

AUTHORING OUR STORIES: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING THE  
INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG THREE  
GENERATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

by

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ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry combines black feminist thought and symbolic interactionism to provide a conceptual framework for an exploration of the intergenerational influences on ethnic identity development for African American women. Nine African American women, grouped into three families, who represent three different generations were interviewed individually and as a family to examine the individual and shared meaning of their ethnic identities. This study sought to answer four research questions: What is the process by which African American women within the same family, arrive at a shared meaning of their ethnicity? What is the process by which individual African American women, of the same family, construct meaning of their ethnicity independently of the meaning shared by other women of that family? How does this shared and individual meaning change across generations? What are the processes by which these shared and individual meanings are constructed, learned, and taught intergenerationally? Nine individual and three family in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, using the construction of cultural genograms as photo elicitation, with the participants of this study. Two

types of analyses were used – narrative analysis and analysis of narratives – in order to construct individual narratives and to highlight themes across families. Black feminist thought was used in analysis and in re-presenting the narratives in order to reverence the voices of the women and to allow their stories to be told in their own voices. Symbolic interactionism helped to explain and explore the process of meaning-making inherent in these women’s processes of ethnic identity development. These themes and a discussion of pertinent literature are included in order to highlight this study’s contribution to the current family studies literature. A discussion of future research and marriage and family therapy clinical implications are addressed, along with the strengths and limitations of this study.

INDEX WORDS: Ethnic identity development, African American women, African American families, Narrative inquiry, Black feminist thought, Symbolic interactionism

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## DEDICATION

*The achievements of those who have gone before me inspire me to achieve.*

*The belief that others have placed in me give me reason to believe.*

*~ Carole Joy*

Fred “Rocky” Jones and Evelyn Marie Mathews... You are the angels that have been sitting with me in each meeting, late night at Barnes and Noble, and at home who have given me the strength to push through. You both have left this earth and made it a better place while you were here. I hope to touch lives and the world almost as much as you have. You both will forever be missed and loved. Thank you for setting the example.

I am not alone. I stand here, in this moment, with my ancestors, with my family, and with those whose souls I am connected to. There is no way I can take full credit for this accomplishment. This dissertation and degree are a manifestation of the Holy Spirit living within me. I am thankful to God for setting my path before me so all I had to do was trust in Him and move forward. My desire is to thank all of those who have gotten me to this point, but I do not know all the names – I just have a deep sense of connection to those whose shoulders I stand on... We are one. This is my chance to attempt to put into words the deep sense of gratitude I have to the village who raised me to this point and who were with me every step of the way...

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*The truth is, we make a mistake when we think that generations can be separated. The truth is you need me so that I have shoulders you can stand on, and we need you because you have shoulders somebody else can stand on. We are one.*

*~ Maya Angelou*

God has blessed me with the most connected and loving mother a girl could ask for. Mom, this PhD (along with any other accomplishment of mine) is yours. My name may be on it, but I would not have achieved it had you not been who you are. Your guidance, words of wisdom, and willingness to talk for hours – or minutes, if needed – weekly can never be replaced or duplicated. Dad, your silent, but evident pride in me has always been something I've worked to get use to. You've taught me such valuable lessons over my 30 years that have kept me pushing towards the mark. You, along with Mom, are responsible for creating the person that God has blessed to complete this program and degree. Thank you for always showing me what true work ethic looks like.

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the feeling that, no matter what I become, you will always love and support me. You have no idea how this unconditional connection has encouraged me to keep going, even when I didn't want to... I've always been the little sister to you three and I've been blessed to be able to continue the living legacy you continue to create daily. Rint, my brother-in-law, you are always a strong presence in my cheer corner. Thank you for always being there encouraging me. Dawn and Keisha, I have been blessed with such wonderful sisters-in-law and I am thankful you are a part of our family. Destinee, Alana, Aliya, Tiana, Owen, Mason, and Kevin – you continue to make me a proud aunt. I love each and every one of you differently and hope that this accomplishment adds to the legacy of our family and shows you that the impossible is always possible with God.

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## PROLOGUE

It is my personal experience that ethnic identity is passed down through generations of family members who experience their culture throughout different eras. Since each generation is connected to the one before it, I feel that my ethnic identity is even influenced by my ancestors and by the meaning that was created of their culture through a system of slavery and tactics to create an oppressed “other”. All of these factors have led to a shared meaning within my family about our ethnicity. This shared meaning is sometimes overtly discussed or implicitly understood. From a very early age I’ve experienced the labels that are associated with being black and with being a woman, but through my experiences I’ve learned that I am so much more. This dissertation is a testament to the depth of knowledge that can be generated through the voices of those who have been invisible for so long. Before getting to that, though, below is a narrative, presented as my subjectivities in creating this study:

At the age of six, while waiting anxiously for my turn to use the slide at recess, one of my first-grade friends came up to me and asked, “Are you a nigger?” I wasn’t quite sure what that meant, but I realized that I was the only person she had asked. Since it was my turn for the slide, I quickly replied, “I don’t know. I don’t think so.” and slide away. I went home that afternoon and asked my mother if I was, in fact, a nigger. At the time, I did not understand her initial look of surprise, which gave way to a look of anger, then a look of frustration, which was followed by an instant look of sadness all in a matter of seconds. She sat me down and tried to explain why I was not a nigger in a way that my six-year-old brain could comprehend. After that, she asked me to leave the room so that she could “call the school and take care of it”...

When I was eight, I was waiting quietly in the line that the safety patrol formed in order for the third-graders to file onto the school buses to go home. Before the bus doors opened, a boy tapped me on the shoulder. When I turned around I recognized him from down the street on which I lived. As soon as I turned he punched me in the stomach and called me a nigger. His words, more so than his punch, knocked the wind out of me and left me unable to speak, which made me cry when I was sure no one was looking. When I went home, my mother realized that I had been crying. I told her what happened. This time, there was rage in her eyes. She marched me down the street to his house, made me point him out, and spoke to his mother for a while. After their conversation, the boy came out and reluctantly apologized. When we got home, my mother called the school again...

In my seventh grade computer class, when I was 12, some friends and I were spinning around in the computer chairs while the teacher was out of the room. As we were spinning, we were talking about gym class that day, where I had beat everyone in the 50-yard dash. One of the boys replied, "Of course you are fast, you are a nigger." Instead of having to go home and have my mother "handle the situation", I felt that I knew enough about the term and about myself to tell him, "My name is Carla and I have never been, and will never be, a nigger". Since that first encounter, watching my mother's reaction taught me enough about the negativity of the word, but her lessons about my history and culture from that point on prepared me for developing an understanding of who I *really* am.

I am from Toms River, New Jersey, which is situated right on the Jersey Shore. Though popular culture has done wonders for the popularity and meaning of what the Jersey Shore is to others, my experience of it is has been the same for the past 27 years. Growing up, I could count on one hand the number of families that *looked* like mine. There were even fewer families who

ate what we did, listened to the music we listened to, said words the way we did, or connected to one another like my family did. For 18 years, when I was not at home with my nuclear family, visiting my extended family, or at church with my spiritual family, I felt alone and different.

While living under my parents' roof, though, I learned some pretty valuable lessons about who I was and about the type of family I came from. I never wanted for anything and lived in a middle/upper middle class neighborhood, but I knew that my siblings and I were just one generation from poverty. My mother, who was born in an impoverished neighborhood in Chester, Pennsylvania, often reminded us that we were "just one generation from the projects" and that we were no better than anyone. She instilled in us the lessons from our past. I grew up knowing I came from slaves, but that I also came from a place in Africa, where we were so much more than someone else's property. These lessons contradicted what my peers and teachers wanted me to know about my history and about my potential.

My father, who was born and raised in Marabella, Trinidad, experienced extreme poverty growing up. He has spent most of his life providing for himself and his family through working hard. As an immigrant to this country, he has experienced instances of hatred at its worst, but continued the tradition that was passed down to him: keep a roof over the heads and food in the mouths of yourself and your family. No matter what the world around me tried to teach me about the traditions of black families, my mother and father provided me with my truth. To this day, there is not a moment that passes that I am not aware of both my race and gender. I've experienced and witnessed horrible instances of racism, sexism, oppression, and discrimination, but I know that I am connected to the greater struggle of my ancestors and this pushes me forward to continue a legacy of being so much more than a label associated with the color of my skin.

Toms River prepared me for what the world had to offer a little black girl with a proud, not-easily-broken mother and a hard working, immigrant for a father. Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey had some similar lessons and different ones, too. This time, I heard and saw people who *looked* like me telling me that I was different and, therefore, not good enough; that I wasn't "black enough". Frustration and confusion combined with the lessons from my family thrust me into studying English literature, with an emphasis on African American literature, with a minor in Linguistics. What my family taught me and what the world was trying to teach me were too different; I needed "the truth" about who I was.

The journeys of my ancestors have always been and may forever be unknown, but at least what I learned at Rutgers was that I am so much more than the color of my skin. This is what my family was trying to teach me all along. There have been times when I've longed to know the deep roots of my past and how those roots influence the person I am, my ethnicity, and my culture. Two years ago, I started that process. I created and studied my cultural genogram by having discussions with my grandmother and mother that I had never had before. Stories flowed out of them as if they were writing novels about their experiences. The stories they told of my lineage led me to the discovery that many of the cultural traits (religion, language, traditions, etc.) that have been passed down reach further back than I'd ever imagined. At the same time, I have been able to add to many of those traditions through my own experiences.

People encounter me as a dark-skinned, black, female, with natural hair. These are all indications of my race and gender and are, without a doubt, part of my cultural experience. My ethnic identity is integral to understanding this cultural experience as well. I am the daughter of a woman from the northeastern United States and a man from Trinidad who both worked to make sure their children did not live in the same poverty they did; the granddaughter of a woman born

in the southeastern United States, who migrated North, and a man of mixed Native American and West Indian blood; the great-granddaughter of a woman who passed away young, but spent her time on this earth as a devoted wife and mother and a man who became educated against all odds and wrote a book; the great-great-granddaughter of slaves; and the descent of African people.

With this heritage, I am much more than meets the eye.

What follows is a project that was born out of my own need to explore my connection to the legacy that has been left for me. As a budding healer (family therapist, scholar, teacher, activist), I believe my own personal journey is pivotal to helping others. This project is a tribute to those who came before me and made this possible. The purpose of this work is to explore the cultural traits that have led these African American women to construct individual and collective ethnic and gender identities.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Authoring our stories: A narrative inquiry exploring the intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity among three generations of African American women

Culture dictates all we do. It is culture that encompasses human behavior, beliefs, symbols and ideas of meaning (Rosman et al., 2009). “Some [cultural anthropologists] have focused upon culture as a set of ideas and meanings that people use, derived from the past and reshaped in the present” (Rosman et al., 2009, p. 5). Within the study of culture, ethnicity similarly encompasses behavior, beliefs, symbols, and ideas of meaning, but further emphasizes belonging to a group. Ethnic groups share a common history, ancestry, values, customs, cultural traits and overall meaning of symbols (Cokely, 2007; McAdoo, 1999; McGoldrick, 2005; Phinney, 1990). Ethnic groups may also share a common race, physiological features, and common social experiences.

Based on a combination of race, religion, and cultural history, ethnicity is retained, whether or not members realize their commonalities with one another. Its values are transmitted over generations by the family and reinforced by the surrounding community.

It is a powerful influence in determining identity” (McGoldrick, 2005, p. 2).

Ethnic identity is the sense of belonging one feels to their ethnic group (Phinney et al., 1997). It has been measured by looking at one’s commitment to, positive evaluation of, interest in, and knowledge of the ethnic group they are a part of (Phinney, 1992). Further, familial ethnic socialization within Latino families, including “the degree to which [Latino] adolescents

perceived that their families were socializing them with regard to their ethnicity” (Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001, p. 351) has also been studied. Ethnic identity development (EID) is both a conscious and unconscious process that is determined through known and unknown history, ancestry, beliefs, cultural traits and an individual’s connection to them (Phinney, et al., 1997). Meaning, in relation to one’s ethnic identity and their process of ethnic identity development, is constructed through various influences, including the exchange that occurs with both others and the social environment around us.

Ethnicity and ethnic identity cannot be studied without situating it in a cultural framework, nor can it be studied without exploring the significance and meaning of race. In most studies of culture, ethnicity, or race the relationship between these terms is either unclear or simply left unexplored. Although the primary goal of this project is to investigate the shared meaning of ethnic identity, it is important to note that culture and race will also be included in the discussion. Human beings create meaning of culture, ethnicity, and race through interaction with others and with the world around them. Individuals interpret these different instances of meaning making and interaction and use them in the process of identity formation (Blumer, 1969). Various social objects, such as the media and music, influence individuals’ interpretations of self. These objects are cultural and historical, as well as social, and have implications for ethnic identity development (EID). Women have an added social experience of gender identity that is developed within a dominant discourse where their power and voice are most often subjugated. This study sets out to explore the notion that both ethnicity and gender are influenced by cultural traits and meaning for black women. Families, in general, influence the way in which their members interpret interactions with others and within their environment based on their various identities, particularly their ethnic and gender identities (Burton et al., 2010; Davey et al.,

2003; Lesane, 2002; Suizzo, et al., 2007. Either through conscious or unconscious socialization, meaning is passed down through generations around ethnicity and gender. This, in turn, contributes to positive or negative meaning associated with one's identity. Both inside and outside of the family, ethnic and gender identity development becomes a process of interpretation of interactions with others that is ultimately influenced by culture.

Families of African descent, in the United States, have a unique history and sociocultural experience that influences their process of identity formation (McAdoo, 1999). Due to the multiplicity of subordinate identities, women of African descent have a further distinct (and difficult) process of integrating gender into the ethnic identity development process (Collins, 1990). Families of African descent essentially become a relational system within which historical, cultural, and social messages are filtered and processed in response to social oppression and discrimination (Hatchett & Jackson, 1999). Generally, the process of ethnic identity development (EID) is one that is an important factor in overall identity development in the lives of ethnic minorities (Jaret & Reitzes, 1999; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997). People of African descent have a distinct EID process that has been studied within the context of American history and society (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Jaret & Reitzes, 1999; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Rotheram-Borus & Phinney, 1990; Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2007).

In the United States, the meaning of being "of African descent" significantly influences the development of self for members of these ethnic groups, as they are subject to social, historical, and cultural influences on identity formation. Such historical influences include the shared history and residual effects of systems of slavery and second-class citizenship (Johnson & Smith, 1998). Socially, issues of race, colorism, oppression, and domination are consistent influences on the representations of black-ness and, therefore, black identity (Burton et al., 2010;

Parham, 1999). Women must integrate these same social issues into their identity, while making sense of representation of their gender (Collins, 1986). Lastly, there are cultural influences, such as kinship bonds, spirituality, and family collectivism that can contribute to ethnic identity development (Hatchett & Jackson, 1999). Members within families of African descent simultaneously experience all of these influences, individually and collectively, and the family then collectively serves as a system within which meaning is produced, maintained, and/or transferred (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; McAdoo, 1999; McGoldrick, 2005).

I have found a significant body of literature explores individuals and families of African descent, along with the processes that occur for both (Billingsley, 1968, 1992; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hill, 2003; McAdoo, 1988, 1999; Pinderhughes, 1981; White & Parham, 1990). Much of this research theorizes about identity formation for people and families of African descent, particularly those in the United States (Billingsley, 1968, 1992; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Franklin, 1999; Hill-Collins, 1989; McAdoo, 1999). Along with the literature on families of African descent, individuals' ethnic identity development has been studied quantitatively using measures of EID with various ethnic minority groups of adolescents, including African Americans (Phinney, 1992) and Latinos (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2001). Little research focuses on *ethnic* identity among the various ethnic groups of Black people. Further, there has been little focus on ethnic identity within the context of families of African descent as it is passed down generationally. In contrast to studies that attempt to explore the transmission of ethnic culture by studying one individual within a family, I believe it is important to hear and represent these experiences using the voices of other generations that make up families in order to track the creation and transmission of meaning. Also, the lack of focus on gender in ethnic identity development fuels me to explore the voices of women. Grounded in black feminist thought, I

feel it necessary to explore how being a woman of African descent influences the way that ethnic identity is created and passed on, specifying how gender roles and expectations intersect with experiences of being Black in the United States. Lastly, there continues to be a gap in the literature on adult ethnic identity development for people of African descent, which implies that EID slows down or stops in adolescence or emerging adulthood (Nancoo, et al., under review).

