US South. The baby boomer generation encompasses those born between 1946 and 1965, and our disparate studies, on which we draw here, sought to investigate how they remembered their raced, classed, and gendered educational experiences during the 1960s and 1970s. In our research processes, issues around identity arose, and this paper pursues two areas of inquiry related to those issues—trust and relationship building with narrators and race as an all-encompassing metalanguage; we contend this metalanguage superseded narrators' perceptions of gender's influence in their lives. It is our wish that our transparent reflexivity aids other scholars in wrestling with considerations similar to those we found ourselves navigating.

### KEYWORDS

African American education; baby boomers; gender studies; history of education; women's studies

The purpose of this essay is to articulate particular tensions oral historians may face when conducting oral history research with Black baby boomers. As two Black American women oral historians of education conducting disparate research projects focused on Black baby boomers and their education in the South in the 1960s and 1970s, we found ourselves working to reconcile two common sets of issues related to identity. These issues centered on (1) building trust and meaningful relationships with narrators; and (2) narrators' expansive conceptualizations of race, which subsumed their perspective on the significance of gender. Although oral historians have done a commendable job exploring critical questions of justice in delineating the methodology's interdisciplinarity, gaps persist.<sup>1</sup> There are, for instance, few resources germane to the history of Black education that focus specifically on oral history methodology; even fewer sources analyze difficulties associated with conducting intergenerational interviews or African American perspectives on overlapping and simultaneous forms of oppression. While our work is not prescriptive, we do hope to provide insight that affirms and expands researchers' similar experiences.

This manuscript originated from our ongoing conversations dating back to 2017 about our respective studies. We discussed our experiences trying to stimulate meaningful discussions about the significance of gender with our narrators during oral history interviews. Eventually, we identified the generational difference between our narrators and ourselves; Francena is of Generation X—the period between 1965 and 1980—and ArCasia is a millennial, the generation born between 1981 and 1996. As we continued to discuss our projects, we found that this generational aspect may be a key driver. We came to understand

that navigating Jim Crow in the US South contributed to the race-centric worldview of Black baby boomers—children of the era of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.<sup>2</sup> Gender, we reasoned, based on our interviews, was a distraction from their collective experience as Black people.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Generation Xers and millennials have had more time to witness America’s failure to live up to its civil rights promise of racial equality and equity.<sup>4</sup> This perspective, along with our graduate research training, enabled us to construct lenses that consider race but also look beyond it to understand persistent and pervasive social inequity across various interlocking categories of social difference.

The baby-boomer generation encompasses those born between 1946 and 1965. Until 2019, baby boomers were the largest generational demographic.<sup>5</sup> This “post-World War II birth cohort,” write scholars Andrea G. Hunter and Sherrill L. Sellers, “came of age during a period of tremendous social change around race and gender.”<sup>6</sup> Race—more specifically, in this case, Blackness—is the most salient social identity for many African Americans in this cohort. Older Black baby boomers in the South experienced all their primary, middle, and secondary education in de jure segregated schools, while younger members were among those affected by the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that mandated school desegregation. This generation of organizers, activists, and freedom fighters gave us the classic Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and their submovements. Although they have also lived to see significant social shifts around gender norms, Black baby boomers possess a complicated relationship to this social identity and the oppression that accompanies it, especially regarding approaches that decouple gender and race. For instance, baby boomers witnessed the second wave of the feminist movement, which peaked in the 1970s, when many of them were coming of age. This movement’s racist foundations and dismissiveness of inclusive sisterhood turned away many African American women, leaving them to identify feminism as an adversary of racial progress.<sup>7</sup> Such context is crucial for understanding the perspectives of our narrators.

As Black feminist scholars whose work is interdisciplinary, we used a framework comprised of three interrelated theories—Black feminist theory, oral history theory, and critical race theory—for our individual studies and in penning this essay. Writing in the 1970s, the Combahee River Collective (CRC) supplied one of the clearest descriptions of Black feminist theory’s chief proposition; they described how they were “actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and s[aw] as [their] particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.”<sup>8</sup> That is, the theorists in the CRC issued an early articulation of intersectionality. Our use of oral history enabled us to examine our narrators’ educational experiences in specific historical, political, cultural, and regional contexts, underlining the various forces that shaped their encounters with intersectional injustice. Our use of oral history also supported our consideration of how the interlocking facets of our own identities affected our experiences, choices, and the tensions we observed as researchers.

Furthermore, from critical race theory (CRT), which represents an eclectic body of scholarship intent on exposing and challenging systemic, institutional racial oppression and the resultant maldistribution of power, we engage its formulation of counternarratives which serve to challenge dominant constructions of Black people—here Black women—as deviant, lacking agency, and unintelligent.<sup>9</sup> Critical race theorist and Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw built upon the work of numerous Black feminist foremothers

such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and the CRC to offer the metaphor of intersectionality. Intersectionality overlaps with Black feminist theory and aids our understanding of the ways that interlocking dimensions of our narrators' identities—namely, race, social class, economic status, and gender—mediated their educational pursuits and experiences.<sup>10</sup> We situate these conceptual underpinnings within oral history theorizations that argue for oral history as a social justice project, given its objective to supplement the historical record with voices of those near the bottom of the social hierarchy. We do so because marginalized voices are often missing from existing written archives or “official” historical narratives of, for instance, Black student activism or school desegregation implementation.<sup>11</sup> These perspectives converge around this social justice aim. CRT contends that elevating voices *from the bottom* is essential to mitigating social injustice, and Black feminist theory emphasizes the salience of concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, or, as scholar Patricia Collins argues, that one’s “personal experience is considered very good evidence” to support a knowledge claim.<sup>12</sup>

Bringing together these theoretical considerations, this paper is organized into three multivocal sections and a collective conclusion. The first section reviews our respective projects to furnish necessary context for the following discussions. The second section discusses tensions in building trust and relationships with our narrators. In the third section, we work through how Black baby boomers’ metalanguage of race—whereby the social construction of race consumes every other facet of a person’s identity—posed generative challenges for our projects.<sup>13</sup> In each of these sections, we alternate voices, each section beginning with Francena and ending with ArCasia. In the final section, our voices converge to emphasize the importance of naming methodological tensions and to underscore our central conclusions.

