

Am I Truly My Mother's Daughter?

An Autoethnographic Exploration of Identity and Educational Legacy

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THE RESEARCH FOCUSED on the importance of the lived experiences of Black women in education across three frameworks: *currere* (Pinar, 1975/1994), Black feminism (Collins, 2000), and Womanism (Walker, 1983), which emphasizes the personal narratives within curriculum studies and qualitative research, particularly through autoethnographies. Dillard (2006) maintain that for researchers and teachers to reexamine their values, cultural understandings, and decision making, they must also come face-to-face with the contradictions of life and determine what aspects of these are most important to their being.

By revisiting the intergenerational narratives of my journey through education, I wish to locate my “*currere* of stay” or “curriculum of stay,” which McNair-Lee (2023), defined in two parts: (1) “creating a means for Black women to speak to other Black women about how and why we have remained teachers in urban school spaces despite *displacement* and other factors” (p. 7) and (2) “as the ability as Black women to create, sustain and pass on resources that allow us to remain in school spaces despite the concerted and intentional efforts of hegemonic power structures to remove us from those spaces” (p. v). Furthermore, by incorporating *currere* as the method and its application to Curriculum Studies, I hope to embrace my identity as the daughter of a Black woman and educator to explore if the lived experiences of my mother inform and shape my personal and professional journey.

Positionality Statement

As a Black woman scholar, my positionality is rooted and shaped by navigating spaces that were never built for me nor intended to prioritize and recognize the fullness of what makes me human. As I entered the ivory walls of my doctoral program, I had to learn how my presence was already an act of rebellion. Allowing Black women to speak to, write, theorize, and speak the truth of our lives is rebellious and important, as the work is critical to interrupting dominant narratives, removing the silencing systems, and asserting that our presence has always been vital in the disruption of the historical misrepresentation of our scholarly attributes.

A revolving theme of needing to embrace the rebel in me has long been a part of my empirical work of naming internal, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and political systems that limit

and dismiss the critical work that positions our behaviors as chaotic or defiant. Then again, maybe these behaviors are essential parts of our survival. It is with liberatory methodologies rooted in Black feminist tradition that the very act of telling my story and stories of other Black women educators became a way to push back against narratives that profit from our labor while hindering our struggles.

Black women in the field of educational research, such as Patricia Hill Collins, Cynthia Dillard, Lisa Delpit, Theodora Berry, Denise Taliaferro Baszile, Robin Boylorn, and countless others, have positioned their work in identity, memory, and the lived experience by situating the researcher's subjectivity as the lens to our truth, both inside and outside of the classroom. They remind us that narratives are forms of epistemic resistance, which becomes a stance against the reduction of stereotypes and tropes that negatively represent who we are and a radical act for the unknowing. To embrace my inner rebel, I will engage this work by removing the illusion of neutrality by reclaiming my stories, interrogating my experiences, and centering my positions. My perspective is guided by generational wisdom, collective responsibility, and lived curricula of sustainability. Therefore, there is no service without our truth, and there is no care without our critiques.

Literature Review

Autoethnographies and Memory Work

Madison (2011) argued that one of the most vital positions in critical ethnographies is the acknowledgement of power, position, and moral responsibility. As the fieldwork is situated in our lived experiences, the work becomes the site of our belonging and how others may take up that representation and interpretation. McDonald (2021) assert that ethnographies allow researchers "to study a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture" (p. 98). Boylorn (2016) defines the process of ethnography, locating the self, as:

Being at home with oneself requires that you take home wherever you go, that you carry it on your skin like the aroma of sweet perfume. You hold it on your tongue like a poem you fear will disappear when you speak. When you are at home with yourself, you feel at home even at somebody else's house. When I feel at home, I can make myself at home wherever I am, opening cabinets and drawers, making myself a cup of coffee, putting my feet up on the furniture, changing the channel without asking. (p. 45)

Ethnographies, both auto and critical, allow researchers to embrace their truths and negotiate these social and often politicized narratives to make meaning, resurrect memories, and reflect on the stories of our everyday lives and our storied legacies (Boylorn, 2014). Additionally, autoethnography or racial autobiography in feminist and womanist thought has the power to facilitate an interrogation of racism, power, and privilege (Pratt-Clarke, 2012, p. 85). Cooper and Lilyea (2021) describe elements of autoethnography within the family of traditions of narrative and ethnographic methods as a way to amplify the base unit of analysis of self as the author and

researcher. Therefore, with that responsibility, we must turn back to ourselves to harness the accountability for our own research paradigms and positions of authority in qualitative research.