### **The Nature of the Present Study**

In order to expand the conversation from theoretical representations of families of African descent and individual quantitative perspectives on levels of ethnic identity development (EID), I examined EID as a family process. Further, I attempted to include the conversations of inequality that inevitably occurred, as a part of the portrait of the cultural experiences of families of African descent, while emphasizing the ways families struggle with this collectively and individually as part of the EID process. Far too often African American women's identities are given meaning by a racialized, sexualized system that is unequal. The purpose of this study is to explore the aspects of their ethnic identities these women chose to use and live by. Individual and family narratives were collected to explore the experiences of ethnic identity as an intergenerational process. For communities of African descent, storytelling or narrations are an important aspect of the transmission of ethnicity and experience (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Craddock-Willis & McCabe, 1996). Specifically, I collected stories from women within these families to explore the narratives at the intersections of ethnicity, gender, age, and cultural traits (religion, language, geographic location, etc.) and their influences on identity creation. In the second chapter, I outline a critical review of the literature in the areas of culture, ethnicity, and race; identity formation; ethnic identity development; black families in the United States; black women in the United States; and the socio-historical and cultural influences on ethnic identity for

African American women. My theoretical framework fuses black feminist thought with symbolic interaction to marry theories of gender and ethnicity/race with theories of meaning-making and social influences on identity formation.

With this narrative inquiry, I hope to influence the fields of family research and family therapy by showcasing the importance of exploring shared meaning within family contexts, in general. In both fields it becomes vitally important to access relational systems to better understand the influence of a problem or process. As family researchers and family therapists seeking these voices and stories from relational systems helps to influence social change and facilitate healing. In this study, narratives of women within African American families are displayed to offer examples of how collective and individual shared meaning of ethnic identities are created. In capturing and foregrounding the voices of these women, my purpose is to explore the experiences at the intersections and in the interactions of their cultural identities, while witnessing their family dynamics.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE LITERATURE

Ethnic identity is an integral aspect of the collective development of families of African descent. The impact of historical, social, and cultural aspects of society can be experienced on the individual level, but I believe that it is also given significant meaning on the collective family system level. Generationally, there are stories of significance and meaning around issues of culture, ethnicity, and race that get transferred among family members. Ethnic identity development (EID), for various ethnic minority groups, has been studied in the social sciences within the contexts of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), studies of acculturation (Berry, Trimble, & Olmedo, 1986), and identity formation theory (Marcia, 1980). These studies all explore various aspects of EID and have uncovered an array of information regarding the typical (or atypical) development of identity around one's ethnicity. EID is usually studied in the fields of child or adolescent development (Rotheram-Borus & Phinney, 1990; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990) and counseling psychology (Phinney, 1990; Yeh & Hwang, 2000) on the individual level, but could be stronger in the family studies and family therapy literature to highlight the family processes involved and culturally responsive interventions to address therapeutic needs.

The need for this transition speaks to the growing interest in the process of ethnic identity formation within the context of families. Specifically, ways families themselves identify their ethnicity and the meanings associated with cultural expressions of that ethnicity (Burton, et al., 2010). Very little is known, though, about what families of African descent, in particular, do to

influence the collective, long-term development of ethnic identity of the individuals in that family, particularly for women into the developmental stage of adulthood. Furthermore, little has been explored about the connection of this collective ethnic identity process in families and the individual process that we know occurs. Looking at these collective and individual processes may give insight into the ways families of African descent protect and socialize members to be prepared for social discrimination and oppression, while developing healthy identities, throughout the lifespan. Much of the confusion and lack of in-depth studies can be attributed to the fact that there are varying definitions of ethnic identity; ethnic identity development; race, culture and ethnicity; and African American and black families. A lack of clearly stated operational definitions leads to confusion in measuring and exploring these processes. Helms (1996) develops this argument in a review of 11 theoretical models of race or ethnic identity:

[Helms]...noted that some of the theorists that she reviewed considered that they had developed models of “ethnic” or “cultural” identity, whereas others contended that they had developed models of “racial” identity, although each seemed to be addressing aspects of the same societal dynamics of in-group/out-group oppression.

Unclear definitions of ethnicity, culture, race, *and* identity make it impossible to explore the characteristics of each, along with the affects each area has on development. In order to focus on the process of ethnic identity development it is imperative that I, first, conceptualizing these terms for the purposes of this study.

### **Explication of Culture, Ethnicity and Race**

The terms culture, ethnicity, and race are frequently used interchangeably in research studies and theoretical literature. One of the difficulties I found in conceptualizing these terms has to do with the combination of scholarly literature and self-identification of participants

involved in studies of culture, ethnicity, and race. Scholars also speculate that terms such as ethnicity and race are socially constructed and, therefore, their definitions become elusive and vulnerable to changes by the dominant cultures within a society (Zinn & Wells, 2000). A lack of definitive distinction between these terms causes a problem in attempts to measure them.

Further, scholars have also attempted to measure cultural/ethnic/racial identity without a clear definition of what exactly identity is (Helms, 1996). What follows is an explanation of my use of the terms culture, ethnicity, and race and how I have used them in this study to discuss the multiplicity of experiences of black families and black women. With this section, I make this clarification to emphasize the importance of exploring the distinct influences of culture, ethnicity, and race for women and families of African descent. It is important to note that, in studying ethnic identity development, culture and race are integral parts of exploring the issues related to ethnic group membership for people of African descent, depending on biological factors (race) and psychological/internalized factors (culture). A clear definition of my use of the term *identity* will follow in another section.

## **Culture**

Culture has various formal definitions in different contexts. In relation to ethnicity, culture denotes overall values, beliefs, and practices of a group that shares historical and/or social traits. It is the internalized/psychological aspects of identity that are often subconsciously transmitted across generations of a group (Helms, 1996). Culture can include ethnic and racial identification, but also includes and highlights the shared experiences of groups of people. Groups of people can share the same culture by being a part of the same religious, spiritual, racial, or ethnic group, but also by having the same gender or by living in the same geographic

location (McGoldrick & Hardy, 2008). Culture is used in this study to identify the overall shared, self-sustaining experiences and context of African American families.

Scholars of culture have described the various aspects of the term as a “tapestry” (Rosman et al., 2009) or “web” (Geertz, 1973). These terms denote the overlapping nature of culture. “Many strands, many colors, many patterns contribute to the overall design of a tapestry, just as many items of behavior and many customs form patterns that, in turn, compose a culture” (Rosman et al., 2009, p. 9). Similarly, Geertz (1973), explains, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (p. 5). As an ethnographer, Geertz expressed that, when studying culture, one should be in search of a “thick description” (1973), or all possible meanings of symbols and human action. Geertz (1973) describes cultures as, “a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes towards life” (p. 89). These definitions of culture are situating the study of identity within a system of symbols and meaning that dictate behavior and interaction. Further, using a cultural framework develops the argument that meaning and interaction is influenced by historical patterns of meaning.

Cultural traits encompass an array of identities that are influenced by social interaction and meaning. Though all of what culture means cannot be addressed here, I find it important to point out that culture, for the purpose of this project, may incorporate: age, behaviors, development, ethnicity, family, food, gender, geographic location, heritage, language, life cycle, nationality, race, religion, rules, social class, social structures, spirituality, and traditions.

Because the term denotes the transmission of meaning around symbols, communication, and attitudes, I use culture and its definition as a foundational framework to understand the concepts of ethnicity and race as aspects of identity.

### **Ethnicity**

There have long been discussions about the need to distinguish between culture, ethnicity, and race, particularly the latter two. Ethnic identity has been defined as “familiarity with and competence in one’s subjective culture(s)” (Helms, 1996, p. 151). It is one’s knowledge or capacity to express qualities and traits that are indicative of a cultural group. Ethnicity most mirrors the definition of culture. Utilizing cultural factors, ethnic groups share traits and norms, such as values, identities, patterns of behavior, languages, religions, class, etc. (Rosman et al., 2009, p. 333). Ethnicity is used to describe shared history, ancestry, traditions, values, and culture among a group of people (Cokley, 2007). Individuals, families, and larger groups may choose (or have chosen for them) ethnic groups that most parallel their class differences, political goals, physiological features, etc. (Rosman et al., 2009). These shared traits are usually adapted by families collectively and are passed down through generations through socialization of the children within that family. Depending on the reason for identifying an ethnic group, they can be chosen for personal, political, or convenient reasons. Waters (1990) distinguishes ethnicity from race by emphasizing individuals’ and families choice and freedom to choose their own ethnic identities. Race, on the other hand, is a social construction that uses physical features to categorize individuals (Burton et al., 2010).

Because of this ability to choose or have a group chosen, many scholars believe that ethnicity is also social construction developed based on the meaning or behaviors that come from the choice (Steinberg, 2001). In the United States, scholars believe that ethnicity is sometimes

used simply to categorize groups of people without emphasizing their race in order to move towards a “post-racial” society (Steinberg, 2001). I am using Steinberg’s (2001) cautions about attempting to highlight ethnic groups in order to take the attention away from systems of institutional “othering”. My emphasis is on the use of ethnicity and ethnic identity within its historical context, exploring the cultural values and “specific relationships between ethnic factors on the one hand, and a broad array of historical, economic, political, and social factors on the other” (Steinberg, 2001, p. xiv).

Ethnic identity is described as a complex construct that includes the self-identification and identity development process as it relates to one’s ethnic group membership (Phinney, 1996). Ethnicity and ethnic identity development are usually studied for underrepresented groups, such as Latino ethnic groups (Keefe, 1992; Rogler et al., 1980; Syed & Azmitia, 2008; Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001), religious ethnic groups, such as Jewish groups (Davey et al., 2003), and Asian ethnic groups (Sue & Sue, 1971; Yeh & Hwang, 2000). For ethnic groups of African or European descents in the United States, there are few studies that explore the meaning and identification of these ethnic groups and ethnicities for identity development purposes. From my perspective, ethnic groups of African and European descent have historically been socially reduced to racial groups due to the inherent hierarchy created where whites have more power than blacks. In particular, for individuals of African descent within the United States, there is an emphasis on race and social status in the creation of a self image and in identity development.

## **Race**

Culture encompasses experiences and meaning based on both ethnicity and race, but the “knowledge of or capacity to express a particular culture is not the essence of racial identity or its measurement, although attitudes and feelings towards or evaluations of group-specific

cultures might be relevant content” (Helms, 1996, p. 151). In its most basic form, the term *race* describes groups of people with similar physical features, such as skin color, eye color, body shape, facial features, etc. (Cokley, 2007). These similarities are very often attributed to all people who look alike, regardless of nationality or ethnic background. Various debates have ensued over the past several decades between people who have attempted to prove that there are biological differences among the races and others who argue that there is no “genetic basis for claiming that there are separate identifiable races by which all human variation can be classified” (Rosman et al., 2009, p. 333). Regardless of the outcomes of these arguments, the cultural meaning of race is such that people are placed into categories and grouped based on their perceived racial group membership. These perceptions are normally based on assumed ancestry, physical appearance, and behaviors.

Again, because of the ability to choose or be put into a specific racial group, scholars argue that race is a social and cultural construction (Smedley, 2007) in which one of the main rules is, “with any identifiable African American ancestry” one is black, not white (Rosman, 2009, p. 334). These cultural rules have historical implications that greatly influence the identity process for those considered to be non-White. Racial identity can also be self-identified, but is mostly a construct that has been predetermined by dominant groups in society. Racial identity is usually used to describe how one views their identity, in terms of their race, as it relates to the larger, oppressive nature of society (Cokley, 2007). Further most research and theory that focuses on race discusses the impact of being in the margins of society for black people and black families.

Families of African descent, particularly in the United States, most often are involved in a process of racial socialization that also greatly influences the identity of members. Suizzo,

Robinson, & Pahlke (2007) emphasize the importance of socializing children to “combat discrimination” and be prepared for negative experiences based on their skin color. Though race and, therefore, racial socialization are important aspects of the shared experience of families of African descent, the focus for this project is on ethnicity, ethnic markers, and ethnic socialization including knowledge and expression of cultural traits, such as language,

It is important to understand the depth of experience that is present by focusing on ethnicity, which incorporates experiences based on race. Depending on personal identification, families and individuals who are involved in a study can self-identify their ethnicity or race and use them interchangeably. The term “black” could signify an individual or family’s ethnic identity when ethnic and cultural markers are also identified. For the purposes of this study, the term “of African descent” is used to describe groups with a shared ancestral history from the continent of Africa. Since this encompasses a large population of people that span the globe, specific groups will be identified and self-identified as African American, Caribbean/West Indian, and African (originating from an African country within the last three generations). The term “African American” normally denotes blacks born in the United States. The uses of these terms for black populations are anecdotal, at best, so self-identification of families is the most reliable labels. For the purposes of this literature review, the term “black” will be used to encompass all possible identifications of ethnicity for people of African descent, as this is a cultural rule and, therefore, mutually understood among people in the United States. Such identifications, shared or differing experiences based on these identifications, and ethnic traits/markers will be explored in depth through the narratives of participants.

### **Historical Portrait of Black Families**

In order to paint an accurate picture of the history of black families, I find it most important to start with the scholarship that discusses family life before the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Since it is possible to spend a significant amount of time displaying the atrocities against African people, families, and communities, I have chosen to give a brief portrait of the history of black families. Atu Ashun (2004) studied the city of Elmina, Ghana and the Elmina Castle, used to detain African people to be sold into captivity. Ashun (2004) explains life before the trans-Atlantic slave trade and rightfully discusses the continued effects 150 years after the abolition of slavery:

Before the coming of the foreigners, the Africans were not ignorant people living in trees, as is often described, but people who had started their journey to prosperity. In the records of the Portuguese, when they first arrived to Elmina, they saw smoke coming from a house and encountered a woman cooking there. This suggests that we were not eating raw meat, as is often said. When the Portuguese saw the chiefs, they were really amazed to see the gold ornaments they were wearing. Were the chiefs naked or dressed in plant leaves? No! They were in clothes. We Africans had gold, iron and cloth-making industries long before the coming of the foreigners. It is even on record that during the sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese exported cotton cloth from West Africa to Portugal. Unfortunately when the trans-Atlantic slave trade started, all these industries came to a halt or became static (p. 51-52).

There is significant evidence that African countries were thriving nations with their own cultural norms and behaviors before colonization. Families and communities were definitely a part of these societies where marriages, child rearing, religion, traditions, and customs all had their

unique meaning. In particular, Ashun (2004) discusses distinct celebrations and festivals, including Bakatue; Edina Bronya (Elmina Christmas); naming ceremonies; and reverence of ancestors and elders. All of these festivities were celebrated within the company of the community, or collective family.

Black and Jackson (2005) also discuss the intricate cultures that African people had before the slave trade. Kingdoms, such as Timbuktu, Mali, and Benin, were “stable, well organized, and prosperous at a time when European states were just beginning to develop into modern nations” (Black & Jackson, 2005, p. 77). During the slave trade, though, Africans were captured and displaced to the United States, South and Central Americas, the Caribbean, and various other locations around the globe. An estimated 50 million people were lost from the continent of African between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Black & Jackson, 2005). It is only possible for me to imagine how this great loss left the continent, particularly Western Africa, in despair and defeat.

The slave trade greatly affected the families that were torn apart, with some being left in their homeland while their mothers, brothers, sisters, and fathers were sold to far-off lands, never to be heard of again. Slavery changed the meaning of family as they were formed in the new world, as families of slaves were not recognized and could be lost at the stroke of a pen. Though these types of experiences were many and the significance of the slave trade can be traced for 400 years, there are various lessons about the culture of black families that can be traced to a shared African ancestry. A shared history is a factor that can bind an ethnic group together, as the cultural experience of a shared history becomes a part of the experiences of that group. For families of African descent, displaced throughout the world, this history can be significant in understanding an ethnic group’s origins in a geographic location down to the food they eat to this

day. The three types of families explored in this project are further explained below. African, West Indian, and African American cultural histories are explored in order to set up the exploration of the ethnic identities of these groups.