## Respective Projects

Both hailing from the communities we chose to study in our projects, we were compelled to interrogate our relationship to the places we call home. Hip-hop scholars suggest that such an undertaking is indicative of our generational position as products of formative hip-hop eras. Hip-hop emphasizes “bringing wreck” in an effort to correct distortions of Black people as subhuman, often via critical homeplace studies.<sup>14</sup> For such a task, we found oral historian Elizabeth Melton’s hometown ethnography approach instructive; as she explains, “Conducting a hometown ethnography simply means a researcher clearly situates themselves in a web of relationships and articulates the specific contexts informing their study.”<sup>15</sup> This paper represents a continuation of our practice of deep reflexivity, as we articulate the varied contexts and relationships in which we are situated and how they impact us and the research process.

### ***Francena: “We Were There”: Black Women and Student Activism at Fayetteville State***

My project explored the ways Black women at my North Carolina hometown-based alma mater, Fayetteville State University, experienced the sit-in and Black campus movements between 1960 and 1972. The *sit-in movement* refers to the wave of sit-ins in the US South aimed at broadly upending segregation, bookended between 1960 and 1964. The *Black campus movement* refers to several years of Black Power-era college student organizing and

activism between 1965 and 1972. My study showed that methods of protest, however, extended beyond these traditional periodizations, as did the social conditions being protested.<sup>16</sup>

Because of the lack of scholarship centering the voices or intellectual activism of Black women at Fayetteville State, I chose to conduct oral history interviews. In doing so, I took a life history approach, posing questions concerning their childhood and beyond.<sup>17</sup> The historiography of civil rights/Black Power-era activism at historically Black institutions of higher education erases student protest at Fayetteville State, providing only cursory mention of the city and the university and overlooking Black women's participation and leadership in Fayetteville-area activism.<sup>18</sup> My study relied on extensive archival research but was grounded in my collection of seventeen oral history interviews averaging two hours in length. Narrators were all alumni of Fayetteville State who self-identified as Black or African American, and I found them using a purposive snowball method—that is, I interviewed student protest leaders and activists named in local and campus newspapers who matriculated at Fayetteville State between 1960 and 1972. Each narrator put me into contact with still other classmates and activists—in this way, I procured seventeen oral history interviews. I discussed the interviews with fourteen baby boomers—eight male and six female—for this essay. These interviews averaged ninety minutes in length. Ultimately, I found that racialized gender and socioeconomic class shaped Black women's active participation and leadership during the movements under study.<sup>19</sup> The racial climate in the US, their faiths, and their access to politically educated community leaders and educators served as radicalizing agents for my narrators. Each narrator continues to participate in various forms of community organizing and activism, in part because of their experiences as student activists at Fayetteville State.

### ***ArCasia: Going Beyond Race in Texas School Desegregation Implementation***

My project centered on former Black students' lived experiences during the 1970s in newly desegregated Texas schools. My interest in this project grew out of my upbringing in Waco, Texas, whose public schools I attended for my K-12 education. In the late 1990s through the first decade of the twentieth century—decades after schools were supposed to have integrated—I attended nominally desegregated schools that still had racially segregated student populations. Learning of the promises of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* verdict sparked in me a curiosity about Waco's implementation of the school desegregation mandate and its meaning for affected Black students.<sup>20</sup> This central Texas area has a vivid history of white racial violence, which importantly shaped its school desegregation process.<sup>21</sup> Thus, to understand how the convergence of narrators' race, gender, and class status differentiated their everyday experiences, I examined the implementation of secondary school desegregation as described in the personal accounts of Black students who experienced it.

Much of my motivation for pursuing this project also stemmed from limitations in the historiography of K-12 school desegregation—namely, presenting race as the only aspect of Black students' social position that influenced their experiences; emphasizing top-down accounts of influential legal battles in the 1950s and 1960s; and elevating states in which headlining Supreme Court battles took place.<sup>22</sup> My project sought to address these

limitations. I drew on former Black students' experiential knowledge—their previous educational experiences had been in segregated Black schools, and this shaped their perspectives on the drastic changes they witnessed as their schools underwent desegregation.

In her study of school segregation in Florida, education historian Barbara Shircliffe discussed narrators' perceptions of these changes in terms of nostalgia, or homesickness—an “attempt to cope” with their sense of loss over the desegregation of their schools.<sup>23</sup> Nostalgia, she suggested, might explain why “memories of the all-black schools are selective, retrospective, and often significantly romanticized,” and how such idealization “present[s] powerful commentary on the contradictory aspects of segregation and the desegregation process.”<sup>24</sup> As I privileged the interview evidence my narrators provided and the significance they assigned to their experiences, I rejected Shircliffe's notion of nostalgia in African Americans' memories of school desegregation. I tempered narrators' possibly nostalgic tendencies by contextualizing their interviews with other interviews and written historical material. Ultimately, my study demonstrates that in the school desegregation implementation process, which upheld white supremacy and anti-Blackness, the convergence of Black students' race, gender, and class status differentiated their experiences.

