

An Autobiographical Inquiry into the Experience of a Black Woman Educator In-Between Contested Race, Gender, Class, Culture, and Place in the South Nappy Roots, Split Ends, New Growth, and No Lye

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“Good Morning. Good Morning. How was your weekend?” This was my greeting to each student that filed in that cold March, Monday morning. Just when I was about to close my classroom door, I heard yelling.

“Boy, you come in here any time you want! Look at you, you ain’t even in uniform!”

When I stuck my head out a little farther to get a better glimpse of the student being yelled at so early in the morning, I saw that it was one of my students. Never hearing anyone say, “Good Morning” or “How are you?” I started trotting up the hallway, yes, trotting because walking wouldn’t allow me to rescue my “baby” quickly enough.

“Why you even come to school? You ain’t got no books, paper, nothing,” yelled Ms. King!

Rasheem, not saying a word, was tucking the orange shirt into his Black pants when I heard another voice yell, “They need to get him out of here!”

The hallway seemed unusually long. I felt like I’d never get to Rasheem. All I wanted to say to him was, “Good Morning.” The closer I got to him, the more rage I could see in his face. I picked up my trot. As I approached him, I could see that the other voice I heard belonged to Mr. Robinson.

“Boy, you late, out of uniform, and you came in here with no books,” Mr. Delany, an administrator walking towards Rasheem yelled!

All of us reached Rasheem at the same time. As I hugged his neck, disregarding the adults standing around, Mr. Delany interjected and said, “Get’em to ISS, Ms. Mitchell. I’m tired of him coming in here when he wants to and how he wants to.”

“Good Morning Rasheem,” I quietly whispered. With rage in his face, I knew what was about to happen.

“Ms. Mitchell, I’m tired of this school. I hate these teachers. I quit. I ain’t never coming back again,” Rasheem screamed as he pulled away from me!

I grabbed his arm and spoke loudly enough so that only he could hear me. “Rasheem, listen to me. Calm down. Let Ms. Mitchell handle this. Don’t let other people ruin your day.”

“No, no, y’all teachers don’t understand. Y’all think I want to come to school with an orange shirt and Black pants? No, but when that’s the only damn thing you got left on the side of the road cause everybody done went through “yo” stuff...” Tears streaming down his face, he paused, turned around, and looked at the administrator, Ms. King and Mr. Robinson, and said, “I hate y’all! Ms. Mitchell, y’all teachers just don’t understand what it’s like to be put out on the streets and everybody done went through your stuff!”

Choked with emotion and feeling the hurt and pain, I (re)lived for the first time since I was in seventh grade, the day I came home from school to find that my family had been evicted...(Author’s personal journal, January 12, 2005).

The comment--“Y’all teachers just don’t understand!”—stirred up an autobiographical narrative inquiry into my experience as a Black woman educator teaching and living in-between two worlds “that often run parallel, sometimes juxtapose, and occasionally collide” (Haynes in He et al, 2009, p. 233) in-between contested race, gender, class, culture, and place in the South. Time after time, I have found myself empathizing, consoling, and/or calming students overwhelmed with personal adversities. Their adversities push me to come face-to-face with my poverty-stricken past. Through educational degrees I have tried to delete many of the harsh realities that I had to endure. Teaching in urban schools, however, has negated my efforts. My values and beliefs gained from my experiences as a Black American growing up in poverty are engrained in the fabric of my very being. My thoughts and actions are driven by my values and beliefs.

I was born in the midst of the Hip-Hop Era (1964-1984) and grew up during the “I’m Black and I’m Proud” movement in Atlanta, Georgia. My childhood world was steeped heavily in African-American culture (e.g. strong faith, family-oriented, and education as the passport to anywhere my mind could conceive). My world became tangled and matted as my mother married a Caucasian and moved my family to rural South Georgia. Face-to-face encountered with racism, class privilege, and white privilege, I sought to escape from the twisted rural South in pursuit of “liberation through literacy” (Douglass, 1845).