### **African American Families**

Though the slave trade and colonialism were used as an attempt to break and eradicate the spirit of a continent, there has continued to be a fight by peoples of African origin to retain ancestral cultural traits. For some African ethnic groups, left on the ravaged continent, immense grief, fear, militarism, and colonialism threaten them every moment of the day (Kamya, 2005). Still others are in spiritual and physical warfare with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, extreme poverty, exploitation, famine, alcohol abuse, war, and human right violations (Kamya, 2005). Through all of this, “many Africans... still hold a strong spirit of collectivism and communalism, as well as a will to live no matter what the odds” (Kamya, 2005, p. 102).

This tradition of community and collective family is a tradition that can be found in black families (Hatchett & Jackson, 1999). Academically called kin systems, African American families have continued the African tradition of developing and maintaining kin networks and extended kin networks that serve as support through various stages of the life cycle (i.e. child bearing/rearing, marriage, older adulthood, etc.). Hatchett & Jackson (1999) conducted a study to measure perceptions of family solidarity, geographical propinquity, general frequency of all interaction, and aid from kin among black Americans. They found that on all four aspects of black extended kin systems, there were high levels of family solidarity, higher probability of families living in close proximity to one another, high levels of interactions, and, among those that reported high levels of interactions, high levels of aid (Hatchett & Jackson, 1999). The respondents were identified based on age, family life cycle, region, and income. With the

emphasis on these social factors, I found this study to be useful in understanding the significance of kinship relationships among black Americans. The trends among older, middle-class, and childless married couples are all populations of black Americans that smaller samples tend to ignore. Studies such as this allow family researchers to see the overall importance of extended kin relationships to the lives of black Americans.

Boyd-Franklin (2003) extensively explores the lives of African American families for the purposes of family therapy assessment and treatment. One of the major transformations in scholarship on black families is the shift from racial to ethnic identification, particularly in literature specific to therapy and counseling fields (Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994; McGoldrick, 2005).

### **Identity Development**

Similar to the definitions of culture, ethnicity and race, the use of the term identity is often unclear and illusive. Both Erikson (1950) and Marcia (1980) created identity development models that suggested there was a process or sequence people go through to attain a full, healthy integration of multiple identities or group memberships. Erikson (1976), himself, noted the fact that the term identity is often used without a clear definition, as if there is an understood and obvious meaning.

#### **Individual**

Erikson (1950, 1975) identified the notion that the psychosocial identity development process has both an individual and communal aspect to it. He believed that one's individual process was greatly affected by internal and external indications of group membership. That is, intrapsychic (or individual) development relied greatly on being and feeling a part of a group or sharing qualities with others. Further, Erikson was the first theorist to propose a human

development theory that spanned the lifetime. Erikson believed that, contrary to Freud's psychosexual theory, people were driven by "the need to become integrated into the social and cultural environment" (Arnett, 2012, p. 21). Erikson believed that each stage has a central crisis that establishes healthy or normative development to the next stage. It is the cultural rules of the environment that dictate what is healthy and normative.

Marcia (1966), in interpreting Erikson's work, constructed the identity status model. Since Erikson (1975) identified adolescence as the stage most integral to identity development, Marcia (1980) classified adolescents into one of four identity statuses: *diffusion*, *moratorium*, *foreclosure*, or *achievement*. These classifications combined exploration and commitment to explain the processes adolescents went through to construct their identity. Although Marcia's work focuses mostly on adolescents, studies show that identity achievement occurs well into and beyond emerging adulthood (Kroger, 2007; Meeus et al., 1999; Van Hoof, 1999). Depending on social contexts and social locations, adult identity development is also influenced by external and internal perceptions of self. For example, ethnic minorities have more factors involved when it comes to exploring and committing to their ethnic identity. Erikson (1975) discussed disharmony that can occur among external and internal views of identity. A person may have a level of pride in themselves, but social experiences of discrimination or negative messages may influence positive or negative views of self. To identify as African American denotes exploring what this means on both an individual and group level. An individual becomes responsible for developing the capacity to sift through the prejudices, stereotypes, and oppressive meanings associated with being a part of an African American ethnic group. The individual's family may provide the foundation for the cultural values in connection with their ethnic group membership.

## **Group**

Concepts and theories of ethnic identity development emerged from social identity theory. Lewin (1948) made the claim that individual identity is greatly influenced by group identification. From these claims, Tajfel and Turner (1979) created social identity theory, which posited that group identification or being a member of any group gives individuals a great chance of having positive self-identity. At this point, ethnic group membership began to pose an exception to the original theories of social identity, because of the marginalization that occurred for some groups. Individuals who belonged to marginalized groups had many other issues to contend with that could possibly harm self-esteem; therefore a strong sense of belonging could not have been the only predictor of positive self-identity. After these assertions were made, various scholars speculated that marginalized groups had to go through a different process of ethnic identity development in order to, first, foster a positive view of their ethnicity. Cross (1985) conceptualized black identity development using the “Nigrescence” process, where blacks moved through stages from a “non-Afrocentric identity into one that is Afrocentric” (Eggerling-Boeck, 2002, p. 17). Scholars generalized these theoretical findings to Black American families as a group and attempted to explain the identity development process.

Hatchett and Jackson (1999) explored the importance of African American kinship ties and discussed African American families as a resource for individual members. African American families can serve as this resource because they develop as a group and contribute to coping and development of members.

## **Ethnic Identity Development**

Phinney (1996) studied the meanings of individual and group identities for adolescents and emerging adults who identified as ethnic minorities. In order for her to do this, she began to

study ethnic minorities as they experienced other ethnic groups in order to explore self-esteem once comparisons could be made. Phinney (1992) created an instrument, called the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), to measure the ethnic identity and feelings of belonging to one's ethnic group for adolescents and emerging adults. The measure has ranged from 12, 14, or 20 items in various studies across many fields. This quantitative measure was used to explore the developmental, cognitive, and affective components to ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1992). Specifically, the MEIM was created to measure the affirmation, achievement, and behavioral aspects of ethnic identity. Phinney thought it important to measure ethnic identity among a heterogeneous sample of ethnic groups. Studies using the MEIM do so in a diversity of ways. Reese et al. (1998) used all of the original 20 items of the MEIM, while Lee and Yoo (2004) and Spencer et al. (2000) used 14 of the original 20 items. Different still, Roberts et al. (1999), analyzed only 12 of 20 items. This obvious difference in the items used in subsequent studies, along with diverse types of statistical analyses makes it difficult to explore comparisons of structural definitions and uses of ethnic identity across studies (Cokely, 2007). Further, Phinney originally constructed the MEIM to be utilized with diverse ethnic groups, but many scholars conduct studies with homogenous ethnic groups.

Many other scholars have utilized the MEIM (Phinney, 1992, 2007) to explore ethnic identity in adolescence. Roberts et al. (1999) used the MEIM to explore the connection between ethnic identity development and psychological well-being, such as coping, self esteem and optimism, and low scoring on depression and loneliness. This study also found a positive correlation between higher levels of ethnic identity development and coping abilities and self-esteem. Further, it was found that the participants with higher levels of ethnic identity had lower levels of depression and loneliness.

Methodological issues have come from the use of the MEIM in studies of ethnic identity. Generally, the use of the measure covers up the diversity that inevitably occurs within groups, even within a homogeneous sample. The measure does not account for differences that occur in identity development. There are problems even with heterogeneous samples, because there are many ethnic groups who have experiences that would contribute to a more profound ethnic identity development process than others (Cokley, et al., 2003).. For example, African Americans possess a history of oppression and discrimination that would inevitably affect their connection to their identities. When studying ethnic identity development, I believe it is most important to capture the diversity of experiences inherent in exploring the processes of individuals within groups. Another concern I have with the use of a measure to explore ethnic identity development is the notion that the process can be categorized in as little as three categories. I hypothesize that the process is more intricate than this and a qualitative approach should be used to gather in-depth information on the experience and meaning of ethnic identity development.

Other ethnic identity development scales, such as the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004), were created to expand on the MEIM and correct some areas of disagreement. The EIS was used to show connections between level of ethnic identity and self-esteem, but also to expand the conversation to family socialization. The use of this scale was to also discuss the effects of components of ethnic identity on individual outcomes. It was found that the lower the level of ethnic identity development, the lower the level of self-esteem. Similarly, the participants who identified as having lower familial ethnic socialization achieved lower levels of ethnic identity development. Umaña-Taylor (2001) also created the Familial Ethnic Socialization Measure (FESM) to explore how Latino adolescents perceived their

families' attempt to socialize them according to their ethnicity. Higher scores on these responses indicated higher levels of familial ethnic socialization (Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001).

The limitations and suggestions for further research for many of the studies conducted by Phinney, Umaña-Taylor, and other ethnic identity scholars, who utilized the ethnic identity development models and scales, emphasized the importance of studying the contexts within which the participants develop ethnic identities. Families nurture and maintain levels of ethnic identity through the transmission of positive and/or negative symbols that ultimately create meaning of ethnicity for its members (Marshall, 1995). For African Americans, specifically, EID is integral to the process of identity development and is greatly influenced by how families socialize their children (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Also, the way that African Americans and blacks perceive their ethnicity within their families influences their own process of EID. Another limitation highlighted by studies of EID is the lack of discussion of gender and any differences in ethnic identity related to gender differences. This study aims to discuss the influence of family in the creation of a positive sense of self for members who are both black and women.

### **Ethnic Identity Development and Black Families**

Ethnic identity can significantly influence a person's overall identity. It contributes to one's overall view of self and one's claim to a specific history, heritage, and legacy (Phinney, 1996). Specifically, marginalized ethnic groups experience a more profound EID process, due to being part of nondominant groups and experiencing their difference among dominant ethnic groups (Phinney, 1996). Phinney (1996) explains her definition of ethnicity:

A common assumption about the meaning of ethnicity focuses on the cultural characteristics of a particular group, that is, the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors

that are typical of an ethnic group and that stem from a common culture of origin transmitted across generations (p. 920).

Phinney expanded the importance of ethnic identity development for ethnic minorities, provided clarity on the definitions and conducted empirical studies to create a model of EID. Her work was created from earlier models of identity development and racial identity models.

While some scholars focused specifically on the racial identity development of blacks, others were creating models that encompassed EID for various ethnic groups. Many of these models, including those for black racial identity development, were created out of Marcia's (1980) Ego Identity Status model. Marcia created the four stages of ego identity status: diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved identity levels, based on a person's identity options.

Phinney (1989) expanded these levels to the options to embrace one's ethnic identity. Her model included unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity search, and achieved ethnic identity, which all corresponded with Marcia's ego identity development model.

Phinney (1990, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997) has done a great deal of research in the areas of ethnic identity development and self-esteem, creating the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (1992) and the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure – Revised (MEIM-R) (2007). In her studies, Phinney explores the connection between ethnic identity development, within the context of group membership, self-esteem and other psychological functioning markers. In one particular study, Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz (1997) found group identity as a predictor of self-esteem, specifically a strong sense of belonging to one's ethnic group significantly predicted self-esteem for African American, Latino, and white adolescents in a study within a school of mostly non-white students. In the same study, participants were asked about their sense of being American and it was found that, for African American and Latino students, this was not a strong

predictor of self-esteem. Context was integral for the participants of this study, as they were a part of a predominately non-White community of peers where self-esteem related to ethnic identity was high. Even though context is identified as integrally important to the perception of ethnic identity for the participants, it is not defined in depth and is not incorporated in the data collection.

Most research on EID, racial socialization, and ethnic socialization is conducted with children or adolescents. In fact, EID continues to occur throughout the life span and is consistently influenced by the ethnic socialization that occurred within a person's family-of-origin (Hughes et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 1990). Examples of activities for ethnic socialization in African American families might be parents taking their children to a Black History Month celebration or attending a local African American arts festival. Research that emphasizes this developmental and generational approach to ethnic identity development could expand knowledge of socialization mechanisms beyond parent-child into grandparent-parent-adult child transmission.

There is a growing body of research that explores black families and various processes that occur within them. In particular, the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and spirituality are highlighted as an ongoing process for black families (Collins, 1989, 1998).

### **Gender Identity Development and Black Women**

Similar to the history of black families, the cultural history of black women will be displayed here as a portrait, identifying some of the significant trends in the scholarship, as well as many of the gaps. The nature of this project is such that the heterogeneity of black women is explored and discussed in light of ethnic identity development. One of the historical similarities of ethnicities of black women in the United States is the system of oppression that continues to

attack both racial and gender identities. Greene (1994) describes, “[African American women’s] lives are inextricably linked to a history of racist and sexist oppression that institutionalizes the devaluation of African American women as it idealizes their White counterparts” (p. 10). For black women, there are experiences of oppression that occur at the intersection of their race and their gender. As outline above, black women have historically had to contend with both sexism and racism as a result of very visible aspects of their identity. Many scholars explore the experiences of black women as they struggle with subjugation and move towards secure and healthy identities (Collins, 1998b, 1998c; hooks, 2000). Gender identity for black women has been significantly influenced and changed through images in the media. Further, perceptions of others create and maintain spaces for black women in marginalized spaces. Black women are constantly objectified and reduced to body parts.

Thomas et al. (2013) studied the contextual influences contributing to the gendered racial identity development of African American girls. Focus groups were conducted and analyzed in order to identify the contribution familial and peer support systems make in the identity development process of African American girls. Specifically, the study explored the ways family and peers counteract stereotypical roles and negative media images (2013). The study found the adolescent girls were well aware of the stereotypes African American women were subject to. Further, the girls identified their parents as being considerably instrumental in helping them navigate the negative portrayal of African American women in order to develop positive self esteem (2013).

Another study of gendered racial identity development explored the process by which African American mothers socialize their daughters in order to aid in their development as African American women (Thomas & King, 2007). This study found that the young girls

received the messages their mothers intended them to about self-determination and self-pride that they found important for them to develop into healthy women (Thomas & King, 2007). Studies of gendered racial identity development do uncover the importance of positive family and peer interactions in order for African American girls to development positive self-images as they develop into women. These studies do not detail a definitive line between gender and racial socialization, but discuss a general emphasis on teaching girls self-determination and self-valuation.

### **Historical, Social and Cultural Influences on Ethnic and Gender Identity for Black Women**

As shown, ethnic identity development has been studied as an individual process, but the importance of the familial context on EID for blacks is integral to understanding a very important aspect of ethnic identity. Many things that create the interconnectedness of experience for black families are of a historical, social, and/or cultural nature. One possible commonality of individuals and families within the same ethnic group is that they have a shared history. In most cases, it is a shared historical context that contributes to group membership. For African Americans and blacks, there is a significant possibility that this shared history includes being enslaved, being on the oppressed side of the color line, and the institutionalization of racism or colorism worldwide. Omi & Winant (2004) explored the construction of racial ideology and the influence of this ideology on the construction of identity:

The automation of southern agriculture and the augmented labor demand of the postwar boom transformed blacks from a largely rural, impoverished labor force to a largely urban, working-class group by 1970. When boom became bust and liberal welfare statism moved rightwards, the majority of blacks came to be seen, increasingly, as part of the “underclass,” as state “dependents.” Thus the particularly deleterious effects on blacks of

global and national economic shifts (generally rising unemployment rates, changes in the employment structure away from reliance on labor intensive work, etc.) were explained once again in the late 1970s and 1980s (as they had been in the 1940s and mid-1960s) as the result of defective black cultural norms, of familial disorganization, etc. In this way new racial attributions, new racial myths, are affixed to “blacks.” (pp. 15)

Racial identity was increasingly vulnerable to political and social movements, which influenced the meaning associated with being black within families and, therefore, individuals. Historically, cultural expression or ethnic socialization was dictated by the racial climate of the times. Therefore, ethnic identity was reduced to racial identification. Given this political influence on ethnic and racial identity, black families became charged with socializing their children to be able to withstand racism and being perceived negatively, while creating a healthy identity through childhood and adolescence (Suizzo et al., 2007).