Like the study by sociologist Amy Stuart Wells and colleagues of “school desegregation's graduates,” the former students in my study were also “born in the midst of the Civil Rights [and Black Power] Movement . . . [giving them] a unique perspective on the dramatic social and political changes that occurred” during their young adulthood.<sup>25</sup> My selection criteria for narrators required them to self-identify as Black or African American people who initially attended segregated, K-12 public schools and then transitioned to desegregated schools in Waco in the late 1960s or 1970s. To recruit narrators, I drew primarily on my existing Waco connections to local Black churches and high school alumni networks. After our interviews, I requested names and contact information for classmates who fit the same profile (snowball sampling).

In addition to exhaustively collecting and analyzing written and archival materials documenting school desegregation in Waco, I also conducted oral history interviews. I conducted eighteen interviews, averaging one and one-half to two hours, with eleven women and seven men, whose average age at the time of the interview was sixty-two; only four interviews fell outside of these interview-length parameters. The level of detail in recollection and the vividness of narrators' memories largely determined interview duration. These differences did not fall along gendered lines—I did not find either men or women more or less likely to withhold or share during interviews.

In my research, I found that longer interviews shaped my overall findings more than shorter ones, likely because they provided more narrative material from which to draw. That is, these longer interviews may have allowed narrators the time they needed to flesh out their thoughts; also, lengthier interviews may have granted me more opportunities to rephrase questions or follow up on initial replies to access a richer range of experiences. Although shorter interviews may not have influenced my findings as significantly, they did furnish insight into the process narrators take in attaching meaning to or detaching meaning from particular events, circumstances, or individuals. Working to build trust in interviews with narrators taught me valuable lessons about such an aspiration.

## “Trust” and “Relationship” Building: Recognizing Their Limits

In this section, we share our experiences of working to build trust and to establish rapport with our narrators. We question the prevailing framing of trust and rapport as objectives that can ultimately be achieved. In doing so, we illustrate the broader need to recognize their limits, especially in circumstances like ours where racial trauma has so significantly shaped the experiences and beliefs of narrators.<sup>26</sup> Such a circumstance proved particularly influential in our work with Black baby boomers who schooled in the South, as their coming of age during the civil rights and Black Power eras meaningfully fashioned their self-perception, self-presentation, and wider worldview.<sup>27</sup>

Building rapport with potential narrators is one of the cornerstones of oral history methodology. Independently, we each realized that the term *rapport* seemed a bit clinical and antiseptic for the kind of work we wanted our studies to do.<sup>28</sup> We research our home communities, and we desire long-range dialogue with our narrators and the communities encompassed in those dialogues. We could not, however, presume familiarity with the narrators or their stories.<sup>29</sup> Instead, we sought to build and strengthen trusting relationships with our elders.

### ***Francena: Surviving/Rethinking Vetting: Beginning the Work of Trust Building***

I conducted most of my interviews using the telephone or video conferencing during the winter of 2018. While I used a purposive snowballing method in which I interviewed several easily identifiable student activists who referred me to other potential narrators, I still worked with each of the narrators to build a relationship that allowed them to entrust their experiences to me. One narrator asked to see my research proposal; I gladly sent it to him. Another gave me a veritable geography test when she immediately asked me what town was to the east of Fayetteville. I am not good with cardinal directions, so I named all the towns surrounding the city until she stopped me, laughing, and acknowledged that I “must be the real deal.” Still another narrator was delighted that I knew something of the high school she attended. In short, I had to prove to my narrators that while I contacted them from a large predominantly white institution in Illinois, I was a child of Fayetteville and a graduate of Fayetteville State University with the scholarly acumen to undertake this work.

I acceded to my narrators’ probing of my qualifications and motivations for several reasons. First, this process was culturally normal in intergenerational dialogues within my community. I came to my project with a Black feminist framework, thereby fully expecting to be vetted by elders who needed to verify my connection to the community, my ethic of caring, and my knowledge of both the social movements and institution under study. Second, the academy subjects Black researchers to far worse ordeals to prove themselves.<sup>30</sup> Last, no narrator owes any oral historian or interviewer their memories. I saw my research and the potential intergenerational relationships I built with my narrators as a privilege and a serious responsibility. Without some semblance of trustworthiness, I would not have been given any interviews—particularly with Black female baby boomers.

In several instances, my female narrators displayed what historian Darlene Clark Hine has called *dissemblance*, which she defined as “the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.”<sup>31</sup> That is, Black women carefully curate



what we do or do not publicly share in our lives because of a long-standing history of abuse, in this case within academic research. In my interviews, there was often more to the story than the narrators cared to tell me. This is not the same as not remembering certain facets of their stories. One narrator indicated that he, his wife, and some of his classmates talked about events germane to my study quite frequently at homecomings and other alumni events. Of note is that this narrator's wife declined my interview request despite being an exceptional candidate whose husband enthusiastically agreed to two interviews. Rather, narrators simply presented the story they wanted *me* to know considering the project they knew *me* to be undertaking. With a different oral historian, connected to a different institution, or in a different study for a different purpose, they might have revealed more of their personal and shared experiences. In one instance, a narrator directly told me, "Now you know there's more to this, right?" She, however, chose to present herself and her classmates to me in a particular light. I believe this desire to hold some parts of their stories closer than others serves an understandably protective function that also aligns with research around collective memory.<sup>32</sup> That is, narrators may withhold some information or details in an effort to preserve a sort of metalanguage of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The narrative of the collective memory was one of male-dominated, public-facing leadership and a nearly unshakable bond among those activists and organizers who survived the era. I cannot stress enough how important it is to remember that student activists were expelled, imprisoned, and sometimes murdered during this era. Surely, those who survived may display some resistance to revisiting those times in their lives.