As I navigate between opportunities for professional upward mobility and the uplift of my community, I find myself negotiating my identities between two worlds: one as a descendant of America’s Black under(represented) class and one as a member of America’s Black middle class. Living in-between worlds, pursuing radical doctoral studies, and teaching in an urban school district complicate who I am personally and professionally and provoke me to question the skin I speak, the life I live, and the place where I work (He, Haynes, Janis, Ward, Pantin, & Mikell, 2013). I recognize that I am my work and my work is me (Ward, 2011). As I navigate in-between contradictory identities, lives, and places, I am compelled to advocate for “at-possibility” and under-represented individuals and groups such as Black students, parents, disabled adults, church members, and community members as the societal ills continue to inflict urban communities and spew into urban schools with few urban teachers prepared to provide any guidance for children who are ignored or denied by families, schools, and societies. I build allies

with my fellow teachers to help students to welcome their parents back to their lives after serving prison sentences. I also work with my school communities to challenge stereotypes about Black women and other Blacks. I call for the members of my school communities to accommodate and educate homelessness or drug addicted parents and evoke dialogue on systemically engrained racism, oppression, and marginalization in the U.S. South. It is through the knowledge gained from my experience of living in-between the contested race, gender, class, and power that I am able to recognize, resist, challenge, and dismantle the “miseducation” of Black students.

What is professional identity, and where does its development originate from? What is experiential knowledge and how is it applicable to the classroom? The answers to these subjectively-viewed questions lie dormant within many educators who resist, reject, or ignore the significance of autobiographical inquiry in education. For the first four years of my teaching career, I wrestled with the value of my practical knowledge gained from my lived experiences. I further wrestled with the influence that my lived experiences had on my professional identity and my teaching practices. To make my argument that autobiographical inquiry is an avenue for teachers to recognize and validate their lived experiences as knowledge and key factors in the development of their identities (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997), I became transparent as I explored my lived experience.

My inquiry is an autobiographical narrative exploration of the ways that race, gender, class, culture, and place shape who I was and how I became who I am as a Black woman educator. Building on the works of Collins (2000), Cross (1991), Gay (2000), He (2003), hooks (2000), and Tatum (1997), I used Black women hair metaphors such as nappy roots, split ends, new growth, and no lye to comb through the phases of my life. The use of this extended metaphor to tell my counter narrative and to transcend theoretical and methodical boundaries, follows the traditions of Black women pioneers writing their lives in the likes of Toni Morrison (1970), Alice Walker (1983), Zora Neale Hurston (1965), and Maya Angelou (1969). For the purpose of protecting the characters and myself in my stories, I fictionalized characters, events, settings, and time to capture the complexities of Black girlhood and to provide the space necessary to identify recurring themes of resilience, strength, and determination embedded in the stories of my life.

Although there is a large body of research literature on autobiographies that explore teachers’ personal and professional identities, few texts explore the influence of race, gender, class, culture, and place on the development of identities from a Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought standpoint. I use hair metaphors to narrate my experience as a mobile urban youth growing up in the U. S. South. Each incident, much like the lye in a perm or wave kit, seeps into my pores, creating not only a new and different style through which to story and (re)story my life, but also a story to be added to the limited body of literature on the complexities of Black girlhood. Although my inquiry focuses on my personal experience of race, gender, class, culture, and place, it has implications for educators, teachers, administrators, parents, and education policy makers to understand the identity development of Black girls, their cultural roots, learning styles, academic achievements, and highest potentials in schools and greater social environments. I hope that my study could in some ways act as a force to demolish “the White Architects of Black Education” (Watkins, 2001). My hair stories are counterstories that challenge the stereotypical meta-narratives about Black women, evoke dialogues about the suppressing and controlling images of Black women, and incite changes in the ways Black women are defined and educated and the ways they live their lives.