Omi and Winant (2004) suggest the idea that race is a social construction that is bred by larger society and was institutionalized throughout history. Ethnicity, also a social concept, can be maintained within a group. For example, a family can maintain their ethnic ties by passing cultural values and traditions intergenerationally. Meaning attributed to ethnicity can also be socially constructed as members interact with one another based on preconceived notions of characteristics of a particular ethnic group. Blacks are in constant social exchange within their own ethnic groups, as well as with outside groups, as to what it means to be black. The ways that black people make meaning of their ethnicity includes what they have learned from their family, but also from what they have learned from what society says it means to be black.

Historical influences on EID began to be integrated with the study of cultural influences as they pertain to black families specifically. Differences within communities of black families

showed that cultural norms and traditions were also important aspects of family members' influence on one another (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). Ethnic socialization focuses on the influence of family and community on passing down cultural traditions, beliefs, religion, languages, etc. (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 2008; Phinney, 1990; 1996). Studies have expanded knowledge of black families and African American cultural perspectives (Lesane, 2002). Further, studies highlighted the experiences of African American families and contemporary cultural values (Mosely-Howard & Evans, 2000).

Social constructions of race and ethnicity greatly influence the way in which individuals within different generations conceptualize their own ethnic identity. The meaning that is associated with a particular identity comes from the symbols that are derived from the interaction between an individual and their social environment. Black families and, therefore, individuals share a connection in experiences and influence one another's beliefs, traditions, and practices (Mosely-Howard & Evans, 2000). Further, the emphasis on group identity, kinship bonds, spirituality, and role identity showed some apparent connection to African ancestry and gave evidence that culture was passed down intergenerationally (2000).

### **Conceptual Framework**

To conceptualize the intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity among families, specifically among black women, I believe it is important to explore my own epistemological and theoretical assumptions about identity development for black women. Specifically, the intersections of ethnicity and gender are important to explore in order to study the experiences of black women. Black feminist thought provides the conceptual understanding of the reason for studying black women, their experiences, and the diversity of knowledge among them. Similarly, symbolic interaction theory emphasizes the cultural exchange of meaning embedded within

symbols in our social world. Black women within families exchange such meaning through conscious and unconscious behaviors and this contributes to ethnic and gender identity development for female members. To conceptualize ethnic identity development using a black feminist thought and symbolic interaction theories is to look at the cultural meaning-making process with black women, but to emphasize their experiences using their own “subjugated knowledge” (Collins, 2000, p. 11) or experiences.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Historically, black feminist thought was born out of the systematic exclusion of black women’s experiences in both the civil rights and feminist movements. In both of these movements, the assumptions of group members were maleness and whiteness, respectively. Black female voices were negated and their realities silenced. In both of these movements, though, black women held an “outsider-within location” (Collins, 2000, p. 15), where they were include by skin color in the black social and political movements, and by gender in the women’s movements. However, being a black woman denotes several socio-cultural and historical symbols in and of itself that has been discussed in detail through the work of black feminist theorists. Specifically, Collins (1986) emphasizes three key themes in black feminist thought:

- (1) The meaning of self-definition and self-valuation;
- (2) The interlocking nature of oppression; and
- (3) The importance of African American women’s culture (pp. S16-S21).

Collins (1998) emphasizes the importance of using the lens of intersectionality to explore the ways in which gender, ethnicity, class, etc. “mutually construct one another” (p. 63). “For African American women, the knowledge gained at intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of black

women's critical social theory (Collins, 1998, pp. 3-10). Oppression is also a valuable experience that should be explored at the intersections of these identity traits (Collins, 2000). Experiences of oppression, based on identifying as (or being identified as) a black woman, must also be explored and understood as a significant factor in development and meaning making. Though I am not using the theory of intersectionality to frame my work, I am using the concept, as outlined through black feminist thought, as a foundation to explore the multiplicity of gender and ethnicity as being created with and because of one another as "intersecting systems" (Collins, 1998, 63). The two cannot be taken separately, but for black women, are constructed together. The identity development experiences around being black women are unique, as you cannot simply weed out the experiences based on ethnicity and race or those based on gender.

Black feminist thought emphasizes the discovery and reverence of black women's "subjugated knowledge" (Collins, 2000, p. 11). Collins (2000) describes subjugated knowledge as, "the secret knowledges generated by oppressed groups" (p. 321). Such knowledge typically remains hidden because revealing it weakens its purpose of assisting them in dealing with oppression. Subjugated knowledges that aim to resist oppression constitute oppositional knowledges (p. 321). Black women have, for some time, developed such knowledge through their experiences of oppression. In understanding black women's process of identity development it is subjugated knowledge that is at the foundation that has allowed them to survive through historical, cultural, and social oppressions. In particular, oppositional knowledges become lessons passed down and taught to younger generations in order to teach these survival tactics. Collins (2000) explains oppositional knowledge as, "a type of knowledge developed by, for, and/or in defense of an oppressed group's interests. Ideally, it fosters the group's self-definition of self-determination (p. 320).

In the process of expressing both subjugated and oppositional knowledge self-definition and self-valuation is explored and developed. As the first theme of black feminist thought, expressing these knowledges becomes part of increasing power and agency over the way black women are defined and represented. At the intersection of ethnicity and gender are various messages of what black women's cultural expression *should* be and who black women are. There are often contradictions, or a dual consciousness, where black women must interact using the language of the oppressor versus a self-defined perspective to be kept from the oppressor (Collins, 2000). An example in United States history is that of black women as domestics in white homes, where they needed to uphold an image satisfactory to their white employers, but keep a part of themselves hidden in order to build themselves up and keep pride in who they were. Families of prideful black women or black communities often fed this positive sense of self by expressing a positive representation of blackness and woman-ness, versus the subordinate meaning being black took on in mainstream culture.

Similarly, self-valuation becomes an important factor in rejecting negative representations and taking an active part in creating and maintaining the content involved in self-definitions (Collins, 2000). Black feminist theory calls for black women to take responsibility for strengthening and appreciating themselves before expecting other groups (i.e. men, whites) to do it. Black women writers, singers, and actresses have historically produced media that speaks to this self-respect. For example, Collins (2000) provides the example of a song Aretha Franklin (1967) remade, "Respect", which spoke to this very issue: *What you want? Baby I got it/What you need? You know I got it/All I'm asking is for a little respect when you come home*. Though there have been several meanings derived from this song, Aretha Franklin's identity as a black woman and the way the song is written/performed speaks volumes about her self-valuation and

the respect she demands from her man/oppressor (Collins, 2000). In both cases of self-definition and self-valuation, black women's voices become most important in understanding the ways black women rely on themselves for survival. This is also not an independent process, but a process where black women look to other black women for a collective vision of black womanhood.

With empowerment towards self-valuation, there is a need to explore and identify the impact of oppression and discrimination on identity. The value of being a black woman is often greatly influenced by the oppressed context within which many black women find themselves. The second theme of the interlocking nature of oppression becomes apparent in the stories black women tell of their experiences. Very often, stories of self-definition and identity development are situated in stories of oppression where black women discuss an experience where they were discriminated against based on their ethnic/racial group and/or gender. These oppressive experiences often become a turning point, adding to or taking away from positive feelings of self-worth. One of the most distinct areas of scholarship around black women's oppression highlights the sexual politics of black womanhood. Social media, often driven by white men of upper class status, takes control of images of black women, turning them into symbols of sexual beings (Collins, 2000; Stephens, 2003), who people find it difficult to love and respect (Collins, 2000). These images, controlled by everyone other than black women, begin to subjugate their position, making them subordinate. Furthermore, when one is subordinate, their knowledge (even of themselves) is not given high regard.

With the politics of oppression influencing self-definition and self-valuation, there is little to no importance placed on Black women's cultural experiences. Theme three, the importance of African American women's culture, lays the foundation for continued research focusing on black

women, their experiences, and their knowledge. Culture, a closely related concept to ethnicity, emphasizes that which makes a group unique and special, along with how people learn to be who they are. Black women's culture can include ethnic and racial identifications, but also includes and highlights shared historical, social, and/or personal traits. There are a plethora of symbols and meanings attributed to the process of self-definition and self-valuation that occurs for Black women. Though oppression can impact these symbols, there may also be more positive, ideal influences on re-defining Black women's identities and experiences. Collins (1986) explores the various historical and social institutions, along with creative expressions that make up Black women's culture. For example, church and family are social institutions that greatly influence constructions of Black women's culture. Similarly, art, music and dance may all provide valuable patterns of cultural expression within groups of black women.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

The symbolic interactionism (SI) framework is a pervasive theoretical perspective within family studies (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Herbert Blumer (1969) organizes symbolic interaction into three premises:

- (1) Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them;
- (2) Meanings of such things is derived from, or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and
- (3) Meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p. 2)

SI accounts for the encounters and experiences between human beings. Human behavior, actors, processes of the mind, and societal influences dictate the meanings of these encounters (White &

Klein, 2008). All of these factors combine to create the symbolic world in which we live, where all things constitute some meaning and interaction between actors is dictated by those meanings (Mead, 1934). To apply this specifically to ethnic identity development for African American families of women, symbolic interaction posits we learn our roles, concepts of self, Black feminist thought and symbolic interaction combine to describe a conceptual foundation to the study of ethnic and gender identity development among black women within the same family. With the first premise, the meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other people act toward the person in regard to something (Blumer, 1969, p. 4). The “thing” actually signifies an object, human beings, guiding ideals, activities, situations, identities, etc. (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). In family research, SI identifies families as social groups. It is within these social groups that “symbolic worlds” are created and “shape human behavior” (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, p. 136).

In response to the second premise, symbolic interactionists in family studies theorize about the processes that occur within family social groups. The individuals that make up family groups interact with one another collectively to create meaning of symbols in their worlds and to, in turn, attach meaning to their identities and form a sense of self (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Many of the questions that are asked within symbolic interaction theory are around the process by which family members create meaning of who they are.

Interpretation is the final premise in symbolic interaction theory, as it is interpretation that influences the meaning one makes of a process (White & Klein, 2008). In order to use the meaning of something an interpretive process must be utilized, because in order to act (think, feel, etc.) towards something, we must first think about what it means in light of the context and then act accordingly (Blumer, 1969).

Symbolic interaction, as many family theories, were not developed in reference to a particular social issue. I have found, though, that the theory and premises of SI lend themselves well to the study of identity, particularly ethnic identity, as people and their social groups react to culture, ethnicity, and race through an interpretive process that is dictated by meaning. Ethnic identity, for example, is created through common interpretations and shared meaning of signs and symbols between people about racial and cultural markers and is greatly influenced by context (2008). The meaning that individuals within a family associate with being a particular ethnicity dictates how the ethnicity is viewed, how people react to it, and how people talk about it within the family (Blumer, 1969). For black families, in particular, this notion of how race is defined and discussed is greatly influenced by the view of being black in the outside world. For ethnic identity, though, it is equally important for families to influence how ethnic markers are viewed and talked about within the family. Regardless of the type of discussions around ethnic identity, a common meaning is attained and continuously exchanged between family members and between generations. It is this shared meaning, or “interpretive process” that is socially constructed within the family social group that can be captured in symbolic interactionist qualitative research, which focuses on the lived experiences of participants.

Here, I challenge family researchers to utilize a critical lens to apply symbolic interactionism to historical, social, and cultural meanings of the ethnic identity development process for black families. I use black feminist thought theoretical tenets in the ensuing discussion of this dissertation study and integrate them with the tenets of symbolic interactionism in order to explore the influence of meaning and interpretation of ethnic identity for Black women in their family system. Both theories focus on meaning making which influences the self and the family system. The important addition that black feminist thought provides is the

emphasis on societal factors, such as encountering oppression, and the culture of being a black woman. These societal factors have significantly changed throughout generations, as the historical and social climates change. Along with the changes, there have also been some similarities that attest to the consistencies among the narratives between generations.

The intersection of ethnicity and gender is one that complicates the identity process as symbols and messages are transferred within the social environment. Black women, in particular, have a unique identity development process due to the ethnic identity process, coupled with the gender identity process. In identity development, black women have to navigate through the meanings associated with being both black and female simultaneously. With both come historical, cultural, and social symbols of meaning. Black feminist thought “explores how these systems mutually construct one another” (Collins, 1998, p. 63). With the participants of this study, their blackness, their womanhood, their age, their socioeconomic status, and their spirituality will be experienced all at the same time. This research will not set out to separate them, but to understand how they are all used as objects to create a shared meaning of their ethnicity within their contexts.

### **Summary**

Research on ethnic identity development is vast and spans many disciplines. Its origins can be found in social identity theory, ego identity theory, and racial, ethnic, and cultural studies. The next step for EID studies is to focus on the process within contexts that foster and maintain ethnic identities. Families are one of these contexts where meaning is created, maintained, and transferred. Most research highlights the EID process in childhood and adolescence, but it does not end there. EID into adulthood is an important aspect of research that is often overlooked. Specifically, adult black women must integrate the ethnic socialization they received as children,

along with the constant messages of their ethnic, racial, and gender identity that they receive in their social world. Both symbolic interaction theory and black feminist thought account for the processes that have occurred across generations around the creation of an integrated ethnic identity for black women.

### **The Present Study**

This study aims to explore ethnic identity development as a process experienced by a family system. As individuals within the participant families identify ethnic identity, shared meaning of that ethnic identity will be explored. In order to study the process of ethnic identity development within the family system, it is important to explore what meaning families create, maintain, and pass on from generation to generation around their ethnicity. To that end, three sets of families, represented by three generations of women, will be studied in order to understand their experiences of their ethnic identity.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The literature I reviewed and critiqued in the previous section outlines the symbolic, physical, and emotional placement of African American women in history, culture and society. Moreover, the literature shows the systematic exclusion of black women's voices and experiences in both the study and treatment of identity development for this population. There is also evidence of a lack of emphasis on ethnicity and ethnic identity development in family process literature, along with a lack of exploration of ethnic identity development into adulthood. The use of deficit paradigms (Bloom et al., 1965) clouds our ability to explore black women's knowledge of their own experiences and representing them in a positive light. Just as there are negative perspectives of black families and stereotypes of black women, there are positive, lenses to view black women's experiences within their families, using their knowledge to guide exploration.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to emphasize and explore the use of ethnic markers and meaning making within the process of transmission of ethnic identity and retention of ethnicity across generations of African American women, towards shared meaning around family processes; ethnic identity development is one such family process. In this chapter, I detail the methods of this study, including a description of qualitative traditions, emphasizing narrative inquiry as the method I use; the data collection methods; an in-depth discussion of how I analyzed these data; along with a discussion of the quality and credibility that girds this study;

and the limitations of narrative methods. Throughout this chapter and study, I use black feminist thought as both my theoretical and epistemological stance to allow an understanding of and keep emphasis on the intersections of identity for black women. Black feminist thought emphasizes the use of black women's knowledge and voices to tell their own narratives. Further, my symbolic interactionist stance helps to accentuate the importance of meaning and perception of meaning. In using this stance, I've designed this study to explore the meaning attributed to ethnicity for the individual women and how these individual identities connect (or not) with their collective family identities. It is this research design that accounts for that by allowing the voices of the women to guide the inquiry and the creation of the cultural genograms.

### **Research Questions**

In an attempt to account for both the individual and collective experiences of ethnic identity development, I've constructed the following research questions to structure this study: (1) What are the processes by which African American women, within the same family, arrive at a shared meaning of their ethnicity?; (2) What are the processes by which individual African American women, of the same family, construct meaning of their ethnicity, independently of the meaning shared by other women of that family?; (3) How do these shared and individual meanings change across generations?; and (4) What are the processes by which these shared and individual meanings are constructed, learned, and taught intergenerationally? Given these research questions I found the best way to explore and answer them completely, from the perspective of the women who participated, was by constructing a qualitative study.