Using autoethnography as a methodology, the personal narrative can revisit, reinterpret, and reimagine the cultural complexities of Black womanhood in educational settings. Riddick (2022) argues that autoethnographies tell the story of the self and connect it to “outside” elements (p. 1087). Black women educators who apply Pinar’s *currere* provide themselves with an invitation to reimagine their lived experiences, making it a curriculum that centers their ways of knowing. When embracing Black feminist and Womanism frameworks, the researchers illuminate the complexities of their personal, professional, and political practices. Black women researchers then maintain these methodological spaces to share their stories that not only function as data sources but also as acts of rebellion, reclamation, and resistance.

Currere of Stay/Curriculum of Stay

Pinar (1975/1994) laid significant groundwork for understanding curriculum as a personal, social, and evolving body of knowledge. *Currere* is a process that allows one to use him/herself as a means of gaining a better understanding of him/herself within a four-point method:

- Regressive (One returns to the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present)
- Progressive (The future is present in the same sense as the past is present.)
- Analytical (Make more visible of what is lived through)
- Synthetical (Underline the biological concreteness of being)

The concept of “curriculum of stay” is emergent in curriculum theory and teacher retention as it acts as a part of the reflexive journey that accurately allows Black women to explain our personal, professional, and emotional reasons to remain in K-12 spaces despite systemic challenges, neglect, and tensions that have historically existed in the educational system. While looking through the educational lens, Pinar (1975/1994) suggests that the use of autobiography narrows the focus on self which allows the space to open, to experience, to reflect, to learn, to critique and judge, to think, which establishes a space for agency (Strong-Wilson, 2017).

McNair-Lee (2023) beautifully described the “curriculum of stay” as providing Black women educators with “an anchor and with wings.” (p. ix). “We are enabled to stay and empowered to grow” (p. ix). By harnessing that power, we reconceptualize that all notions of our experiences with curriculum are social, historical, theological, cultural, racial, gendered, and aesthetic lived experiences of Blacks in the United States (Berry, 2015). The curriculum of stay converges and diverges from the steps of *currere* by using memory or reflection to locate why Black women sustain in K-12 education, which removes the race and gender neutrality of the framework, although the philosophical foundation does not strictly follow the four steps linearly.

Black Feminism and Womanism in *Currere*

Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) is a theory of empowerment and activism based on Black women's experience and legacy of struggle. Collins maintained that Black Feminism functions in two paradigmatic shifts: (1) understanding how we think about oppression by embracing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, and (2) addressing ongoing epistemological debates concerning ways to assess what is considered truth. According to Reynolds (2002), at the heart of Black feminist theory is the view that there is a specialized knowledge produced by Black women that clarifies a particular standpoint of and about Black women. Black feminism not only highlights the intersections of race, gender, and class but also suggests that self-determination is essential to our survival.

Womanist, a term coined by Alice Walker (1983), is defined as a Black woman who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, both male and female" (p. xi). Womanism reflects an interchangeable and collective voice that validates the narratives of Black women. Lindsey-Dennis (2015) defines womanism as a social change methodology that stems from everyday experiences of Black women and their modes of solving practical problems (Murry, 2025, p. 15). Furthermore, both Black feminism and womanism emphasize the value and strength of Black women's culture, in addition to "embracing the commonalities of emotional relatedness, nurturance, empathy, caregiving, moral decision making, and other ways of knowing" (Haskins et. al, 2019, p. 9).