Smooth Roots: Participatory Research Process

My life of constant displacement taught me, without me ever-knowing, not to become as William Falk (2004) describes as “rooted in place.” For me, change was and still is inevitable and inescapable. For a short moment, three years to be exact, I found a place to call home. I loved Eastside Academy. Yes, it had its share of problems. The students were learning and receiving a rigorous curriculum, at least that was what I believed until I arrived at Westside Academy...and enrolled in the Curriculum Studies EDD program at Georgia Southern University. Written on the first line of my class notes for the *History of American Education* (my first doctoral course) were the following words, “If you want to change how a person thinks, change how they are educated” (Personal Communication, August 16, 2006). I had no clue what my professor, William Reynolds, was talking about when I jotted his words on the first day of class, but by the end of the semester, which concurrently was the end of my first semester at Westside Academy, something certainly had changed about how I was being educated and how I was, and had been educating. I accredit my transforming identities to the accumulation of education gained from my lived experiences. Prior to enrolling the Ed. D. in Curriculum Studies program, my formal education encouraged me to ignore my active participation in the educational system of hegemony which insists on marginalizing Black students. Fortunately, as curriculum theorist William Watkins (2005) indicated, “Knowledge can serve a regulator. It creates boundaries for discourse and understanding” (p. 115), I became impelled to untangle my experiences in search of understanding their impact on the development of my identities. As Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought reaffirmed, personal experiences as a source of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2003), I believed they could serve as a lenses for educators, myself included, who dare to teach towards freedom (Ayers, 2004) and take a critical gaze at the development of their identities. I totally agreed with what Sonia Nieto (2003) asserted in the following.

That all educators, if they are to become effective teachers of their students, need to confront tough questions about their identities and motivations; they need to think about why they do things as they do and ask if there might be a better way of reaching their students; they need to reflect on how a word, a gesture, or an action might inspire or wound for life. (p. 33)

My study was a quest for understanding how my personal experiences influenced the development of my identities. By composing and critically reflecting upon my lived experiences, I identified the ideologies within my race, place and culture that influenced who I was and the culturally conscious educator I have become. My quest for understanding was guided by Black Feminist Thought and critical race theory perspectives. For my study, I recognized a Black Feminist Thought perspective as one that placed the experiences and ideas of Black women at its core (Collins, 2000) and a critical race perspective as one that illuminated the intercentricity of race, challenged the dominant ideology, committed to social justice, validated the centrality of experiential knowledge, and utilizes interdisciplinary approaches (Solórzano, 1997).

In analysis of my stories, including the similarities between my lived experiences and my students’ lived experiences, Critical Race Theory lent itself as a theoretical framework to help understand the impact of race and culture on cyclical oppression or hegemony. Moreover, as my personal stories and professional stories were told, CRT lent itself as an analytical tool to help

unpack how and why my students, members of a marginalized group of people, and I shared similar experiences.

As both, Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory aim to empower Black women and other marginalized groups of people their perspectives were significant in understanding and identifying the socially constructed ideologies that influenced the development of my identities. Relying on stories of marginalized people in our own voices, Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought blended well with one another as I, a Black woman, unraveled the phenomena of race, place, and culture and their impact on the development of my identities.

In my inquiry, I blended my personal narratives with community and historical narratives. The bulk of my inquiry was collected through autobiographical writings. I began by drafting narratives of critical incidents that influenced my views on my relationship with my professional career (He, 2003; Jalongo, Isenberg & Gerbracht, 1995). I arranged the narratives chronologically and then organized them under the headings of Nappy Roots (ages 5-17), Split Ends: Strand I (ages 18-23), Split Ends: Strand II (ages 24-26), and New Growth (ages 24-28). After drafting the stories from my childhood, I shared them with my sisters. This mostly occurred during informal conversations while walking in the mall or through telephone conversations. As Harris (2005) pointed out, “The issue of validation of the autobiographical text is another common concern for Black women autobiography writers” (p. 47). I turned to my sisters for validation of the events and for filling in gaps when my memory proved to be faulty. My stories, as well as my thoughts, ideas, tensions, and experiences (Spradley, 1980) were documented in a researcher reflective journal. As my “I” turned into “we,” I sought permissions from my family members to tell their stories. Through telephone conversations, my mother was instrumental in confirming the accuracy of my family narratives. She helped me understand the necessity of telling my life story. She would say, “Michel, tell everything. Your work will be a testament of the goodness of God” (Hunt, Personal Communication, February 2, 2009).

I also used personal journals, letters, and emails to construct narratives. Originally, I intended only to tell the stories of my students in my journals. Later I found that those stories influenced my very decision to write specific events. This could be expected as autobiographies or personal histories, in the words of Gitlin et al. (1992):

Focus on the individual, revealing how past experiences, circumstances, and significant events may be related to perspectives teachers bring to the classroom, the way they act in particular situations, and what they see as problems or questions to be asked about their and the function of schooling. (p. 29)

Creating a balance, I wrote about both, the professional and the personal. Reading through my collected journals, letters, and emails, I found that my students’ stories were my stories. They sparked memories of my childhood experiences and helped narrow the list of stories that would be included in my inquiry. This triangulation of stories was intended to offer multiple perspectives (Marshall and Rossman, 2006) of the experiences that have influenced the development of my identities.