### **The Qualitative Tradition**

With an emphasis on voice and representation, I created this study as a qualitative study because of the ability to explore the social construction of meaning, particularly among black

women who are rarely given the opportunity to centralize their experiences. “Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). It is hard to deny my closeness to this study, so qualitative research granted me the opportunity to situate myself in the study and challenged me to remain cognizant of my reflexivity. Given the population and the qualitative framework, I felt the need to build intimate, connected relationships with participants, as they entrusted me with their narratives. Qualitative research highlights these relationships and encourages qualitative researchers to be transparent about the process of building appropriate closeness to the study and to the participants.

Qualitative researchers initiate exploration into an experience or phenomenon (Crotty, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). “They seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Traditionally, much of social science research has been conducted with dominant groups and has systematically excluded the experiences of subordinate or marginalized groups (Andersen, 1993). In order to uncover the stories of traditionally excluded groups and build knowledge of these groups, it is important to explore experiences and perspectives from their own bodies of knowledge.

The qualitative tradition includes a plethora of methods that exist to explore and interpret the context of complex social interactions in a way that emerges from data, rather than being preconfigured (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The voices of participants guide this exploration and, in the case of this study, provide narratives as the units of analyses. Most qualitative research provides researchers with the opportunity to continuously reflect on the integration of participants’ experiences and their own. Utilizing qualitative methods challenged me to create

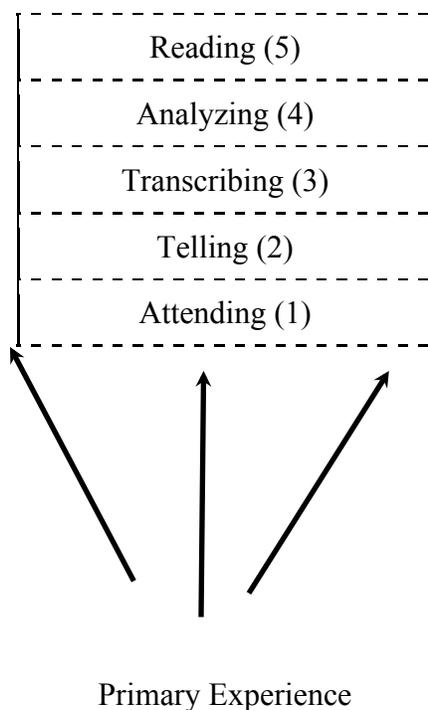
boundaries around participants' and my own experiences in order to appropriately keep distance between them. There is an interpersonal nature to qualitative research that explains the connection between researcher and participants. In my opinion, it is this interpersonal connection that is most important with black women. In particular, black women across generations are looking for a sense they can trust the researcher with the private answers to interview questions (Few et al., 2003; Vaz, 1997). Building trust and rapport with the ten women in this study was the most time consuming, but rewarding aspect. It was this connection that epitomized qualitative research for me. The "give-and-take" fashion of the qualitative tradition (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) helped me to build rapport and secured participants' engagement in this study and global use of the findings.

In relation to narrative research, the qualitative tradition allows previously silenced experiences of black women to emerge and be centered (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Clandinin & Connolly (2000) describe the narrative tradition as a way to "give credence to the value of personal, practical knowledge" and the notion that stories are units of analysis. Narrative is a substantial form of inquiry, examining the structure and function of narratives in daily lives (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Clandinin & Connolly, 2000). Narrative inquiry offers a complex history of data collection methods, including interviewing, which I utilized in this study. Other methods include photo elicitation, journaling, autobiographical writing, etc. (Marshall & Rossman 2011). For this study, stories were elicited through interview questions, and cultural genograms were used as a form of photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) to initiate storytelling around a central map, or visual depiction, of participants' family tree. The specific uses of narrative methods are often ambiguous in research studies. The next section details the specific use of narrative inquiry, supported by literature, for this study.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

To investigate the experiences of ethnic identity experienced by the participant families, I utilized narrative inquiry as a way to elicit stories. Storytelling is an ethnic marker within communities of African descent that is said to have survived the involuntary immigration of African slaves (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Johnson & Smith, 1998; McCabe, 1996). Narratology (Patton, 2002), or narrative inquiry, attends to this cultural tradition by collecting stories in order to “understand lived experience and perceptions of experience” (p. 115). Within this study I utilize narrative inquiry as a way to capture the experience of ethnic identity across generations and the experiential act of passing down culture. Families of African-American women were asked to discuss their perceptions of the ethnicity of their family and how it has (or has not) been passed down through generations.

In pursuit of a comprehensive model in which to collect, analyze, and represent these experiences, I used Riessman’s (1993) “Levels of Representation in Research Process” to explore the experiences of my informants. Her clear description of these five levels allowed me to focus on representing the experiences my informants discussed. Riessman (1993) describes a method of analyzing narratives that focuses on the representation of experience, paying attention to the process of recording and interpreting voice. Figure 3.1 shows this method and the process by which researchers can: (1) attend to; (2) tell about; (3) transcribe; (4) analyze; and (5) read experience.



*Figure 3.1.* Levels of Representation in Research Process (adapted from Reissman, 1993, p. 10)

Along with Reissman’s “Levels of Representation in Research Process,” I utilized Clandinin and Connelly’s (2009) methods of gathering and analyzing for rich, in-depth descriptions of the participants’ stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss the process that researchers are to “do research into an experience” (p. 50), which situates a researcher in the position of immersing herself into the experience of the participants’ stories. In order to do this the focus must be on the “four directions in any inquiry” (p.50): “*inward* and *outward*, *backward* and *forward*” (p. 50). Meaning, I (as the researcher) am able to get as close to experiencing participants’ experiences by asking questions connected to the inward, or internal conditions of feelings or emotions; the outward, or environmental factors; the backwards and forwards, or temporal locations of past, present, and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By eliciting detailed stories I was able to focus on these four directions of narrative inquiry, the “*personal* and *social* (interaction); *past*, *present*, and *future* (continuity); combined with the

notion of *place* (situation)” (p. 50). Using narrative inquiry with black women in this way allowed us to create an environment to explore together the interaction of ethnic identity development as both an individual and family process. More specifically, using this form of inquiry allowed me to identify the nuances of interpersonal relationships, the particular way in which the women told their stories, and the various settings included, all as ways to follow the participants’ meaning making processes. Also, in using cultural genograms I was able to gather a different kind of data, with the same purpose of gathering stories to focus on the “four directions of inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). These methods are discussed next.

### **Methods**

The following section details my process for creating and carrying out this research study. Because of the specific type of participants needed for this study, I engaged in a detailed recruitment process. In the end, three families of women did participate. There were some limitations to the methods of this study and those will be explained later on.

### **Recruitment**

The families who participated in this study were recruited through snowball, or chain, sampling (Patton, 2002) in order to utilize resources I obtained through networking. Individuals within my professional and/or social network referred all three families to the study. There were also various families who did not end up being a part of the study, but who I connected with to invite them to participate. I submitted emails to several professional and community listservs, including black faculty listservs at various local universities, the Malcolm X Grassroots community organization, the Shrine of the Black Madonna community organization, various churches, and the National Association of Black Social Workers group. I met with professors of local universities who are connected to black communities around the city. All the families who

ended up agreeing to participate were somehow connected to an individual I am closely connected with on a professional or personal level.

In the beginning I was in contact with one person who then put me in contact with the other two women. In two cases the youngest generation was the initial contact person and in the other case, the middle generation was the contact person. She contacted me to express her interest and I included her in the study as well. After contacting all the women of the family, telling them about the study, and answering questions, we worked together to set up individual interview times at the date, time, and location most convenient for each woman. In each case, I needed to email all interview questions and the informed consent out first, before all three agreed to participate. I also offered times to go in more depth about the questions and the purpose for asking them. With one family, after the individual interviews were conducted, the women talked to another woman in the family who represented a fourth, oldest generation in the family. She wanted to become part of the family interview in order to experience the discussion.

It is necessary to make an important note about recruitment here. This aspect of this study was probably the most important, most difficult, and most time-consuming aspect of this study. In planning the study, I had no idea I would have to take such care in gaining access to African American families that *looked* like me (in terms of skin color). The literature mostly focuses on within group research, based on race, and supports the notion that same-race researchers do not have as much difficulty gaining access to participants. In my experience, the most care and time was spent telling the participants about myself and my own family, along with identifying the purpose for the questions, in order to gain access and for them to become comfortable. This aspect was about so much more than making sure I was flexible in meeting spaces and times, but also flexible in giving pieces of myself to assure each generation of women, in different ways, of

my intentions. My original goal was to have a heterogeneous sample of black families: an African American family, a Caribbean American family, and an African immigrant family. I would describe the experience of entering the African American communities as difficult and the process of entering Caribbean and African immigrant communities as impossible, especially in the length of time I had. I spent time telling the African American families my story and their ability to relate to my experiences motivated them to participate. With the other cultures, my experiences were not similar enough. My father's story of immigrating from Trinidad did not give me the cultural experiences the Caribbean families could relate to. Also, as an African American person, the African immigrant families felt they could not culturally relate to me. Much of this feedback came by way of the community connections I made during recruitment. The leaders (i.e. church leaders or community group leaders) suggested I allot about a year attending the churches and meetings in order to gain the trust of the families. I discuss this further in my section on future research in the final chapter.

### **Participants**

In conducting qualitative research with African American women, I found it most important to create a collaborative environment whereby participants are empowered to become part of the research process (Few et al., 2003; Vaz, 1997). As explained above, the participants wanted to know about me and about my intentions. I found the most support when I included how their involvement in this study would bring me closer to graduating. The participants wanted me to explain the dissertation/PhD process and I made sure to include how these interviews fit into the process. Once the interviews began, I continued to use black feminist thought to guide the design and kept my focus on the totality of participants' experiences. Black feminist thought is founded in the idea that black women need to be the authors of their own

experience. My job, as the researcher, was to create a space where my participants felt most comfortable re-collecting and re-memembering the stories of their past in order to tell them together. The family narratives took on a life of their own, as the women sat together to discuss their individual and collective ethnic identity development – conversations they had never had before together. From my black feminist thought epistemology, my role was simply to create a space where these women’s stories emerged.

Since I was exploring the intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity among women within the same family, the participants represented three different generations. The criteria for recruitment were that each triad of women self-identified as African American or black, from the United States, and were at least 25 years of age. Each of the participants completed a demographic profile (shown in Appendix) complete with information such as: age, ethnicity, relationship status, ethnicity of partner, ethnicity of parents, nationality, education level, family of origin, and current household income levels. Figure 3.2 shows the demographic information of each participant.

Table 3.1

*Participants’ Demographic Information*

	Age	Ethnicity	Relationship Status	Level of Education	Birth City	Current City
Emma Nelson	72	African American	Divorced	Associate Degree	Chicago, IL	Chicago, IL
Renee Brooks	49	African American	Divorced	High School Diploma	Chicago, IL	Miami, FL
Faith Lorde	29	African American	Single	Master’s Degree	Chicago, IL	Atlanta, GA
Gwendolyn Clarke	53	African American	Married	Master’s Degree	Brooklyn, NY	Lithonia, GA

Toni Walker	52	African American	Married	Master's Degree	Madison, WI	Alpharetta, GA
Nikki Walker	25	African-American/ Bahamian	Single	Bachelor's Degree	Summit, NJ	Athens, GA
Coretta Hooks	75	African American	Widowed	Bachelor's Degree	Winston-Salem, NC	Raleigh, NC
Angela Morrison	53	African American	Married	Master's Degree/PhD in progress	MI	Raleigh, NC
Ella Morrison	26	African American	Single	Bachelor's Degree	Raleigh, NC	Raleigh, NC

### **Data Collection Methods**

Literature supports the notion that the best way to explore and collect data from black women about their own experiences of ethnic identity within their families of origin was to learn and absorb from my participants through interviews (Collins, 1989; Few et al., 2003; Vaz, 1997). Using narrative methods I was able to become a witness to the process of telling and retelling stories. What follows is a detailed description of the methods of this study; these methods were carefully chosen because of my use of black feminist thought as an epistemological and theoretical stance.

I utilized three data collection techniques to conduct this study: 1) interviews, which were audio and video recorded; 2) cultural genograms; and 3) my reflexive journal entries after each interview. The genograms, audio and video recorded interviews, and my journal entries provided multiple sources of data to produce “data triangulation, [which is] the use of a variety of data sources in a study” (Patton, 2002, p. 247). Particularly, data triangulation is used for “comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different

means *within qualitative methods*” (Patton, 2002, p. 559). Below, the schedule and sequence of data collection are outlined.

Table 3.2

*Breakdown of Individual and Family Interviews*

	Length of Individual Interview/Date/Location	Length of Family Interview/Date/Location
Emma Nelson	1 hour and 15 minutes October 15, 2011 Her Home Audio & Video Recorded	2 hours and 45 minutes December 22, 2011 Home of Renee Brooks Audio & Video Recorded
Renee Brooks	1 hour and 30 minutes November 18, 2011 Her home Audio & Video Recorded	
Faith Lorde	1 hour and 30 minutes October 8, 2011 Her home Audio & Video Recorded	
Gwendolyn Clarke	1 hour and 45 minutes November 3, 2011 Her home Audio & Video Recorded	3 hours and 15 minutes December 3, 2011 Home of Toni Davis Audio & Video Recorded
Toni Walker	1 hour and 10 minutes November 17, 2011 Her professional office Audio & Video Recorded	
Nikki Walker	1 hour and 30 minutes November 8, 2011 MFT Clinic on University campus Audio & Video Recorded	
Coretta Hooks	45 minutes April 22, 2012 Home of Angela Morrison Audio Recorded	1 hour and 30 minutes April 22, 2012 Home of Angela Morrison Audio Recorded
Angela Morrison	50 minutes April 22, 2012 Her home Audio Recorded	
Ella Morrison	50 minutes April 22, 2012 Home of Angela Morrison Audio Recorded	

Table 3.2 shows the breakdown of interviews that were audio and/or video recorded. One family asked they not be video taped and did not consent on the informed consent. It also outlines the interview lengths, dates, and locations. I went to the homes of the participants for most of the interviews. One was completed at the family therapy clinic on the campus of the local University. Another interview was conducted in the office of the participant. Each participant chose the location, date, and time of the interview.

### **Interviews**

Stories are situated within time and space and are continuously constructed through interactions with different contexts and environments (Mishler, 1986). Using semi-structured interviews I created an environment that allowed stories to be elicited as representations of the generational narratives. Mishler (1986) described the interviewing process as one that incorporates context, behavior, and exchange. The encounter of interviewing initiates an exchange of behavior that creates a context for the telling of narratives (1986). The telling of narratives is as natural as engaging in conversation. Through discourse, interviews can take on a structure that culminates in a story of meaning for participants. This story becomes an account of events connected to their human experiences (1986).

In choosing and creating an interview protocol, I thought it important to explore various aspects of ethnic identity that could be experienced both collectively and individually within one family. Patton (2002) discusses the importance of an interview guide that will ensure “the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed” (p. 343). I decided on “The Cultural Assessment” created by McGoldrick et al. (2008), which is often used in family therapy practice. This assessment was constructed to aid in the creation of cultural genograms and to focus on clients’ contextual factors, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, geographical

location, class, race, gender, etc. (McGoldrick et al., 2008). I adapted the assessment as the interview guide to aid in asking participants to identify themselves ethnically, culturally, and overall, contextually. Using these questions, I created cultural genograms during both individual and family interviews to map ethnic identity and the transmission of cultural and contextual factors.

During the first individual interview with each woman I used the interview guide to focus on questions and eliciting stories around the women's individual ethnic identity development process. I conducted the family interviews as a way to follow up with the individual women, but to add family stories around various ethnic and cultural factors. In particular, the women were encouraged to elaborate on certain stories told in the individual interviews in order for me to observe the reactions and input from the rest of the women. One of the most important aspects of these family interviews was to explore how they collectively identify their ethnicity and the ethnic factors that influenced that from the family.