These theories allow Black women to define their experiences while also enabling them to challenge the hegemonic discourse of what Black womanhood is because "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (Walker, 1983, p. xii). Black feminism and womanism seek to provide vital critiques to name and confront the multiple forms of oppression to re-center Black women's narratives beyond the controlling societal images, patriarchy, and structural oppression. Black women scholars have continued to push the boundaries of ethnographies to challenge dominant narratives that incorporate intersectionality, critical autoethnography, and endarkened epistemology as forms of advocacy of personal and home spaces (Pratt, 2023). Pinar's *currere*, as a methodology, and Black feminism and womanism, as frameworks, allow the autoethnography to be culturally anchored, historically informed, and grounded in survival, care, and healing.

At the heart of women's liberation in education, women have been confronted and are progressively continuing to dismantle the dominant societal narratives and the intersections of what Phelan et. al (1991, as cited in Mims and Williams, 2020) consider a "multiple worlds" microsystem setting: families, peer groups, classrooms, and schools. While navigating the multiple worlds, Black women educators' experiences have sought to produce literature that highlights the unique experiences of their contributions to literature, specifically in alignment with Black Feminism, Womanism, and the success and retention within the teaching profession (Regus et. al, 2024).

(Re)membering Regressively

According to Roofe (2022), human liberation and emancipation result from reflective explorations (p. 4). In the regression phase, I return to my earliest memories of education and identity. My first introduction to the harsh reality of school systems was in kindergarten. Since the age of five, I have had to negotiate space, wrestle with stereotypes, and also be comfortable with

who God created me to be. I remember when I was in kindergarten at Southdown Elementary School, during a parent-teacher conference, my teacher called me a “fat, lazy ass gal who would not amount to nothing.” My mama came home that night and whipped me. Years later, she explained that she was not only embarrassed, but she knew I could do better.

I contend that “my better” is situated in being considered a “sapphire.” Not the fancy, precious, and valuable jewel that comes in a wide array of crystal stones, but the one that Patricia Hills-Collins (2000) describes as a controlling image that is applied to Black women and their sexual beings (p. 156) or a woman who is stigmatized based on the perception of her sexual behaviors. However, who said “sapphires” cannot change the world? According to Butler-Barnes and Inniss-Thompson (2020), Black girls are exposed to negative messages about themselves based on their identities as racial and gendered minorities. These negative messages and/or stereotypes further dictate the disciplinary actions taken against Black girls for major and minor offenses based on society's notion of palatable feminine behavioral characteristics. Therefore, I learned at the age of five that my body would be “free and unfree, light and darkness, joyful and melancholic, beautiful and terrifying” (Guillory, 2021, p. 302).

Lorde (1984/2007) maintains that to evolve beyond the superficial shared experiences of Black womanhood, we must pursue empowerment through our service to others and our future selves. My mother was the first curriculum I ever learned, standing 6 feet tall at 280 pounds, with skin as dark as the night and hair white as snow; her mother nicknamed her “Moon.” My mother, a devout Christian woman, knew “love like a back street.” She would often open our home to anyone who needed a place to sleep and a meal. She would work two or three jobs, working days and nights at the Answering Service, a professional telephone answering and call center, to make sure that everyone ate. We never whispered in our house. Being loud and boisterous was a survival tactic; otherwise, you would get lost among the many people who frequented our modest three-bedroom home on Peter Street. Many of our visitors never left. I would refer to our childhood home as the “Motel 6;” we always kept a light on. All-Black neighborhoods, often referred to as “ghetto or hood,” were designed to foster political control and economic exploitation. However, these spaces were where ideas were crafted to refute oppression and provide oppositional knowledge (Collins, 2000).

Hall et al. (2025) suggests that stereotypes of Black women are socio-political and historically rooted in slavery. My mother and her sisters would call me “Saph,” which is short for my great-great-great aunt's name, Saphronia, who worked on a Louisiana plantation called Hollywood. Aunt Saph is described as a hard woman with no children, no husband, who wore pants in an act of rebellion, chewed tobacco, sat with her legs wide open, and took no s*** from nobody. My mother and her three sisters would lament through funny stories while filling in each other's lost memories concerning the dreadful visits to Aunt Saph's house on the plantation. She lived and worked on the land well into the 1960s-1970s (This information is strictly derived from family stories and has not been further explored.). Black women who embrace stereotypes, such as strength, resilience, fearlessness, aggression, or even anger, understand these implications as a duality, rather than a dichotomy, which provides spaces to redefine the adaptability of said identity.