The stories collected in my study were a representation of events that occurred in my life. I wrote a fictionalized autobiography. By fictionalized autobiography, I do not mean fabricated, but rather altered the names and settings to protect the identities of people in my life. Stories from my experiences as an educator were a consolidation of several experiences. I created

fictionalized teachers and administrators who were composites of several of my colleagues. In my narratives, I also created fictionalized students. Rasheem served as the main character in several stories. He was consolidation of multiple Black male students that I had taught over the past six years. Similar to Rasheem, Mahogany was too a consolidation of several female students that I had taught. In an attempt to protect the identity of my family, the stories of my experiences within my family were jumbled. Several experiences were combined to create one narrative. Are my stories fictional or autobiographical? This is a question. Cudjoe (1984) explored the factual and fictional aspects of the autobiography:

Obviously the “truth” of the autobiography is neither self-evident not independent of extratextual confirmation. Autobiography and fiction, then, are simply different means of arriving at, or (re)cognizing the same truth: the reality of American life and the position of the Afro-American subject in that life. Neither genre should be given a privileged position in our literary history and each should be judged on its ability to speak honestly and perceptively about Black experience in this land (p. 9).

Since the bulk of my autobiographical writings relied on memory and my perception of reality, I used multiple data sources and relied on my family members tremendously for confirmation of accuracy. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) acknowledged that this type of triangulation “reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objectivity can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representation. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation” (p. 8). Every family, school, church, and community has secrets that they hope are never revealed. To ignore these stories is to ignore their impact on the development of who we are. Of course, there are some events of my past that if I had the opportunity to re-live my life, I would alter the script, but I would not be who I am had it not been for those not so glorious moments. Writing, reflecting, and discussing my experiences from childhood to the present, helped me identify and challenge my values, beliefs, stereotypes, and biases.

Detangler: Counterstories

“Say It Loud-I’m Black and I’m Proud” was released in 1968 by recording artist, the late James Brown to rally Black empowerment at that time. James Brown used his lyrical talents to speak out about the marginalization of Blacks. The song, recorded long before I was a twinkle in my mother’s eye, communicates my feelings at the conclusion of this study. I am now prouder than ever to be Black. I would go so far as to say, if I had to die and come back again, I would come back still as a Black woman. After a conducting a critical inquiry into my lived experiences, I now recognize and embrace the four ideas about Black women’s consciousness as identified by Collins (2000) as: “(1) the importance of self definition; (2) the significance of self-valuation and respect; (3) the necessity of self reliance and independence; and (4) the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment” (p. 119).

I began this inquiry with the hopes of understanding how race, place, and culture have shaped who I was and how I became who I am as a Black woman educator. Combing through my stories, I have found nothing less than culturally socialized traits. I found that traits of determination, spirituality, strength, resiliency and liberation through literacy were fostered through my cultural socialization. As noted by Collins (2000), “For many U.S. Black women intellectuals, [the] task of reclaiming Black women’s subjugated knowledge takes on special meaning. Knowing that the minds and talents of our grandmothers, mothers, and sister have

been suppressed stimulates many contributions to the growing field of Black women's studies" (p. 13). This affirmation was uncontestable as I read the autobiographical works of Harriet Jacobs, Jarena Lee, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, and bell hooks, just to name a few. Through the lenses of Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory, I combed through their stories as well as my stories.