Using narrative interviews as the driving force of data collection, I met with the individual women that made up the families, first to gather demographic information along with stories of their ethnic identity development. Mishler (1986) discussed the importance of co-constructing meaning using interviews. "One way an interview develops is through mutual reformulation and specification of questions, by which they take on particular and context-bound shades of meaning" (Mishler, 1986, p. 53). My goal was to always make the interview process a joint process, where the participants had the space to recollect and remember stories particular to the subject matter. Further, I felt it pertinent to create a space where the women were able to express who they were through describing or performing cultural traits. For example, Family Two expressed an important cultural trait that had always contributed to their ethnic identity by

serving food during the family interview. Gwendolyn Clarke alluded to this by offering and insisting I eat during her individual interview as well. Family One had a similar process, but showed that it was hospitality that was always important in their home. Renée Brooks invited me to her home to stay for a few days before the family interview was completed. During this time, Renee gave me a glimpse into her individual emphasis on work ethic and reaching out to others through service that then was supported by her mother discussing similar family traits during the family interviews.

### **Cultural Genograms**

McGoldrick et al. (2008) suggest cultural genograms be used in qualitative research to gather lived experiences based on ethnicity and culture of family members. The use of cultural genograms, in which in-depth data of ethnic identity is collected through interviews and observation, “encourages participants to tell their stories” (McGoldrick et al., 2008, p. 287). In research, the use of cultural genograms with more than one generation present in a qualitative, narrative inquiry study is unique. I utilized cultural genograms as a way to collect the various directions/details of an experience that are integral to in-depth narrative inquiry. In this case, having two different types of data collection methods allowed me the opportunity to gather different types of stories, all around the experiences of identity for these women.

In practice, family therapists use genograms to map family systems and show a visual connection among the various generations in one family (Bowen, 1978). Together with my participants, I constructed cultural genograms (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995) as a means for collecting detailed generational information to supplement interview data. At one time, cultural genograms were introduced into family therapy research for training purposes (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; Keily et al., 2002; Shellenberger et al., 2007). The idea was to foster cultural

competence and sensitivity by requiring therapists to understand how culture and context influences their own identity, first, before asking this of their clients. Since the introduction of cultural genograms, there have been similar research studies utilizing this intervention with groups of graduate students in marriage and family therapy (Keily et al., 2002) and in other mental health disciplines for supervision (Shellenberger et al., 2007). There has been other mention of the importance of incorporating culture in therapy and the suggestion to intervene using cultural genograms (McCullough-Chavis & Waites, 2004; Watts-Jones, 1997). I conducted individual and family interviews with the family's cultural genogram as the center of the discussion, in order to collect detailed information on ethnic identity from each generation represented.

During both the individual and family interviews, I sketched a rough draft of each family's cultural genogram, adding details with each interview. We (the families and I) then used the cultural genogram as the centerpiece of the family interview, adding further details about cultural traits or names of family members. Also during this time, the genograms were used as a photo elicitation piece to elicit stories and details about those stories told during the individual interviews. The cultural genograms also became part of the way the women told their stories naturally. While sitting at kitchen tables, office desks, or sprawled out on the floor, we added the details to the cultural genograms and it became their family projects as well. The women would crowd around it to correct dates, names, or simply to reminisce about a particular person/time in the family.

I created the genograms first on paper during the interviews then used two different software programs to recreate them, and a last time on paper again to show the cultural details

(and to send back to the families). There are two software programs I used, GenoPro and MacFamilyTree, to create the computerized programs.

### **Reflexive Journal Entries**

After each interview I took the time to sit and collect my thoughts on paper. Most often I would simply sit in the car, before leaving the participants' homes, and write about a page or two of my thoughts, reactions, and minor details I did not want to forget. Other times, I would drive to a near-by parking lot to jot down my reactions. "Writing a journal can help us expand our vocabulary, our habits of thinking and train us to attend to our senses – what we see, hear, and sense in our bodies – all of which are needed for reflexive monitoring" (Etherington, 2004, p. 128). I then used these journal entries to situate the narratives and analysis in the following findings chapters.

### **Data Analyses**

My processes of analyzing the various field texts (transcripts, cultural genograms, audio and video recordings, and reflexive journal entries) followed closely with Riessman's (1993) "Levels of Representation in Research Process". First, I kept individual and family interviews in triads (grouped by family) to be analyzed, first, as different cases. After I got a good sense of the individual and collective experience of ethnic identity development within each family separately, I looked at the experiences across family cases, broke them down into generations (i.e. analysis of the oldest generations, the middle, and the youngest across families). Within Riessman's (1993) "Levels", I emphasized the attending to, telling of, transcription of, analysis of, and reading of experiences as a way to flow through the narratives informants performed.

Before beginning the steps of analyzing narrative data, Riessman (1993) discusses the need to "represent the experience" (p. 8) you are studying. I made sure to do that with this study

by, first, identifying the best way to gather stories representing each woman's story individually, but then collectively. The individual interviews gave each woman the opportunity to discuss the interview questions and research topic alone without influences of the other women in their family. I used their collective narratives to get a better view of how they experienced their ethnic identities together. That is, what family stories represent the way they share meaning of who they are and the ways each individual woman influences the other. After gathering these "representations of experience" (Riessman, 1993, p. 8), I used Riessman's steps to complete an in-depth analysis, starting with attending to each woman and family of women's experience they discussed in their interviews.

### **Attending**

In order to attend to both the individual *and* collective experiences of the women I utilized reflexive journaling to recollect aspects of my interactions with the participants. I also listened to the audio recordings and watched the video recordings to capture the nuances of the interviews I may have missed in the transcripts. My interactions with them were somewhat different between the individual and family interviews, which spoke to the possible ways the women wanted to present themselves to me. For example, I found the youngest generation to be independent in thought and ideas when they were alone, but when they were with the older women of their families wanted to make sure they were speaking in a manner that would also please them. Riessman (1993) discusses how the researcher's subjectivities will guide what is attended to in this step:

There is a choice in what I notice, a selection from the totality of the unreflected on, the primary experience. The truth of hearing and vision predominate over touch and smell,

for example... I actively construct reality in new ways at this first level of representation to myself, by thinking.

*I made this difference in interaction between interviews meaningful; therefore, I attended to it and discuss it in my reflexive journals after each interview.*

### **Telling**

The next level of analysis Riessman (1993) discusses is the telling about experience that inevitably must occur during and after data analysis. "I re-present the events, already ordered to some degree, to these listeners in conversation, with all the opportunities and constraints the form of discourse entails" (Riessman, 1993, p. 9). After several attempts at deciding *how* I was going to re-tell these women's stories, it became evident I needed to, first, utilize their words in a narrative analysis to pull apart their interviews and then re-construct their stories, using their own words (Polkinghorne, 1995). I used setting, characters, and plot to construct the story of the interview, but also to string together the details of the story they were telling about themselves during the interviews.

Since my study was exploring the meaning making these nine women used to construct the stories of their identities, I had to carefully re-construct the context of their lives and stories in an attempt to analyze their experiences. These decisions were ones I came to before actually delving into these data in order to, first, situate myself in the study and identify how and why I wanted these stories to be re-presented. Transcribing became the way I delved deeper and used their women's actual words to represent them.

### **Transcribing**

Each interview was audio and videotaped so I could gather a more complete experience of these women telling their stories. The individual interviews were completed transcribed as to

use their words during analysis. I used the videotapes to study the interactions the women had with me individually, and then when their other family members were in the room. The family interviews were not completely transcribed, but were mainly used to gather details specific to family history for the cultural genograms. The videotapes were used more, with the family interviews, to study the interactions between family members.

Riessman (1993) discusses the importance behind transcription and the continued subjective process it is. She points out, "...seemingly mundane choices of what to include and how to arrange and display the text have serious implications for how a reader will understand the narrative" (p. 12). I transcribed each interview in a traditional sense, separating my questions/input into separate lines from the participants' answers/input. Since I attempted to make little interruption into the telling of the stories, the transcriptions have paragraphs and, sometimes, pages of text of uninterrupted text from the participants. This made analysis and representations of these stories seamless, because I was able to keep the re-telling of the stories somewhat together.

### **Analyzing**

The next level of representation was the analysis of the transcribed data. Riessman (1993) identifies that "challenge to identify similarities across moments into an aggregate, a summation" (p. 13). In order to summarize interview data I looked at the transcriptions and coded the types of stories the participants told.

I found Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) use of reading and coding to organize data helpful in the coding stages. I analyzed narrative texts and representations first, through archival coding, where all field texts were read, reread, and sorted. The sorting occurred through "careful coding of [my transcripts]... with dates, contexts for the composition of the field texts, characters

involved, topics dealt with, [etc.]” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). Next, I reread all archived field texts “in order to construct a chronicled or summarized account of what is contained within different sets of field test, [including] character, place, scene, plot, tension, end point, narrator, context, and tone” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 131). After this step, I conducted “narrative coding” (p. 131) to get a sense for some important aspects of the field texts. After coding was completed, I organized categories and created lists of them, using the codes (Charmaz, 2006). I then used the categories to generate overall themes, once the same categories were found within and across the individual and family narratives. Along with Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) overall general description of the importance of coding, I used Ruona (2005) as a guide to organize these data into spreadsheets, color-coding responses into categories and then themes.

### **Reading**

The reading of the women’s experiences became a way to follow up with the participants and give them some input on how their stories were told. Member checking (Maxwell, 1996) helped me to stay true to the ways participants wanted their stories told (and the ways they did not want them told). Given I am an African American women, whose context is within the United States of America and am writing to an academic audience, the telling and reading of these experiences were shaped by that context. “Written texts are created within, and against, particular traditions and audiences, and these contexts can be brought to bear by readers” (Riessman, 1993, p. 14). It was important to me that my participants’ readings of their stories be a part of the final stages of writing them. It was also inevitable that my subjectivities shaped how I interpreted/analyzed and, subsequently, wrote and read the experiences of these nine women. Though my influence was clear, I wanted to continue to adhere to a black feminist though

theoretical framework by making the participants have autonomy in how their stories were authored.

### **Quality and Credibility**

The most important aspects of structuring a qualitative study are attending to quality and credibility in order to enhance the rigor of the study. “Rigor is demonstrating how and why (through methodology) the findings of a particular inquiry are worth paying attention to” (Mayan, 2009, p. 100). I made various strategic strides to ensure rigor in this study in order to generate quality findings that were credible and worthy of display.

### **Trustworthiness**

There are a plethora of criteria used in the literature to describe rigorous qualitative studies (Flick, 2009; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Mayan, 2009; Richardson, 2000;). For this study, I utilized credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as criteria to ensure trustworthiness. The follows outlines how I thought about each in this study.

### **Credibility**

Prolonged engagement with the research participants, in their setting, was secured through the number of interviews conducted. Each individual woman was interviewed once for one to two hours each and the family was interviewed once for two to three hours. The individual interviews were always conducted first, before scheduling and conducting the family interviews. Each family had a total of four sessions for data collection and one extra period of contact for member checking and delivery of the cultural genogram for their records. Credibility in a research study speaks to these details, in that “it assesses whether the findings make sense and if they are an accurate representation of the participants and/or data” (Mayan, 2009, p. 102). Along

with prolonged engagement with the women, I also returned the genograms, transcripts, and findings to them for member-checking purposes. This allowed for a sense of agreement in the representation of stories and the values important to the participants.

I also utilized data and researcher triangulation to ensure credibility through various perspectives. I achieved data triangulation through gathering various methods of data. Narrative interviews, cultural genograms, and audio/video recordings were all regarded as different data collection techniques to be analyzed narratively. Each technique brings a different perspective of the participants to analysis. For example, using both audio and video recordings allowed me to focus on two very different aspects of expression: verbal and physical. I fulfilled investigator/researcher triangulation by utilizing my committee and working closely with one or two members to eliminate the possibility of only having my own perspective in the data analysis phase (Patton, 2002).

### **Transferability**

I took great care to construct the research design and process for the research participants in such a way that the design could be duplicated. Further, I found it necessary to provide a thick description of the methods I carried out for this study. “Transferability replaces external validity... [and] assesses the applicability of the findings (Mayan, 2009, p. 102). The structure of the design is such that the “process can be systemically followed” (Patton, 2002, p. 546).

### **Dependability**

I relied heavily on an audit trail to ensure dependability, which is the qualitative version of reliability. “It refers to the opportunity, post hoc, of reviewing how decisions were made through the research and is attained through the use of an audit trail” (Mayan, 2009, p. 102). I made sure that any decisions I made with the raw data, the process of collecting it, and the

recordings were documented in detail. Further, any decisions I made to reduce, summarize, and describe data were also documented in my journal along the way. Specifically, I wrote through a number of summaries of the data, writing memos along the way of what I did to create a comprehensive outline.

### **Confirmability**

This is a way to “replace objectivity” (Mayan, 2009, p. 102) and increase the practice of reflexivity. The purpose for choosing a qualitative study to explore my research questions is because I am connected to this research and became connected to my participants. In particular, narrative inquiry situates the “I” in data collection and the subsequent representation of data. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, “We need to make sure that when we say ‘I’, we know that ‘I’ is connecting with ‘they’”. Paying attention to authenticity in my research allowed me to fulfill this detail. Using reflective journaling during data collection allowed me to continuously be mindful of my own perspective, the connection to my participant families’ perspectives, and the representation subsequently created.

I was well aware that my own experiences and closeness to the topic did, at times, color my interpretation of others’ experiences. In particular, it was possible that, even in inquiry, I was reacting to the way I saw my own experience rather than the ways participants described their experiences. To work with this, I called on the influence of my participants and committee to check my understanding of participants’ experiences. First, I made sure my participants felt their narratives were accurately depicted in my write-ups by sending them a copy of the writing. I asked these writings be returned with any changes or requests within two weeks. I also offered the participants my phone number so they could call with any concerns. After I received any necessary changes, I looked them over to make sure correction would not change the nature of

the analysis or the theme that was originally generated with my analyses. In all cases, the changes were minor and did not change the analysis. I made all necessary changes and sent my analysis to my committee members to have them check for accuracy.

From the beginning to the end of this study, there were various ethical concerns that arose. The next section outlines those ethical concerns and how I took the care to address them during the study.

### **Ethics**

There are two issues that come up as significant ethical concerns in narrative inquiry: (1) confidentiality and (2) informed consent. Both of these concerns come up in narrative inquiry because of the closeness of the researcher to the researched. This quality of becoming close to the experience is important in order to get to the essence of the experience. Regardless of this fact, though, I maintained these areas in order to protect the participants.

I maintained confidentiality by using pseudonyms throughout the life of the study and for any subsequent written accounts of the data. Further, I conducted interviews where the participants felt safe and where there was no possibility of their involvement being disclosed to anyone outside of the study. Even before the first interview session, I took care to thoroughly describe and discuss the informed consent. Further, since the informed consent was in written form we were able to move through the consent form during the first interview and I answered any questions during this time. After consent was given, I made sure to remind the participants they always had the chance to no longer be a part of the study. Lastly, I created a process to de-identify all data, by clustering demographic profiles, interviews, and cultural genograms by a family number first (i.e. Family 1) and then by individual number (i.e. Family 1\_Person 1). After

I gave each individual woman and family ID numbers, I also assigned individual and family pseudonym as to completely disconnect any identifying information.

The cultural genograms presented another layer of ethical concerns, particularly in the area of confidentiality. Since I was collecting actual names, dates, and cultural traits during the interviews, I needed to take extra care in de-identifying that information. The cultural genograms were also given to family members as a “thank you” for their participation. Since I wanted to make sure to give them their correct identifying information, I made sure to complete the cultural genograms, first, in order to send them to the families for member-checking. Once they were returned, I fixed any errors, and sent the same genogram back for the women to keep. Once it was completely final, I changed all the names on my final copy of the genogram and used the ID numbers to decipher between families.