bell hooks (1994/2015) confronts the fear of speaking out and the courage to speak “truth to power,” as she discusses the silencing of her youth to be “seen and not heard.” As a woman raised in the South, this Southern proverb is often spoken as a reminder to remain silent due to other people's perception of who you are. My mother, Michelle Wanda, did not totally believe in the thought. She often gave us space in our home to argue points that we believed were important. For example, in the late 90s, my brothers believed that my friend group and I did not need to listen

to a female group from New Orleans called the Ghetto Twins' 1998 album entitled *No Pain, No Gain*. She was the judge, our friends were the jury, and we were the attorneys who had to argue for or against the concept of young Black girls' "Responsibility" to hold our own. ("Responsibility" is a song on the Ghetto Twinz album that speaks about the roles of motherhood, despite the father refusing to step up as a parent.) Her way of parenting transcended the belief of being "seen and not heard." My mom's house was the place for "our relentless resistance to the continuous denial and dismissal of Black women's intellectual production and liberation" (Perlow et al., 2017, p. vii).

The need to embrace the rebel part of my "sapphire" allowed me to become a "woman of bold speech" (hooks, 1994/2015, p. x). The "sapphire" identity was also the description of my character in my late undergraduate professors' unfinished opera libretto entitled "The Vocal Competition." The "sapphire" character was described as heavy-set, hot-tempered, quick-witted, loud, and bossy but always fighting for the justice of her classmates. Bradley (2017) argued that multiple voices and perspectives are needed in the production of knowledge and the ways institutions respond to challenges of diversity and difference as the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, language, culture, and religion (p. 137). The libretto was loosely written about our undergraduate experiences at a national vocal competition as young Black students from a historically Black university (HBCU) and our journey to stay true to our cultural identities in classical music and the art of the Negro Spirituals. These moments were difficult, as we were often the only HBCU in the competition and were then judged more harshly due to our complexion. I believe that my professor was taking an anti-racism approach as he used multiple voices in his libretto to provide different perspectives on the same issues of oppression.

Progressive Potential of Right Now

"If only I could find her, then perhaps, I could find myself."
(Ferdinand, 2018)

Warren and Coles (2020) argue that "the future of Black education research and practice hinges on both documenting barriers to Black student success and identifying promising pathways to actively dismantle such barriers" (p. 384). These commitments rely on the documentation of persistent barriers that make Black women educators potentially unsuccessful, as well as identify and construct new possibilities to actively dismantle these barriers. The progressive phase focuses on the centrality of personal experience in understanding educational identity and its practice. With the United States school systems as the first introduction of societal norms, Black women educators make up only 5% of U.S. public school teachers and have the highest turnover rate amongst all other gender and racial demographics (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018). Black women scholars, at the heart of women's liberation in education, have been confronted and progressively continued to dismantle the dominant societal narratives and the intersections of microsystem setting.

My mother's journey through these multiple worlds, where navigating life as a single mother, an undergraduate student, and into teaching at the age of 50, was a living embodiment of the progressive phase. Her radical commitment to finish what she had started in 1973 at Nicholls State University is a model of what it looks like to choose education again and to restore what one may think is lost. Yet, as I move through my own educational career, I stand at a restless

crossroads to continue in the K-12 sector, the urge to further my educational pursuits into higher education, or to leave the public school system as a whole. This painful tension exposes my accomplishments alongside my fears—coexisting with my success as a teacher, the communities I participated in to sustain myself for 12.5 years, and the grief of what I believed education was supposed to be.