Ultimately, I experienced limits to rapport or relationship building in the pursuit of oral history interviews in three ways. First, I was under program-specific time constraints, as this study was my dissertation project. With more time for dialogue, my relationship with my narrators might have deepened, and I might have been granted access to more particulars of their stories. The constraints did not end my relationships with my narrators; they simply determined when I stopped pursuing interviews to write the dissertation. As long as my narrators and I live, there is time for more dialogue. This point is important for oral historians to remember because our projects can continue past the confines of grant- or program-enforced deadlines.

Second among the constraints was the fact that each narrator has a line—known only to them—that they refuse to cross in terms of sharing their memories, and they are well within their rights to do so.<sup>33</sup> The third constraint arose because I conducted a study of a historically Black college or university and its student body—an institution and a demographic that the academy has repeatedly misrepresented.<sup>34</sup> I pursued access to my narrators and their stories as a member of my home community, a graduate of the institution, and as a representative of a large predominantly white research-intensive university. My dissertation research exposed the degree to which the academy, philanthropists, and the state of North Carolina used student grievances and protests as excuses to undermine and underfund Black institutions of higher education.<sup>35</sup> There was no way for me to escape my being a part of a set of institutions that may have both helped and harmed my narrators. Black baby boomers who were student activists either personally experienced or witnessed hypersurveillance at the hands of their university administrations and state and federal governments. In these contexts, oral historians of education must understand that there are limits to rapport and relationship building in the pursuit of oral history interviews, and some of these limits cannot be overcome by the skill, training, or

positionality of the interviewer. We each exist within interlocking systems of oppression that leave lasting scars; that is, our lived experiences teach us what we can and cannot safely share. Thus, it is imperative to respect the wishes of both potential and actual narrators.<sup>36</sup>

### ***ArCasia: When Trust Isn't Enough***

Many of my narrators did not see their school desegregation implementation experiences as novel or interesting. Nevertheless, most of those I sought to interview consented despite voicing concern about the potential faultiness of their memories. Narrators seemed convinced to participate after I assured them that I would do my due diligence to corroborate their testimonies with other sources. In working to establish trusting relationships with southern Black baby boomer narrators, though, I confronted situations where I was more formally educated than them, and I feared coming across as too bookish or arrogant as a result. Those concerns did not materialize, but my discussions with Francena about her narrators' relationship to metanarratives about the Civil Rights Movement helped me see how my narrators differed from hers. In Francena's study, her narrators felt compelled to align their memories with the master narrative of the classic Civil Rights Movement, while my narrators experienced desegregation after this period is commonly understood to have ended, in the 1960s. Thus my narrators may not have felt the same pressure to make their recollections of desegregating schools match those of the earlier decades of the movement. My narrators desegregated previously white schools because their school districts closed their segregated Black schools, making desegregation involuntary for them—they had no other educational options. They “just did it because they had to.”

School desegregation is a hallmark of the Civil Rights Movement. However, because my narrators experienced school desegregation implementation primarily in the 1970s, my conversations with them helped me see that the historical periodization that scholars typically set for the traditional Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s misaligned with my narrators' experiential knowledge of school desegregation—a process still unfolding in places like Waco into the late 1970s. Trust and relationship building, therefore, felt inherent to my research process. We all considered Waco home and had schooled there as Black students, so I thought narrators would want to tell me their stories; together we were uniquely qualified to see the importance of those stories, even though they happened after the Civil Rights Movement is often supposed to have ended.

Whether it was latent, actualized in real time, or a combination of the two, racial trauma presented palpably in many of my narrators' lives. Many Black baby boomers saw remarkable racial and social change that transformed their lives in unprecedented ways, such as having to attend newly desegregated, formerly white schools where Black students were held in contempt and blatantly mistreated.<sup>37</sup> I began my interviews by asking narrators to recount some of their earliest racialized memories, and most shared vivid recollections of separate and unequal facilities or disparaging treatment from white stakeholders. With these experiences as a baseline, it should be no surprise that some Black baby boomers harbor residual trauma that discussion about the past might easily trigger.

I had not fully thought through how my interview requests might stir up these latent racial traumas in potential narrators, traumas which some narrators had no desire to revisit. I had lively introductory conversations with two different Black women that seemed to point to good formal interviews to come. When the scheduled interview

time arrived, however, both women, one by phone and one by text message, declined. Their reasons were similar. They, rightfully, were not interested in revisiting this period of their educational lives, as it was marred by memories of visceral racial and classed-based resentment around desegregating a school primarily comprised of lower- and working-class white students. This student demographic, narrators reported, was especially belligerent toward new Black students, given the precarity of white residents' class position and the ways their low economic status influenced their perception of Black people as economic threats.<sup>38</sup> These women also noted that the slight yet significant socioeconomic status-based differences between Black students contributed to their angst, as middle- and working-class Black students periodically found themselves at odds with each other. Articulating a desire to "help if they could," these women, even in declining, stressed their high hopes for my project and future as a scholar, gesturing to their awareness of their racial trauma and their hope that I did not have to suffer the same.