Through close reading and analysis of our stories, I was able to define traits about myself that previously left me responding to how-do-you-do-it-with I-do-not-know, I-just-do-it. Their experiences have helped me affirm who I am. The affirmation that has been most profound to me is that I come from a people who have a history of having the courage to resist and challenge oppression and I am a beneficiary of that courage. I join Cornell West (2008) in his beliefs:

It's crucial to understand your history, and then be true to oneself in such a way that one's connection to the suffering of others is an integral part of understanding yourself...If you don't muster the courage to think critically about your situation, you'll end up living a life of conformity and complacency. You'll lose a very rich tradition that has been bequeathed to you by your foremothers and forefathers. (p. 13)

This inquiry allowed me to narrate and explore my lived experience as a Black female growing up in various geographical places in the South. The research findings from my study indicated that who I am is directly linked to my race and our culture. My race and culture were compromised into "conformity and complacency" at times as I moved throughout the South. But the development of my critical consciousness has encouraged me to resist and challenge conformity and complacency. The traits of determination, spirituality, strength, resiliency and liberation through literacy were fostered through my cultural socialization.

Black Feminist Thought created a space for me, as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) summarized, to join the "Black daughters [who] identify the profound influence that their mothers have had upon their lives" (p. 102). Through this study, I have found that I am a reflection of my mother, a Black woman. In the words of Dick Gregory (1964), "Like a lot of Negro kids we never would have made it without our Momma" (p. 25). My mother inherently transmitted the culturally socialized traits of Black women to me. The strength required to raise four Black daughters in a society that insists on immeasurable and unimaginable marginalization. Only my sisters and I know the heartache and burdens we have placed on our mother. But she always loves us. Her unrelenting love for me and my sisters was clear as she always managed to make a way out of no way for us. Just as bell hooks (2000) asserted, "Many black folks from poor and working-class backgrounds were given a foundation of love and recognition...There have always been loving families who lack material wealth" (p.85). My family was one of them. I attribute my resiliency to her implicit and explicit life lessons. It would have been easy for my mother to use poverty as an excuse for not expecting me and my sisters to become educated women. Rather, she used it as a reason why we must become educated women. This study has shown me that my determination to succeed regardless of unfavorable circumstances is too a reflection of my mother's strength. Enduring abuse, seen as a race-trader, living in poverty, and triumphs over medical adversities, produced an internal strength. I watched my mother triumph time after time, giving me no excuse not to triumph. Her only request has always been that I get an education. This study has allowed me to see this culturally socialized theme repeatedly.

Through this study, the culturally socialized trait of liberation through literacy has been extended for me. In the likes of Fredrick Douglass (1845), my true liberation through literacy has

come with the privilege to write my life and raise consciousness of the significance of Blacks as well as educators studying their lives. I feel a sense of liberation as I have been able to narrate the stories and experience of not only myself but also my students who are trapped in an educational system designed to keep them disenfranchised. Race has been used in the United States, in the words of Ladson-Billings (2003), “to justify hierarchy, inequality, and oppression” (p. 8). Making race (un)ignorable is crucial to understand the cultural socialization of identities. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), one of the leading pioneers in Black education, professed, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (p. 3). Unfortunately, we are in the twenty-first century and the problem in education is still the color line. Since emancipation, universal education or public education has seldom met the needs of Black students. Based on my experiences, race has served just as William Watkins (2003) argued “to maintain and transmit dominant culture” (p. 37). This was evident in my education as I was told that I was too smart to be a Black girl. I am now committed to exposing and dismantling systemic marginalization in all of its various permutations.

My lived experiences narrated in this study exposed the significance of class. The changes that occurred in my life with the acquisition of a wealthy White were evident. As hooks (2000) declared “Despite grave injustice and all barriers that make it practically impossible to change your class position, if you are born on the bottom of this society’s economic totem pole, it is still true that a teeny fraction of that population squeezes and militantly forces their way from the bottom up. And we consider ourselves fortunate, lucky, blessed” (p. 156). Indeed, had it not been for my mother’s sacrifice of happiness in marrying my step-father, I am not quite sure of what my fate would have been. Of course the financial means to relocate the family from south Florida to South Georgia was necessary. However, the knowledge of the impact of environment, at least I would dare to say, was a class privilege that my stepfather possessed and was likely influential in his decision to uproot us. This class and white privilege denoted the necessity of educational policies that take in to account the role of race and racism in the creation of class hierarchies.