Samuels et al. (2021) considers the analysis of sensemaking as an intentional process for Black women educators who teach in either secondary or postsecondary settings. Through investigation or going back, the answers to their teaching experiences are used as a lens to cope. These individual experiences allow us to make sense of our educational journeys. McNair-Lee (2023) suggested that a “curriculum of stay” provides Black women autonomy in connection with the need for space that propels our growth beyond the American hegemonic power structures:

This curriculum is self-determined, that is, Black women take from it what is needed and add what they believe is missing. We know this curriculum without learning it in formal ways. It is, as the church mothers would say, “in our bones.” Our connection to the space and place of the urban classroom connects us to the specific histories and legacies of those who have gone before us, and we can re-member that which we have not been formally taught. (p. v)

My burning question, “how do the lived experiences of my mother inform and shape my personal and professional journey?” pushes me to reimagine the future and the transformation of systems for educators who look like me. My mother’s persistence to become a teacher after leaving college in her junior year to pursue a career in telecommunications offers me an example of how it is okay to leave, but never okay to not return to your purpose. At moments of contention or guilt, I remember my mother leaving home to drive an hour away to go to class, and then returning to work her night job at Chabert Medical Center from 10pm to 6am. While working the “switchboard” during the night shift, she would complete assignments or while working 8am to 8pm at Beautiful Beginnings, a women/family shelter in our hometown. All of those moments happened before she became a long-term substitute at a local junior high school. My mom found sustainability while reimagining herself in spaces to further craft and create a world that allowed her to reinvent her future.

The progressive phase of *currere* views the influence of the future as the present in the same sense that the past is present (Pinar, 1994). Dillard (2012) conceptualizes that knowing who we are and whose we are is embedded inside of us, and after years of forgetting, it is necessary to get back to the grounded energy of “(re)membering the things we have learned to forget” (p. 5). Alice Walker, in her 1983 book, *In Search of My Mother's Gardens*, contends that there is a belief in truth as an expression of maternal love. All theorists ultimately point toward the act of locating and making meaning once what is sought is found. My mother would consider the progressive phase, “nothing new under the sun,” which is a phrase that she often uses when attempting to recall relevant cultural memories to her sixth-grade ELA students or when hearing the same theme in a different story or considering how her past revisits her present in her children’s decisions, especially her only daughter and fellow educator.

In returning to the memories that shape my educational identity, I return to what Ferdinand (2018) considers a journey to “rediscover a point of cultural origin” (p. 56). These cultural origins are then rooted in Black Southern womanhood, where community is central to the children’s upbringing. We were not introduced to resilience as a haphazard notion; however, it was practiced, witnessed, and lived as if it were our collective responsibility. Our Southern, Baptist churches sit on corners of urban religious colloquialisms of “faith without work is dead”

(James 2:17) and “if a man doesn’t work, they don’t eat,” (2 Thessalonians 3:10) yet, in the two-hour drive to my hometown, my “sapphire” is still unsure of my responsibility to return to the classroom with no clear answer.

Analytical Antics

Sometimes, the power of my presence feels more like a burden than a blessing. Before I ever read the work of Patricia Hill Collins or Alice Walker, I was forced to maneuver through narratives and the weight of the “sapphire” stereotype. My voice, a weapon of audacity laced with unapologetic assertiveness, refused to shrink under unrealistic jargon in meetings, classrooms, or administrative spaces. Many times, my outspokenness made individuals who are uncomfortable with the volume of their oppression uneasy, yet those same qualities allow my students to feel seen, heard, and understood. I learned early that being a Black woman educator meant that I would have to constantly negotiate my cultural identity on a tightrope of being “too much” and “not enough” simultaneously.

The analytical phase juxtaposes past, present, and future, creating a subjective space that penetrates the lived past and grants freedom to return to the present. When I look back, I was “sapphire” by simply asserting boundaries when I was afraid or advocating for myself. For example, in 1992 I was five years old when my father died from complications related to diabetes at the age of 37. We traveled up to his hometown for his services and during the family viewing, my family members suggested that I touch him, and I refused. Then my twin brother touched his face and announced that he was cold. My family members chuckled through their tears. My refusal was misunderstood as defiance when my quiet grief attempted to rationalize through an internal conversation: “Why is my daddy cold and sleeping in a box?” Lorde (1977/2017) argues that death is a final silence, and maybe that is why nobody explained to me that burials are a part of life and that death mutes you from the inside out.