On a practical level, I found it difficult to mitigate these challenges beyond trying to secure additional interviews in place of those I could not obtain. These problems, however, are not ones to be resolved in an absolute sense. Rather, I surmised that I should deliberate these challenges in self-reflection, especially as they pertained to Black baby boomers. This approach seemed fitting because of the likelihood that potential narrators endured or witnessed overt racial violence, which many recounted in vivid memories of Jim Crow segregation. These visceral recollections of Black inferiorization left lasting impressions on their psyche, evident in some potential narrators' rescinding their interview consent.

What narrators did not say may have also influenced the depth of trust I was able to build with them.<sup>39</sup> Throughout US history, close contact between white and Black peoples has often furnished an opportunity for white supremacy to assert itself; school desegregation provides just one of numerous examples. When mapped onto patriarchy and sexism, however, expressions of racism become more complicated and serve to further threaten groups, such as Black girls, who face multiple, simultaneous forms of marginalization. Melba Beals, one member of the Little Rock Nine who in 1957 helped to desegregate Central High School, underlined the grave danger she faced in attending school with white males, one of whom sexually assaulted her as she traveled to school on her first day.<sup>40</sup> Her memoir provides insight into the peril Black girls risked, resonating with the myriad accounts of Black women, who have—historically and contemporarily—contended with the constant threat of sexual danger.<sup>41</sup>

Although my narrators never mentioned an occasion of sexual assault, Beals's account may reflect a circumstance in which Black girls found themselves in all desegregating schools—one they did not want to remember. Gender historian Rachel Devlin's examination of Black girls as courageous agents in the struggle to desegregate schools reminds us that "black girls and women were both sexually vulnerable and viewed as sexually dangerous"; thus, the threat of sexual violence loomed constantly—most certainly in newly desegregated schools.<sup>42</sup> Whether accounts of these dangers will ever make it into an oral history interview is difficult to predict. This consideration, coupled with the culture of dissemblance that animates many Black women's posture and degree of forthcomingness, may help account for such silences.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of what I attempted to achieve in terms of establishing a meaningful connection with almost-narrators and narrators alike, my efforts

were unlikely to provide me access to such memories, particularly those of anguish that these individuals might have, coupled with feelings of shame or embarrassment often associated with victimization.<sup>44</sup>

A lesson one can draw from these instances is that no amount of rapport-building would have enabled me to circumvent these challenges; this was not simply a matter of how well I knew my potential narrators or how effectively I was able to convince them of my trustworthiness. Nonetheless, our brief yet significant encounters served to remind me that the racial terror Black people withstood in the past, and that they contend with at present, has lifelong consequences, and that is not a problem that oral historians can or should attempt to fix. Additionally, I learned to prepare for an interview by anticipating some anxiety about the direction it could take and what that course might mean for the details I asked narrators to reveal. This approach invites oral historians to document these tensions when narrators permit them to do so, and to analyze them through a lens that honors narrators' stories of survival while also chronicling the structural inequities that sought to thwart that survival.

## **Metalanguage of Race**

Civil rights/Black Power-era historiography, which includes activism and school desegregation, shows that were it not for direct and careful studies of Black girls' and women's experiences, the overwhelming, all-encompassing power—the metalanguage—of race and the collective memory of the movements would remain heavily masculinized and would present a set of pictures that subordinate Black girls' and women's experiences. In the next section, we discuss the ways we worked through our narrators' adherence to these metalanguages, and we explore the ways our Black feminist worldviews abutted our attempts to illuminate the lived experiences of Black baby boomers.

### ***Francena: Being “Haunted” by Self-Erasure for the Greater Good***

I encountered what historian Evelyn B. Higginbotham refers to as the “totalizing tendency” of race in all facets of my research. In my exploration of archived newspapers and existing oral history interviews, I found that student activists resisted devoting any specific attention to womanhood.<sup>45</sup> Black female collegians at Fayetteville State often considered the collective more important than the individual and, as one narrator stated, individual credit was not the point of her work.<sup>46</sup> Thus, finding direct preservation of Black women's experiences in the archives proved difficult, necessitating oral history interviews. Higginbotham argues that the social construction of race is a metalanguage that consumes every other facet of a person's identity. Moreover, the language and discourse around Black history, specifically Black Power, is masculinized. Blackness as a metalanguage, then, helps explain why Black female activists at Fayetteville State saw their experiences through a race-only lens and why they were seemingly content to minimize part of their experiences in higher education and within activist spaces. I found that Black women diminished their particular gendered experiences or needs during student protests, both in the moment and during our interviews.

In February of 1966, the Fayetteville city newspaper ran an article detailing a long list of student grievances at Fayetteville State. The protesting students indicated one of their demands was “that advances from instructors be prohibited and subject to ruling and/or

action by the head of the college.” The next day, the Student Government Association president, George Langford, and protest organizers removed only that specific demand from the list because “the students took issue with an *Observer* story which listed charges of ‘improper advances’ by some faculty members toward girl students as a principal complaint.” Langford said, “We did not consider these matters to be one of the principal matters in our movement.”<sup>47</sup> While no female narrator discussed this aspect of the protest, I serendipitously secured an interview with Langford long after I interviewed my other narrators. I did not expect him to address the disappeared demand, as no other narrator addressed it. I asked, “During that [’66] protest, how did it resolve?” Other narrators indicated that they did not remember, but Langford remembered. During our interview, he said:

So, we had presented some specific requests to the administration, and it turns out that one of the things that was on that list was sexual misconduct by faculty members and that was not the focus of the protest, but it was picked up by the Fayetteville newspaper. It sort of changed the whole spirit of the protest because, suddenly, that became the focus of the, you know, concern on campus. And, unfortunately, I think because of that, the protest sort of petered out before it actually accomplished what we had hoped it would accomplish.<sup>48</sup>

Here, Langford spoke to the student protesters’ collective decision to remove the demand that overshadowed the full weight of what they were fighting for, even though doing so did not prevent the protest from prematurely ending. The veracity of the students’ claim in 1966 and the urgency of its initial placement on the list of grievances is indicated by the college president’s statement at a campus meeting called to negotiate an end to the protest. The president asked students to bring complaints directly to him instead of going to the press. “If nothing else,” he said, “I can terminate the faculty member’s contract at the end of the school year. We have even paid people to stay off the campus. There was one we paid like that last summer. We told the police not to let him on the campus.”<sup>49</sup> The issue, then, was less about the safety of Black female students and more about the image of both the protest and the institution. That no female activists chose to speak of this encounter during our interviews attests to the overarching desire to minimize the gendered experiences of women so that those experiences would not “change the whole spirit” of the [Black student] movement. I wondered if this event—or some similar event—was part of what my female narrator meant when she said, “Now you know there’s more to this, right?”

This historical event—the removal of this protest demand—continues to haunt me. I use the term *haunt* in the way scholar Marisa Parham conceptualizes it. “Being haunted means struggling with things that come to us from outside our discrete experiences of the world, but which we nonetheless experience as emerging out of our own psyches—haunting names how we experience the pain of others or how the pain of others shades our own subjectivities.”<sup>50</sup> Even though my female narrators never named these experiences during our interviews, they were certainly publicly named during the time under study. As I read these articles, I found myself feeling what they must have felt because I also have a history of student and community activism. I have minimized myself for the sake of the collective. In interviews about my experiences creating and being a member of advocacy and social movement organizations, I, too, kept some things close.

As I analyzed more interviews, I found that discussing gendered experiences was not the point of contention, as the experiences of male students are also gendered. Rather, it was specifically discussing the possibilities of differences for women that resulted in firm challenges from my narrators. In my study, Black female baby boomers resisted discussing their gendered experiences and readily embraced the collective idea that male and female students had one experience situated in their Blackness or African Americanness—particularly within the aforementioned social movements. As evidenced earlier, Black female narrators alluded to “there being more” that they chose not to tell. While writing this essay I remembered the moments where I could have pushed harder for information. I convinced myself that I did not do so because I feared losing interviews, as challenging elders is considered rude. Ultimately, my Black female narrators and I had more in common than I originally thought. While I am an ardent Black feminist of a different generation, I still succumbed to pressure to make myself small for the greater good—Blackness—in my own activist experiences. Perhaps, in this instance, our intergenerational differences were about communication rather than the experiences themselves.

### ***ArCasia: Iteration and Denials of Difference***

In interview after interview, I asked narrators if being a boy or girl made their school desegregation experience different; virtually all replied with, “It didn’t,” or “No, I can’t think of anything.” Feeling defeated, I would often proceed with my line of questioning and in every case, the interview would turn to issues of gendered racism—the very topics about which I had earlier asked. For example, after one narrator denied gendered differences, she casually mentioned that she had been a cheerleader in high school—one of the first Black cheerleaders to be elected in her majority white school. As a deeply gendered endeavor, cheerleading represented a gendered dimension of some Black students’ experiences. Likewise, in a subsequent interview, my question about differences in Black boys’ and girls’ experiences yielded a narrator’s gentle shrug. However, in asking him about how he was treated by white school personnel, he offered a story about the peculiar arrangement of a yearbook photograph. As the junior class’s best-dressed boy, he explained, he was prohibited by the white yearbook teacher from sitting next to his white counterpart, the junior class’s best-dressed girl, revealing the persistence of sexual stereotypes about Black men as sexual aggressors.<sup>51</sup> In both cases, I was able to locate yearbook images that corroborated the narrators’ recollections.

My narrators tended to adopt a perspective like my own around racial oppression, but this mutual foundation did not translate into common understanding about issues centered more directly on their gender *and* race as combined factors shaping their daily experiences. Because my project sought to understand issues related to gendered racism, I found narrators’ unwillingness to acknowledge the interconnectedness of race and gender frustrating and, frankly, misinformed. My reaction was based on the premise that virtually everything in the social world, education in particular, is influenced by interlocking systems of oppression—most often racism and sexism. However, because my narrators did not seem to share this perspective, at least not in the terms I used to articulate it, I found myself needing to identify other ways to phrase my questions. This shift forced me to address the same topics through a different frame, one more aligned

with the worldview of Black southern folks of the baby boomer generation. In this recognition, I had to lean into the generational difference between me and my narrators and work to perceive the issues I aimed to discuss on the narrators' terms rather than my own.

I worked to resolve this tension by revising my interview questions. In this process, I rewrote questions, such as "How did being a boy make your schooling experiences different from girls?" to make them broader and less presumptive. My replacement questions read, "What are some of your clearest memories of desegregation?" and "If you were involved in extracurricular activities, what do you remember about participating in them?" Making these adjustments helped me tune into a version of what oral historians Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack discussed as the *muted channel*, something activated "inadvertently" as "women . . . mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions."<sup>52</sup> I found the concept of the muted channel to be applicable to both men and women because of the importance of race, particularly Blackness, and racism in their lives. Narrators' acceptance of race's importance stood at odds with their simultaneous acceptance of gender's significance.