One last ethical issue I continued to struggle with was the issue of representation. In narrative inquiry representation becomes one of the most important facets in writing up findings. Spivak (1988) discusses what she called the “subaltern” and the need to keep the control over representation with marginalized populations. Gready (2008) expresses this concern in his chapter on ethical concerns in narrative research. “The argument... is that the marginalized and subaltern increasingly have a voice, but little to no control over representation, interpretation, and dissemination” (p. 138). The natural tendency of qualitative research is that I am responsible for analyzing data collected during this study. My struggle throughout the study, though, was whether or not my representation accurately depicted the stories these women were telling. Furthermore, was my interpretation of their narratives appropriate by their standards? Member checking became the way I ensured appropriate representation and interpretation. I was in

constant contact with my participants for the life of the study and made sure this was appropriate by identifying the need for continued connection in my original IRB application.

The following chapters display the final, approved write-up of my interpretations of the women's individual and family narratives. I took great care to use quotes and actual words spoken by my participants in the narratives displayed.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

This chapter serves as one of two analysis chapters, showcasing the depth of data I collected during the interviews. I, first, conducted a narrative analysis with interview data. The second analysis chapter is the analysis of narratives, showcasing the themes across the three families and nine individuals. Polkinghorne (1995) is the scholar who makes the distinction between two types of analysis with narrative data. This chapter displays the narrative analysis, which “organizes experience into stories” (Polkinghorne, 1988. p.112). I conducted an in-depth analysis of each interview to construct the individual narratives using the stories the women told.

The process of seeing human action as meaningful sequences of events linked together in a causal chain requires cognitive skill, judgment, and the application of previous experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 112).

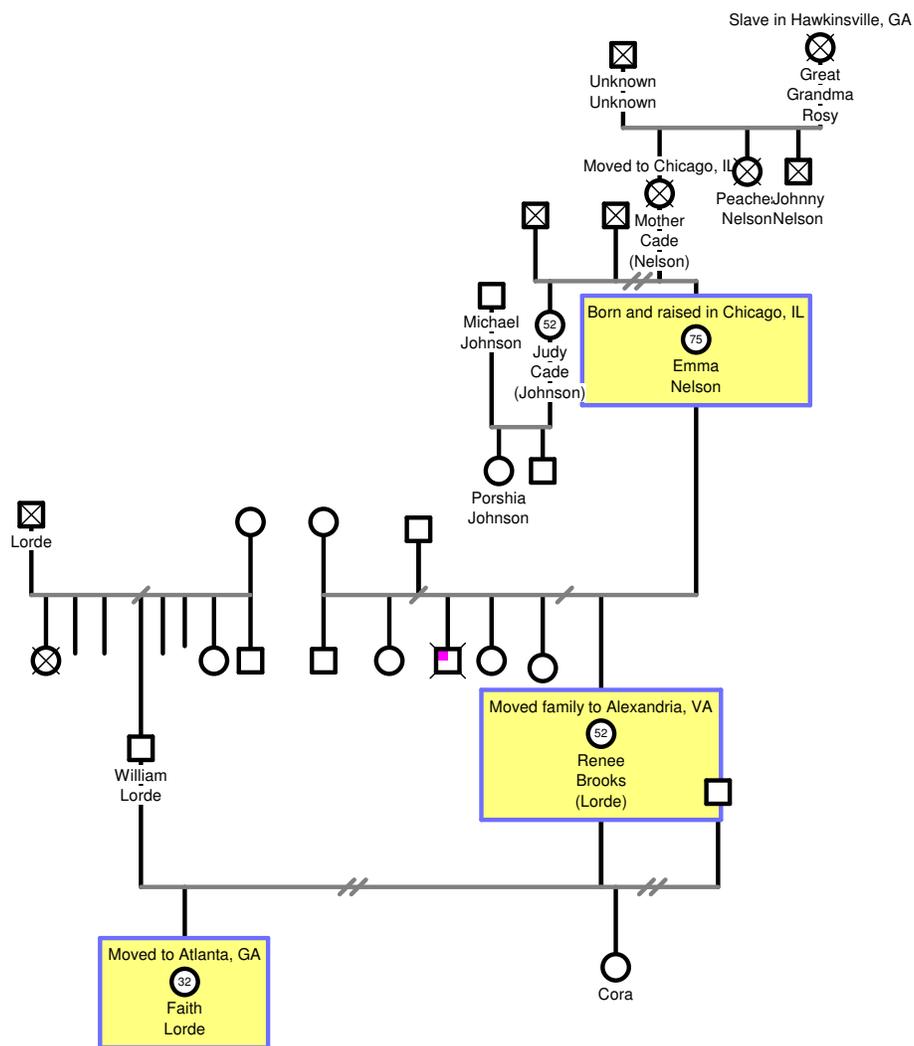
Going through each interview using a basic coding method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) helped me discover themes and use the women’s own words to construct narratives. What follows are these detailed individual narratives, broken down by themes within their interviews. The narratives are grouped by families and include a family summary at the end of each.

#### **Family One**

The first family interviewed for this project consists of three women: Emma Nelson, Renée Brooks, and Faith Lorde. All three women were born in Chicago, Illinois, but Faith was raised in Alexandria, Virginia.

Emma Nelson is a 72-year-old African American woman who retired as a labor force advocate in upper administration for the state of Illinois labor force board. She received a GED after leaving high school to raise her children. Renée Brooks, the youngest daughter of Emma, is 49-years-old, and has two daughters herself. Renée has been married and divorced twice and currently lives in her condo in Miami, Florida. She is upper management for a major transit system throughout the United States and is looking to be promoted again in the coming months. Renée's oldest daughter, Faith Lorde, is a 29-year-old student working on her second master's degree in theology. She moved to Atlanta, GA for her undergraduate studies, then moved to Miami, FL for her first master's program in social work, and then moved back to Atlanta where she has been for the last 8 years. Faith is a licensed social worker and is a part of an Air Force chaplaincy program.

All three women are leaders of their generations within the family. Whenever something is planned or needed, these women come to the forefront to "take care of it all". Emma is the matriarch of the family and has taught her daughter and granddaughter the ways to take on that role for the others in their family. There are other similar qualities among these three women – some of these qualities and values were consciously instilled in the next generation, but others were unconsciously passed on through the way the older two women lived. Below, each woman is introduced and her narrative displayed. After the individual narratives, a family summary was showcases the themes across the three individual narratives.



**Figure 4.1**  
*Family One Genogram (Created in GenoPro)*

**Emma Nelson: Who I am**

Emma Nelson is a 72-year-old retired labor activist who still continues to contribute to labor unions daily by serving on national and state-level boards. The various awards and certificates that lined her walls and bookshelves were a clear indication that this phenomenal woman made/continues to make an impact on her community. Further, she had pictures with various political figures, including one with (now) President Barack Obama. While the interview progressed, Emma named various boards and committees she still sits on. She laughed at the notion of being retired, saying, “I don’t do it [work] as much as I used to, but I still try to give everybody a little piece of me. But, I also try to leave a little piece of me for myself and for my family.”

Born in 1939, Emma “grew up on the south side of Chicago in an African American community”. She attended Catholic schools for most of her primary education. Her mother enrolled young Emma “in Catholic school so that [she] could get – learn – the discipline that [she] needed”. During her time in high school Emma began to dabble in what would become her life’s work as an activist by running for student council. This time was eye opening for her, though, because it was not until she ran for treasurer of her sophomore class that she realized there was racism around her. She recalled her experience:

My first experience [with racism] didn’t happen in the community, but once I went to high school, which was a mixed high school on the north side of Chicago. I had to travel quite a ways to go there. There, I had my first experience with different races, you know. It seemed to go well in my freshman year in high school, but in my sophomore year, I think it was, I ran for office of my class and I won as the treasurer of our sophomore class. The young man that won as president refused to take a picture with me because I

was African American – for the yearbook. That was really my first experience – I was really blessed because I had quite a few friends that were from all races and I had a couple guys who were Italian who were in our class. They got very upset because he took that attitude. And so they took him outside for a few minutes and he took the picture. He had a little black eye, but he took it.

Emma smiled as she told the story, laughing at her own naiveté in the face of blatant racism. During the interview she sat contemplating her words carefully. It was clear to me she had much experience with politics and discussing political matters in a diplomatic manner. Her dignity and pride showed through as she discussed various aspects of her life, choosing to tell the story of her strength and perseverance through many obstacles. Most of Emma’s stories led back to this sense of community built in Chicago while she was growing up. Even now, living in Chicago, she credits the breakdown of community as the reason for so much violence and disrespect amongst people. She reflected on this change saying, “That’s where it broke down at. When we stopped looking, living as a community and helping each other and depending on each other and surviving and caring. You know, I think it broke down there.”

Emma has lived in Chicago for all of her life, raising her children there, and flourishing as a community activist. Emma Nelson was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. During her interview, she clearly identified with the South side of Chicago since the neighborhoods and her history of Chicago are critical to understanding the meaning they held for Emma’s life.

Even though Emma’s immediate family spent most of their lives in Chicago, Illinois, her mother was born in Georgia and Emma spent summers going back to the South to visit. She noticed a difference between blacks and whites, including how she, as a black girl, had to interact with the whites in the South.

My great grandmother – my grandmother’s mother - lived to be, like, 106, - I think it was 106. We went back South every year. My mother had two sisters that never left the South. And, so, every summer my cousins and I went back South and spent the summer with either great granny or my aunts there. So, we had an experience of the South that we heard our family talk about. My aunt was like a sharecropper and we went out to the fields with them. They didn’t take me, but a couple of times to pick cotton. The boss told them not to bring me back anymore, because I didn’t know cotton – I wasn’t raised picking cotton. I took everything, the cotton, the balls – everything. When they weighed mine, I had plenty of money coming in. So, I will never forget; he was not only the boss over the cotton, and what have you, he was also who my aunt was a sharecropper for. He also owned the store. I guess he owned everything in the little town. It seemed like to me. It was very difficult for me, because I was a Chicago girl and I wasn’t use to going into the store saying ‘Yes, sir, Mr. Dan’ or ‘No, sir, Mr. Dan.’ I wanted a box of tide or whatever I needed, right? And, so, I sort of kept that part out of the conversation. I wasn’t a bad child or anything. It’s just that I wasn’t used to having to do those things. I thought that very clearly was a difference. And I felt the fear in my relatives that lived there. There was a big difference, although I learned later, as I grew up, about racism in Chicago. But, it was on a difference scale altogether.

Since Emma’s mother moved to Chicago at the young age of 4, the only reference she had to the racial climate in the United States were those summer visits to her great grandmother and aunts’ homes. In Emma’s Chicago community, though, there was a community of families (including her own) that emigrated from the same little town in Georgia. She discussed how it seemed the neighborhood/community all emigrated and moved to the same Chicago community:

I didn't learn until later on in life, maybe in the last ten years, that on the two or three blocks where we lived that most of the people that lived on those blocks came from the little town in Georgia where we were from - where my family was from. They called where we lived "The Block" and most of the people stayed in our family house until they got on their feet. I didn't know that until about ten years ago – within the last ten years. I had a cousin that was the same age as my mom and between the two of them I found that out. So, I think that our neighborhood was a community – I didn't know that all these people came from the same neighborhood – from the same city and, when you talk about 'it takes a village to raise a child,' that's the way it was in our family. Nobody locked doors. Nobody – we didn't have fans or air condition. We slept on porches, you know. If somebody had sugar, everybody had sugar. That was the kind of community I was raised in, so I guess I was raised in a community-based society.

Emma's uncle was one of the "godfathers" of the neighborhood who made sure all the families were taken care of. He owned a convenience store and made sure the families were fed, no matter what time of day it was. Emma discussed her uncle's position in the neighborhood:

My uncle- he owned a grocery store. It was always amazing to me – we all had to work at the grocery store at some point. It was on the end of the block where we lived. It was always amazing to me that, when people didn't have money, he gave them credit. We had to get up if Ms. So and So down the block didn't get milk or cereal for the kids for the next morning before they went to school, we had to open up the store so Ms. So and So could get milk and somebody had to go. We had to open the store so that – he always made sure that every family in our neighborhood had breakfast for those children before they went to school; whether they had money or not.

Though Emma's uncle was one of the leaders of the community, it was the women of Emma's family that kept the family together. Through the generations, there were more women than men in Emma's family and, therefore, the women learned to live without men. As she described the role of women in the family, she spoke with a sense of pride that men were not needed both in the family she grew up in and the family she created.

### **Strength of the Household**

Emma is the eldest of two daughters with her younger sister born 14 years later. "I was an only child for 14 years", Emma explained after beginning to discuss her role in the family. More importantly, the role of the women in the family were to provide immense strength, taking care of all needs before their own:

My mom was a very, very strong woman; so much to the fact that I don't think my father ever cashed his own check. He brought his check home – he had little side jobs that he did. You know, to make some extra money, or what have you. Like, he drove a cab or he worked in a garage on weekends, or something. His main job was at the post office. At one time, he worked for one of the automobile factories. But, I don't think he ever cashed one of his own checks. My father - he actually was my stepfather, but my mom married him when I was at the age of two. My uncle was strong. My aunt- the women were very strong in our family. My uncle and my aunt's husband were the only males that I saw. And my aunt was like my mom - she sort of ran the family. My uncle brought the money home and she sort of ran the family. That's where we started. My uncle was the only exception. To me, all three of them were the heads of my family. He was like the godfather of the family. Most of the girls in our family probably got our strength or our determination or knew that we had to be leaders from my mom and my aunt, you know.

And I think it followed through the generations. My girls and most of the girls [in the family] are very strong-willed. We are very strong-willed people in our family.

It was Emma's grandmother who left the family home to her three children. Emma discussed this saying, "we came up in a home where our entire – my grandmother died and she left the building to my mother, her brother, and her sister – family was raised in the family home on the south side of Chicago. So we came up like one big family. We had plenty of supervision, because if one wasn't home the other was."

Emma learned to be the head and leader of her family at a young age. She described being prepared to take the reigns of her own her family when she became pregnant in high school. It was difficult to become a parent at a young age and leave high school before graduating, but she Emma described having "to rely on family to survive". Being the head of her own household came easy to Emma after she watched her mother take care of her own family. It was during this major transition in Emma's life that she remembered how her mother taught her to be strong for her family and her community. Emma remembered how her mother took care of both family and community, "My mom, she was a community person. We had, like, four or five bakeries in our neighborhood. Every Saturday she would cook dinners and sell them to all the guys. They didn't have to go out and buy lunch. We would deliver them." Being strong and taking care of others meant so much more to Emma as she began to grow up and get into the workforce. Emma's "family always taught, and that I believe I practiced, is that you have to be strong, you have to believe in what you are doing. You have to care about people and you got to love".

It was this love, strength, and sense of community that carried young Emma into adolescence and adulthood, as she pushed through adversities and learned to work hard and achieve the best.

### **Always the Best**

Throughout her interview, Emma often described a feeling she got whenever times got tough or whenever she seemed to hit a roadblock or obstacle. She often discussed this underlying lesson her family taught her consciously and unconsciously. Emma's mother consciously let her know that obstacles were no reason to give up and her other family members unconsciously showed her that, if you work as hard as you can, there is no reason you should come in last. Particularly, things like race should never be an excuse. Emma described what she learned about always being the best:

You got to be better than anybody else in what you are doing. Not, you know, from a race standpoint – that as an African American, you can't just slide by; you have to be the best. So, you have to strive to be the best in whatever you are trying to do. And I think that was one of the pushing motivations that I used, I think. You have to strive to be the best in what you are doing. I guess, it all combines with love and caring and a strong will to get ahead, you know? Even though mine [childhood] was not that bad, I knew it could be better for [my children]. Cause times were changing then, like they are changing now.

Emma discussed this lesson she learned while she discussed her decision to leave high school early in order to work to take care of her family. These were the lessons she learned and admitted she only passed this same lesson on to her daughters. Having three daughters and one son, Emma realized she only knew how to be a woman, because that's what her mother taught her. Therefore, when the father of her children did not stay around to help raise her children, she

admitted she did not know how to raise her son. Therefore, she loved him the best she could, but still passed on the lessons of being strong and doing your best to her daughters. Emma reflected on this fact during her interview:

I thought men came into the world and knew what they were supposed to do. I didn't know you had to teach them; they just knew this. They know they are supposed to be men. They know they are supposed to work and take care of their families. I thought they knew that, but I knew that I didn't want my daughters to have to struggle like I struggled. So, I'm assuming my son knew.