Motherhood in the African American community involves individuals who renegotiate the relationship between Black children and self (Collins, 2000). These individuals may be blood mothers, other mothers, teachers, church women, or any Black woman who operates in the reconstruction of oppositional and oppressive views in the definition of Black womanhood. Williams (2016) argues that “many stereotypes of Black motherhood are foreclosures and perversions of the relationship between mother and child wherein the ability to grieve is unrecognized or discounted should the relationship be broken or decimated” (p. 20). Their complex roles in the community contribute to various experiences of grief and loss (Al’Uqdah and Adomako, 2018). In Black feminism and womanism, grief is considered a political act.

It was the first semester of my master’s degree program that grief began to complicate my personal and professional life. For many years, I quietly observed my mother bury things. She would bury seeds as we attempted to grow a garden in the middle of a Louisiana summer. I saw my mother bury overdue monthly bills inside the drawer next to the microwave in our old family home. We lost our family home after my mother refinanced the mortgage to cover my twin’s mounting hospital bills. I would listen to her cry in prayer during the wee hours of the morning after the electricity was cut off, once again. I even stood as a witness when my mother had to bury my 27-year-old twin brother, when the aneurysm burst right after the doctor told us the surgery was successful. The doctor reassured my family that my brother would be cleaned up, awake, and ready for us in twenty minutes. He would reappear ten minutes later to deliver the news of his death.

Leong (2013, as cited in Williams 2023) argues that “the experience of loss [bereavement] may be universal, but responses to loss [grief] are widely variable, and there is no one clearly defined course or process of bereavement or grieving” (p. 20). Over the years, I have learned that my mother and I navigate grief in our educational and personal worlds differently. A few days following my twin's death, my mother returned to her classroom. Day after day, she would stand on her 6-foot, 300-pound frame at the front of her classroom, wiping her tears with random pieces of tissue her students handed her when they noticed her brokenness. My mother showing her vulnerability became a form of resistance, healing, and empowerment. These acts often amplify the responsibility of women of color to “interrogate our silences” and engage in critical self-analysis and self-transformation by remembering, speaking, voicing, and acting (Pratt-Clarke, 2012, p. 85). “A mother's grief can transform the marginalized, racialized, and oppressed person from an object bearing grief to being a subject speaking grievance” (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018, p. 94).

The notion of Black mothers mourning, publicly, creates a community of healing and a sense of agency. My mother has always been a crier. Even as a young child, I would wake up in the middle of the night because my bedroom was right next to hers and lie in the crook of her arm to provide any sense of comfort. Although my physical touch provided love, I knew that no amount of “love” would pay the mounting hospital bills, heal a sick child, or restore employment, car and furniture repossessions and bad checks picked up from the District Attorney's office. Golden (2017) maintained that “cry becomes a synonym for being unafraid to admit to confusion, weakness, to plead for help, for the ability of mothers to say to their children, ‘I do not know what to do’” (p. 1921). When mothers allow the vulnerability of admitting having no answers, hooks (1994/2015) identifies this space as one where opportunities allow healing through testimony, through gathering everything available to you, and reconciling the financial and emotional challenges of parenthood.

Brown (2022) suggests “in the legacy of Black womanhood and Black girlhood, the survival of a loss—physical, spatial, ambiguous, or disenfranchised—remains in the blood memory of Black women's and girls' experiences” (p. 24). Throughout my journey, I could not find time to cry. I understood that “there is no expectation of immediate relief, only a willingness to submit to the darkness of the unknown and a determination to stumble through it” (Golden, 2017, p.1921). My “Saph” was full of anger, restlessness, and hopelessness as I began to navigate life without my twin brother. At the same time, I found myself struggling with what it meant to be a daughter while carrying the responsibility of planning my twin's funeral without the support of a burial policy. Al'Uqdah and Adomako (2017) contend that grief is a universal process that aids in people's healing from the loss of a loved one, and that loss changes significantly following the death of a significant loved one. Having to negotiate my feelings and emotions in a classroom was not an option for me; therefore, I subsequently failed my Fall semester of graduate school, withdrew from the counseling program, and enrolled in Educational Leadership in January of the following year.