Writing about my life has also made clear for me the significance of my religious beliefs. Faith in Christ has been the hope that was needed when hopeless situations presented themselves. It was the hope that my people in the likes of Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass held on to when bleakness was all around. Through this study I have been able to affirm my spiritual groundedness as a culturally socialized trait. My affirmation, in the words of Beverly Tatum (1997):

Though Black churches can sometimes be criticized as purveyors of the dominant ideology, as evidenced in Eurocentric depictions of Jesus and sexist assumptions about the appropriate role of women, it is also true that historically Black churches have been the site for organized resistance against oppression and a place of affirmation for African American adults as well as children. (p. 83)

Each of the autobiographies that I read discussed religious beliefs. The Black church has been influential in the development of my beliefs. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) stated, “Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning. It is the lifting of a burden or the canceling of a debt” (p. 50). I have forgiven both of my fathers for their treatment of my mother and I believe that they indeed did love her and me as well.

I intentionally left the discussion of my father and step-father for last. I am still attempting to digest the potential fact of the matters. Through this study, I have found that like my mother, they too have had profound impacts on who I am. In American culture, Black and White, patriarchal thinking is engrained. I make no excuses for either of my fathers' actions, but I acknowledge that they were culturally socialized to in the words of bell hooks (2001) "believe that power is more important than love, particularly the power to dominate and control others" (p. 145). Through the reading of Black autobiographies, physical, verbal, and psychological abuses were vivid. During and after slavery, the abuse of the Black woman was a learned and culturally acceptable behavior. But thanks to God, I never accepted it. I did, however, internalize their abuse to my mother as a control mechanism. I believed that nothing can force me to do whatever a man wants me to do. I have spent my life since leaving my parents house attempting to resist male-domination. This has trickled over from my personal life to my professional life. Reading through my autobiographical writings, it was evident that my challenges and tensions are most often with males. I credit these tensions with my resistance to male domination. Whether the tensions will decrease, that is yet to be determined. However, I am at least aware that subconsciously residue from my fathers has created a tension.

Crown and Glory: Educational and Social Change

While studying and exploring the development of identities, I was unable to locate life stories of educators past novice years and under thirty. Autobiographies of educators born in the hip-hop era (1964-1984) as defined by Bakari Kitwana (2002) were also not assessable. Contributing to that missing body of the literature as well as the limited body of literature written by contemporary Black women, I offer my autobiographical research as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse that discredits personal experience as a source of knowledge. I believe that my autobiographical inquiry can serve as a testimony for 21st century urban school educators.

Telling and retelling my life story not only helps understand the lived experiences that have influenced the development of my identities, but also helps encourage teachers, teacher educators, administrators, and educational policy makers to reflect on the experiences that have shaped their values, biases, stereotypes, and their identities. Teacher autobiographies are as Nieto (2003) implies as "[a] way for teachers to think about how, through a clearer understanding of their lives, they can become more effective with their students" (p. 26). As teachers are having mass exodus from the field of education within three years of arriving, I hope that autobiographical narrative inquiry into the development of identities will be utilized by teacher educators and novice teachers as a proactive way to educate more critically conscious teachers and school officials.

Leading public intellectual Cornell West (2008) proclaimed, "It takes courage to interrogate yourself. It takes courage to look in the mirror and see past your reflection to who you really are when you take off the masks, when you're not performing the same old routines and social roles" (p. 9). My study is written for academe. However, it heavily relies on the elements of fiction and nonfiction. Written in narrative form, and sometimes in my acquired Southern dialect, my study steers away from language that does prohibit it from being understood by non-academe audiences. I hope that my article draws an audience of aspiring teachers, pre-service teachers, novice teachers, teacher educators, teacher leaders, administrators,

and education policy-makers who are interested in education and who have the courage to conduct an autobiographical narrative inquiry into the development of their identities or critically reflect upon their personal and professional experience of race, gender, class, and power in the South. I hope that my study will be of great interest to those who work directly with Black students in high poverty schools. Black students in high-poverty schools have a higher possibility of facing similar challenges in their home life as what I have experienced. These challenges create difficult conditions for Black students to live and progress academically. Nevertheless, they do not define who the students become. I hope that educators of urban Black students will use my stories to create dialogues about the experiences that Black students possibly encounter. Like me, many Black students may not ever reveal outward signs of a troubled home life even though it does not mean that trouble does not exist. Teachers need to be aware and sensitive to the roles that race, gender, class, place, and culture play in the socialization process of Black students.

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