Oral history's humanities leanings lend themselves to an iterative process of research question construction that fosters a more meaningful and generative oral history interview experience. Because of this, I continued to refine my interview questions as noted above until narrators' responses supplied robust and vivid commentary for my subsequent analysis. Unbeknownst to me, I had been framing narrators' experiences as opposed to one another based on gender differences. Given where I am situated generationally in relation to my narrators and my training as a Black feminist scholar, my posing such presumptive questions to narrators constituted a significant oversight on my part that I had difficulty recognizing. Thankfully, my narrators made me aware of this issue, and despite their negation of what I perceived as gender's significance in their educational lives, reframing my questions helped me to locate and uncover such a dynamic. As in the case with the narrator who mentioned having been a cheerleader, many interviews provided salient material that addressed my research questions, something that made me feel triumphant.

Not all interviews were cause for celebration, however. My exchanges with narrators fueled my presumption that my asking questions about gender dynamics in interracial relationships might disrupt their sense of racial solidarity. Studies examining student experiences in newly desegregated schools suggest that Black girls' relationship options dwindled while those of Black boys swelled.<sup>53</sup> Coupled with literature on hegemonic femininity, which sociologist Patricia Hill Collins explains as the dominating Eurocentric standard that renders Black women and girls romantically undesirable, this scholarship converged in the realm of romantic relationships to suggest the presence of distinctly gendered experiences.<sup>54</sup> Intrigued by these findings and curious about their presence in Waco schools, I asked my narrators of both genders about these new relationship trends. Many of them seemed to be taken aback by my questions. To me, it seemed they were striving to assert their racial analytic—the metalanguage of race. For example, one male narrator admitted that Black boys indeed took advantage of their increased romantic partnership options, but he denied that this difference was gendered because Black girls never expressed overt interest in dating outside

their race. His analysis failed to consider that non-Black boys found Black girls romantically undesirable. Hence, the disproportionately harmful impact of interracial relationships on Black girls as compared to Black boys seemed peculiar to me.

I make this point because when I queried narrators about harms that Black boys in particular suffered in the school desegregation process, there were ample replies from both gender groups. And while some responses from men acknowledged the gender disparity, elaborating on Black boys' mentality regarding their higher interest in white girls versus Black ones, most acted as if my question was either sorely misguided or downright offensive. Seeking to reverse mentalities of domination, Black boys, one male narrator explained to me, were reacting to the long history of Black male persecution for any alleged encounter with a white girl or woman.<sup>55</sup> In particular, he noted that he saw dating white girls as an opportunity to seek retribution against white people who had heretofore imposed brutal regimes of anti-Black racial violence on African American boys and men in Waco.<sup>56</sup> My sense was that there was more to this trend that might, if uncovered, reveal layers of pain or frustration for Black girls and women that could disrupt the master narrative of racial solidarity, where gender issues are minimal to nonexistent.

These examples are representative of my interviews. I reasoned that my narrators' seeming denials of the influence of gender—specifically, the particular challenges Black girls faced—tracked with their admittedly racialized lives, a perspective that makes sense in light of the era in which they grew up. This view also tracks with participants' broader tendency to masculinize narratives about their battles with racism. In doing so, Black baby boomers seem to recount their past by preserving the racial collective in ways that honor Black men and boys more than Black women and girls.

Even after our interview, many narrators may have continued to dismiss the idea that gender influenced their experiences alongside other categories of social difference. My project, however, demonstrated the contrary. This tension between my impressions and theirs is important to consider, given my position of authority as a researcher, which was at times difficult to reconcile alongside my identity as a southern Black woman, raised to defer to my elders. "Disagreeing" with my narrators' perspectives caused me to grapple with not only our generational differences, but also my scholarly and regional identity in ways that made me uncomfortable. These points echo those of oral historian Lorraine Sitzia about shared authority.<sup>57</sup> Sitzia wrestled with this concept after she "became 'lost' in this idea of sharing authority and making it a reality," a circumstance that "became very restrictive" and made her project feel futile; it also pushed her to question her "role as a historian [because] if [her narrator] was involved in the process of producing a book about his life, who would decide what testimony would be made public and what would be kept private, and what were the implications of this on the history-making process?"<sup>58</sup> Sitzia's analysis exemplifies one reason I was unable to frame my oral history process as an occasion of shared authority. The way I chose to ask questions and tell the stories with which I was entrusted disproportionately reflects my perception as a scholar. These interpretations are more indicative of my sense-making process as a researcher than they are of my narrators'. In the end, fault lies with me, not them.



## Conclusion

This essay represents an account of our experiences interviewing Black baby boomers from our home communities about specific aspects of their educational and sociopolitical lives from the 1960s through the 1970s. In writing this article, we revisited our individual research and analytical decisions, as well as our potential and actual narrators' interviews and behaviors. We found, in this endeavor, that there are limits to developing trust and building relationships with narrators. Examining the ways our narrators experienced turbulent eras in US history, we asked them to revisit painful times in their lives. In some cases, potential narrators declined our interviews. In other cases, narrators refused to discuss certain facets of their experiences. At times, narrators wrestled with what historian Deborah Gray White refers to as the "politics of exposure."<sup>59</sup> That is, narrators sometimes refused to tell their stories because telling them would reveal the stories of people who had not consented to be interviewed or exposed in such a way. The generational differences between our narrators and ourselves showed us how categories of social difference, such as race or gender, can influence how different generations assign meaning to their struggles against social oppression. We found that this meaning-making process depended largely on the sociopolitical climate in which a generation was reared and the wider battles for civil and human rights that defined their upbringing and perception of society. Our experiences demonstrated the importance of carrying these and related considerations into the interview process, especially when oral historians' own social identities are similar in some respects to those of their narrators and quite different in other respects.