Furthermore, in the analytical phase, I see that my grief was never in solitude. Black feminist thought provides a reinterpretation of community as a place of collective effort and will (Collins, 2000, p. 53). After the loss of my twin, I found myself in a state of disconnection, unsure of who I was or how I fit into my profession. The grief consumed me every day, and I thought my break from work would begin my process of healing. Throughout history, Black women's politics have been explored through unspoken experiences of hurt, rejection, faith, and a search for identity (Harris-Perry, 2011). However, upon returning to work, I faced the daunting reality of

rediscovering my professional and personal identity. In many ways, I was fragmented and unsure of my purpose. At the time of my return to the classroom and to my graduate school program, many of my students had been enrolled in my Choir/Vocal Music class for at least two years and were the driving force behind my return. Many of them also attended my twin brother's funeral, sent emails and text messages, and mailed letters during my weeks away. My students sensed that I had changed, and they softened their edges for me because they quietly understood that I had to figure out who I was moving forward.

Synthesizing Life as an Educator's Daughter

In the synthetic phase, I fully realize that to examine my stay, my journey, and my becoming is not to sit in memory, imagination, or critique. Instead, it wrestles with the moments and asks: Who am I becoming now that I know? Collins (1996) maintains that Walker's definition of womanism is committed to wholeness. In this phase, my intersections are braided together to form a roadmap from who I was to who I am now. For me, synthesizing my life as an educator's daughter, formed by my mother's late-life educational journey, formed by the effects of grief, and finding the balance within an institution that I once trusted, helps me reshape what I believe is possible in my purpose.

As a child, my educational journey started in my home and community; therefore, my mother taught me how to disrupt narratives before I knew the language. Moreover, motherhood in the African American community involves individuals who renegotiate the relationship between Black children and self (Collins, 2000). These individuals may be blood mothers, othermothers, teachers, church women, or any Black woman who operates in the reconstruction of oppositional and oppressive views on the definition of Black womanhood. By returning to my "point of cultural origin" (Ferdinand, 2018), rooted in Black womanhood, I was not introduced to resilience as a haphazard notion; however, it was practiced, witnessed, and lived as if it were our collective responsibility.

Black feminist thought taught me that self-definition is a political act. My "sapphire" is not defined by anger but to "make spaces something like freedom; spaces in which Black people can and do exist outside of and beyond subjection and abjection" (Reese & Cooper, 2021, p. 453). The "sapphire" label is often associated with the trope of the "angry Black woman," and even as a young girl, the label was imposed on me at various intersections by others. It allows me to operate in a duality of being both a subject of the stereotype and an agent of change within my educational setting. I turn my perceived anger from a destructive force into one that drives me to create a positive change in my environment. Bettina Judd (2019) maintains:

By thinking seriously about Black women's inner lives, we can shift the focus from the modes of knowledge by which the angry Black woman trope is meaningful to Black women's selfhood and contribution to knowledge. (p. 179)

The "sapphire" stereotype allowed me to intersect my experiences and the unrealistic expectations placed on Black women educators to become my fuel for action. Furthermore, Cooper (2018) maintained that Black women have the right to be mad as hell. Instead of retreating, my anger led to advocacy, a "hope-in-action" that sustains, particularly in how I approached the reclamation of

my identity. Within these memories, my story is no longer isolated; it is a pattern for Black women to claim ourselves in spaces that would rather have us fragmented.

Vickers (2007) reflects on sensemaking as a process of weaving together multiple meanings, and the problem being that there are often too many and never not enough. In this “space of tension” (Meier, 2016), I resolved that I am allowed to “bring [my] belongings with [me] by knowing that I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another” (Madison, 2011, p. 10-11) and through that location I find wholeness.

When I look toward the future, I do not wish to replicate my mother's journey. Yet her staying was an act of belief, persistence through promise, and sustainability for liberation. As an educator's daughter, her journey to become a teacher at 50 showed me that dreaming has no expiration date and that your purpose will haunt you until you fulfill it. Furthermore, her classroom is not just a workplace, but also an extension of her community, the destination for second chances, and the place where hope is wrapped in expectation. The lived experiences of my mother have informed my “Saph” refusal to accept school as it is without imagining the possibility of what it could be. With that, my future remains open enough for me to choose myself in all spaces.

End Note

This article is posthumously dedicated to my mother, Michelle Wanda White (1955-2025).
Because you were, I am.

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