Thus, we encourage historians of education who engage Black baby boomers using oral history to respect their own limits and those of their narrators and to go into the process granting themselves a measure of grace, as potential narrators—sometimes after scheduling interviews—will literally or figuratively withdraw from a study or resist particular kinds of probing. Another lesson we hope to impart to oral historians is the importance of remaining open to the influences that shape narrators' lives, even when the researcher may share certain social identities with them. These social identities, particularly race and gender, mattered significantly in our respective studies. Contrary to our assumptions at the onset of our projects, our narrators taught us that to them, only one of those identities mattered in their schooling experiences.

The power of both the metalanguage of race and the collective memory of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, we found, subsumed the experiences of Black girls and women of the baby boomer generation. Uncovering this pattern in our work, we underlined how these narratives occasion a process of masculinization that renders Black girls' and women's experiences less important than those of their male counterparts. The primacy of race in this generation's lives was foregrounded in their upbringing under the unrelenting Jim and Jane Crow regime of anti-Black racial terror. Hence, our narrators' insistence that race mattered more than any other category of social difference reflects their lived experience, a crucial point that our practice of reflexivity supported us in reckoning.

We premised this reflexivity on examinations of our home communities, an introspective process that required deep and at times unsettling self-analysis. Anthropologist John L. Caughey supports our contention in arguing that studies of home are much more difficult than studies of elsewhere because they force researchers to dance with their own worldviews about home in ways that may be painful or uncomfortable. Citing Myerhoff's work,

Caughey reminds us that “it is hard to grasp the cultural dimensions of one’s own world precisely because this world seems so natural . . . everything we think, feel, say, and do is permeated by our cultural conditions, but it is not easy to recognize this.”<sup>60</sup> In asking our narrators about the significance of other aspects of social-identity-based difference—dimensions that converged around race—we found ourselves hindered by the pressures of regional, gender, and racial norms as we strived to do as we were taught and defer to elders. In our research reflections, we assign no fault to our narrators for our personal struggles to comprehend their worldview. Instead, we name the dynamic tensions of intergenerational research that were, in our cases, further complicated by our projects being studies of our home communities. Analyzing such tensions is integral to the enterprise of oral history.

Working with Black baby boomers from the South presented productive challenges that revealed deep fault lines in the collective memory and historiography of American and African Americans’ history, topics that intersect meaningfully with education. The lessons our projects taught us characterize the spirit of this wondrous group of freedom fighters, whose courage continues to inspire us. These lessons also serve to urge the analysis of more intergenerational oral history interviews that center on the simultaneity of oppression, particularly because some of the most generative lessons are yet to be recorded. The archives often provide no or only partial accounts of Black baby boomers’ participation in key historical events, thereby rendering these people as objects as opposed to active historical agents. We, then, must rely on their memories via oral histories to access more comprehensive understandings of these past events. As the baby boomer generation ages, it is imperative to do our due diligence to capture their lived experiences, lest the historical record continue to be incomplete.

Ultimately, we discussed the ways our own experiences as Black female oral historians of education informed our studies and our methodological decisions. Given the dearth of literature on the topics we have explored in this paper, our contribution is significant because it names specific tensions that historians of education might confront in attempting to conduct research with Black baby boomers about topics other than *just* race. Learning at the feet of this remarkable group represents one of the highest honors for an oral historian, and our delineation of particular tensions we encountered throughout this process is a testament to how much more there is to uncover—should we have the will.

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## Notes

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**Francena F.L. Turner** is an interdisciplinary historian of education; a fellow of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR); and Postdoctoral Associate for Data Curation in African American History and Culture for the University of Maryland Restorative Justice Project, where her research is an alloy of African American history, culture, digital humanities (AADHum), oral history, and the University of Maryland Libraries. Her critical studies of Black women's higher education and activist scholars explore historical and contemporary issues of equity, agency, and thriving in higher education more broadly. Turner is also on the Oral History Steering Committee of the Society of American Archivists. Her research has been published in *Gender, Work, and Organization* and *Women, Gender and Families of Color*. E-mail: fturner1@umd.edu.

**ArCasia D. James-Gallaway** is an interdisciplinary historian of education and a teacher educator at Texas A&M University, where she works as an assistant professor and ACES Fellow. Her scholarly aim is to bridge past and present perspectives on African American struggles for educational justice. Engaging critical perspectives and approaches such as critical race theory, Black feminist theory, oral history methodology, and Black southern epistemology, her research agenda follows three overlapping strands of inquiry: the history of African American education, Black history education, and gendered anti-Blackness in education. Her dissertation was supported in part by a Ford Foundation Fellowship and earned the Honourable Mention designation for the History of Education Society's Claude A. Eggertsen Dissertation Prize. For her scholarship, James-Gallaway won the Kipchoge Neftali Kirkland Social Justice Award from the National Council for Social Studies' College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA). Her research has been published in national and international journals such as *Race, Ethnicity and Education*; *History of Education Review*; *Gender, Work, and Organization*; and *Educational Studies*. E-mail: ajamesgallaway@tamu.edu.