In the case of raising her children, Emma described, "doing the best she could with what she had". To her, she was doing and being the best mother she could be as a single, working parent. Also, a part of what it meant to "be the best", Emma worked very hard at making sure she did not become complacent in her entry-level job. She engaged in formal and informal education in order to do the best at her job at every level. Living by this mantra and never being satisfied with staying at the same level helped Emma move up the ranks of her job from dishwasher to sitting on statewide committees throughout her life.

### **Educating Yourself to Move Up/Learning to Lead**

Emma smiled with pride as she began to answer the interview question about her job and education history. She seemed happy to hear this question and answered it with a clear timeline of her job history that led her through to retirement. Emma's emphasis on starting out without a high school education highlighted her desire to learn what she needed to and meet who she needed to in order to get the best on-the-job education to learn her position the best she could. Emma remembered how she got started as a labor union activist:

I started out as a dishwasher, would you believe? I started out working for the Department of Children and Family Services, here [in Chicago]; in a department home for the blind. I just went there simply as a temporary thing. I just wanted to try to get the bills paid off, and what have you. After being there a year or so, they asked me would – they were moving into a new building – I move with them and stay another six months. And I said, yeah, then after the next six months, I – it was necessary – I asked them if I could stay because [my children’s] father and I were separating. So, I needed a job. So, I came up there and I met a young lady there who was my supervisor and she came in at a very – I guess I was new and she was new also – and she was Caucasian. So, that first day that she came to work was about my third or fourth day. Everybody that was working in dietary - everybody called in sick. She was the supervisor and I was the food service worker. Everybody called in sick cause we were the two new girls. So, we looked at each other and said, ‘can we do this’, and I said, ‘we can do this’. So, we were determined not to let them see us sweat. We did it. We cooked the meal, because no cook showed up, no dietary – nobody showed up. So, we cook the meal. And, we fed everybody. We cleaned up. And we went home tired as hell, but we made it.

While telling this story, Emma smiled proudly at the effort she and her supervisor put forth to do what everyone thought they could not. She laughed in disbelief, as she thought back, at the fact that two women were able to pull off what a whole department did normally. She paused and laughed nervously as she discussed the separation between her and the father of her children. It seemed she was choosing her labels wisely as she mentioned “the father of her children” and her “Caucasian supervisor”.

Emma and her supervisor began to foster a close relationship until her supervisor “moved on” to work for the Department of Mental Health to be promoted to Supervisor II. Emma’s supervisor encouraged her to return to school to get her high school diploma. The bond the two women had afforded Emma the opportunity to move to the Department of Mental Health services with her supervisor to become Supervisor I. She remembered that bond and how it gave her the push she needed to finish school and get the education she felt she needed to move up at some point. Emma discussed this:

We formed a friendship there and bond. After I stayed with the home for the blind for a year or so, she moved on and decided to work for the Department of Mental Health; she moved up to a Supervisor II. In the meantime, before she moved, she got me involved in going back to school, because I was a high school dropout. She got me involved in going back to school and taking some courses in nutrition – therapeutic nutrition - and supervision, and sanitation. All of those kinds of things would give me an opportunity to move up in our area of work. She told me that if I would show her that I was really interested in [going to school] she would make sure that the state paid for my second semester. But, I have to prove to her in the first semester that I was going to work at it, and what have you. So, that I did and, after the first year or so, they picked up the tab and allowed me to go to school on state time. So, I got an hour or a couple off... and we formed that relationship.

It was this relationship and Emma’s dedication to learning that helped her go back to school and have it paid for by the state. With the book knowledge to move up and her innate ability to connect to other Emma soon started to develop the resources to advance in her career. During this time, she also learned the politics behind state jobs, including the unions that never

got much attention. Emma's involvement in the union taught her lessons about the rights of workers. It was at this time she started to use her involvement with the unions to help others who may not have felt they could help themselves. Emma attributed this need to help others to the lessons her aunt taught in community activism:

My aunt, who was my mother's sister, was the captain. She was always politically involved. We always had to go knock on doors to get people out on Election Day to vote, and all that. So, I think, the community thing, for me, came from that era in my life.

It was the women in Emma's life that taught her she had to take the initiative to learn what she needed to in order to move up. Further, there needed to be this burning desire to help others to always be connected to the communities she was a part of. Emma made it a point to lead and mentor others whenever she could, because this is what people did for her.

### **Leading/Mentoring Others**

There were many instances on Emma's jobs where she noticed racism and sexism, whether it was against her to someone else. One time in particular, she decided to get involved to speak for other workers, particularly African American women who were otherwise unable to fight these battles themselves. Emma discussed an incident that started her in the fight for other workers:

I had a real problem with the way some Caucasian guys talked to African American women, especially older women. So, I started taking up issues with that and fighting their battles, because some of them were not educated at all and they were housekeepers and dietary workers. They had nobody to fight for them, because there was a union there, but they didn't have any power. I mean we didn't have collective bargaining. So, I took up the issues for these women, people like them, and [also] myself.

Collective bargaining became the reason Emma got involved with the leadership of the unions. It was her connection with the community of workers, along with the education she had to be involved in leadership that made her successful from the beginning. Her strong-willed nature and feisty demeanor both serviced Emma well as she jumped into the fight:

So, as we were fighting to take collective bargaining for the state of Illinois employees, I was asked by some of those folks to get involved. At some point I called the city and stayed home on my shift for a weekend, because my supervisor, whom I had become close with – they determined some kind of way, they got together and decided to move her out of the area where we had been working together for four or five years. It was like a slap in the face to me the way they did her, you know. So, we got pretty angry and the whole shift called in sick. One of my girlfriends called me – one of the girls I had met - and she told me, “You better talk to the union president. They are going to get you because they know you organized this sick-in.” So, she brought the union president over and he signed me up as a union member. I also got my whole shift signed up, and eventually the whole dietary department. Which was something very unusual because, when you talked about union, you never heard people talk about people working in the kitchen having a union. So this was all new to us as well as to the labor movement. We didn’t have collective bargaining at that point - we were in the process of fighting for it. So, I became part of that fight to have collective bargaining for state employee.

Emma identified this connection to the community around her as one of the lessons she taught her children and grandchildren. In particular, she felt it prudent to teach her grandchildren to stand for something, particularly in this age where “people do not stand for things anymore”. One particular granddaughter took this lesson to heart, becoming educated in social services fields

in order to service her communities as Emma did. Emma gleamed with pride as she discussed her uncanny connection to her granddaughter, “They say that she’s a lot like me, but I try not to say anything so they don’t get jealous of her. She’s my favorite. We are born under the same sign and everything.” Part of Emma’s pride in her “favorite” granddaughter is her ability to “speak up for others” and “to fight for what’s right no matter what it takes”.

Emma gave her children and grandchildren a strong sense of pride in themselves and their community and taught them how to fight, using their education as a guide, for the rights of others. It was Emma’s community of women, starting with her grandmother, mother, and aunt, who taught her this lesson. Also, throughout her life, women took care of her when she was unsure how she would take care of herself.

### **Community of Women**

When Emma discussed some of the obstacles she faced, she highlighted times where she was discriminated against because of her race and her gender. She discussed the transition from oppression based solely on her race to professional barriers put in her way because of both her race and her gender:

In my younger years, it was just basically race. As I got older and got into the workforce I could see both. You know, because there were not very many women leadership roles. In my unit, where I basically worked, there were very few blacks. And, most of the time, in the positions I worked I was the only black and the only female. So, usually, I wore a couple of hats and represented a couple of communities.

Before Emma got into these leadership positions, though, she found it hard to move up because of the barriers African American women had in the workplace. She noticed this when her supervisor, whom she had become close with, moved up to a supervisor position with the

Department of Mental Health. Emma discussed an incident where she noticed some barriers to her moving up:

She [supervisor] then left that department and they didn't promote me. That's when I saw a little racism there too. They refused to promote me. But, where she went, to the Department of Mental Health, she was like a head supervisor there. And she called and asked me would I take the job and work under her as a Supervisor I, cause I crossed all of the qualification and I was qualified to be a Super I; she was a II. And it took me some while, because that meant that I would have to commute two hours going to work and two hours coming back. I didn't drive, so it was all public transportation. So, it took me a while and some thinking about it.

There might have been some barriers to getting promoted, but Emma noticed that her supervisor was a part of the community of women that were helping her to succeed and be the best at what she did. Her supervisor's willingness to help her came from the bond they shared early on as they worked together. Further, Emma showed this supervisor she was willing to work hard by going back to school, working full time, and raising her children at the same time.

Emma also realized the size of the community she was connected to once she had to make the decision whether or not she could commute two hours (one way) to work. She discussed the generosity of one of the older women she worked with:

Where I knew that you couldn't put people in a class is when I got the offer. I think I may have been the only African American - maybe two others worked in the dietary department where I worked. To see all of the rest of them so excited about me getting this promotion. Even one of the much older ladies gave me a nice warm fur coat, so that when I had to stand out on the corners [for the bus] I wouldn't be cold. They basically

supported me and wanted the best for me. They knew I was raising my kids by my self.

So, I did take that job, and I met a lot of friends out there.

This community of women helped her get through the tough transition to the new job. Her connection with her supervisor continued to be a thread as Emma spoke in awe of their bond. She discussed the fact that they had a bond, even though they were different races; it was their work ethic and commitment to serve others that connected them. That's why it hurt so much when this supervisor was moved to a different area after they worked together for the Department of Mental Health for five years. Emma spoke of this reassignment as a way to break up the bond they had as colleagues, and as women.

After receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award recently, Emma was asked about this connection to women and being involved in the community came from. She repeated her answer for me:

I just got an award – a lifetime achievement award - and they did a video of me. They asked me, where did I think all this came from – needing to be involved in the community and what have you. I went back to my mom, my aunt, and my uncle, who I talk about all the time.

She went on to discuss how she learned to put her all into things and into people. Emma had plenty of people who poured into her and she felt it was only right to pour into others. This was also a lesson she learned through her connection to her Faith.

### **Grace of God**

Emma described herself, during the interview, as “non-denominational” and she discussed an immense connection to God. She identified her mother as Pentecostal, her family as Baptist, and reminded me that she was educated in a Catholic system. Emma always felt the

presence of God in her life, which helped her get through difficult times and reminded her to look for the positive in situations and in people. She described this faith in detail:

[Non-denominations is] still Christian based. I go to a Christian worship temple. We are still connected with the Unity. I belong to a church called Christ Temple. But, for a while after I got married the first thing I did was stop going to church. I mean, I had to be at mass at 8AM Sunday morning. I had to leave the Catholic Church and then go to the church where my mom was. Then I left that church and went to the church where the rest of my family was. So, sometimes on Sunday mornings, I'd start at 8 o'clock Sunday morning and didn't get home until 10 o'clock at night; I had been to three different churches. So, for a long time I didn't – after I got married I just stopped going to any church and didn't start back until I had my kids and I realized that, no matter what my struggle was, if I didn't get them involved in some kind of church or give them the foundation my family gave me, they wouldn't know where to go when trouble hit.

Many of the lessons Emma identified had a foundation in the grace God has for His people and the ways she learned to “live for others, as Christ did”. This “foundation in Christ” influenced Emma to live a life of political activism. She is still a “retired political activist”, with a long history of community involvement.

### **Political Involvement/Activism**

Throughout her interview, Emma remembered many stories from her life of political and community activism. She detailed her journey from being recruited to be a union rep after she staged a sit-in in protest to her supervisor being moved to a different location to the time she spent in South Africa helping many Black citizens in their first election to continuing to being involved in the political scene to help the first Black major of Chicago into office, and finally, to

serving on the Black United Fund, helping agencies in the community service more and more people in need. Her stories were fascinating and she told them with such humility, as if the thing she did were nothing at all. Emma described these things as her calling and as something she can't just point down.

Early on in our interview, Emma made it clear what her personal opinion about class is. She spoke passionately about many of the concerns she has even now with the re-election of President Barack Obama:

It seems like, to me, even the issues *they* are defensive about, like taxing the rich. I don't understand the big issue with taxing the rich. They make more money than anybody! It's a class issue. I also think it's a race issue. This is just my personal opinion. I think that all of this is all about the 2012 election coming up. I think it's all about whether President Obama - If they bust the union, then a lot of the foot work – We can organize people and then do a lot. That's the big part, that's just my personal opinion.

At times, Emma could not finish her sentence for fear of sounding too passionate and too one-sided. It was clear, though, whose side she was on – the side of the people who needed help most. For her, it was not about supporting a President who is Black, though that was a bonus, it was about supporting someone who takes on the issues of those who need it most. That was what kept her moving forward to move up the ranks of the labor unions. Emma detailed this journey through the ranks of the labor unions:

They saw my experiences there and I actually stayed there and I actually became president of that local union there. Well, first I went through chain of command, I was the steward – the chief steward – and then I became president of the local union there. And, basically, from there I just moved up through the ranks of our union. Eventually, I ran for

president of our statewide organization on that. And then some years later, I ran for - we changed to - the convention voted to change the structure of our union. And, they decided that we should have a president and a director, but we should just have one president/director, which meant - I could have fought it, but it didn't make sense. They offered me the associate director job. I made the switch and that's how I got involved. I got to be the associate director of our council there. But, in the meanwhile, I did - I was doing a whole lot of other things like, - I was really involved in the Coalition of Black Trade. I went to the second convention where black trade unions as - that's in 1972. It was the second convention for black unionists to come together with trade unionists; we had come together to find out that we had different issues than trade unions as a whole. And how could we address these issues and how could we become part of leadership in our own union and how to run for office and how to do public speaking and all of that. So, I went - In fact, I don't think I've missed three conventions of the Coalition of Black Trade Unions since 1972 (and all three of those I was in the hospital). I now serve on the national defensive board of the Coalition of Black Trade Unions. I think I've been on it for maybe 10 years.

The lesson of being the best at whatever you choose to do can be seen in Emma's advancement in her job with both the Department of Children and Family Services and the Department of Mental Health. Simultaneously, she moved through the ranks of the labor unions on the local, state, and national levels.

And then, in the process of being active in that and in - and in my union I also was involved in the Chicago federation of labor. I now serve as the first vice president of that organization. And in the process, I really got interested in - I was introduced to some

people who were putting together a core - an organization called the black united front of Illinois. And, they were in the beginning and in order to raise money – the idea was to raise money in our own neighborhoods to back into our own neighborhoods. And, how we did that is we were able to, um – I got involved when we were trying to get payroll deductions for state employees where they could deduct money for the Black United Front, just like you do for United Way or other charities out of their paycheck. And then they were just beginning, so by me having representing 70,000 workers across the state, I was able to go out with them and get - I guess we had to get 15,000 signatures on a petition before they could even be included. And, so, I don't remember how long it took us to get those signatures, but I've been with them since 1985, I think. I serve on their board of directors.

Much of her work was for the underserved, but she mainly felt a responsibility to Blacks, women, and the poor. When Emma got the opportunity to go to South Africa to help organize the first election after Apartheid, she jumped at the chance. She began to daydream out loud of that experience:

It was like, you know, when you say you feel like you are at home. The minute I hit ground, I felt like I was at home. You know, there was just something about it; to see African people so determined to do this and to stand in line for hours to vote. To see them so proud, because they were standing in line and nobody White could walk up in front of them and get in front of them or make them move back. For us being there they were so happy to see us as observers. I was - I had a tag team from Britain. It was three of us on my team. There were 120 of us that were from labor. We were spread out all over the place. I ended up in Johannesburg where I did some training. Then I ended up in, um,

hmm – don't let me forget, it will come to me – it was where Nelson Mandela was in prison at. Right off of Robin's Island...

Emma later remembered that she was in Cape Town. She went on, getting nostalgic about her time in Cape Town.

I ended up there and it was really interesting because the majority of the people that lived in the area I was in were considered colored. Nelson actually lost the election there and what I found out while I was there is that it was because most of those people that were fair skinned or had light eyes or, you know, who were not Black that were considered colored were afraid that if Nelson Mandela won that their status would change. Because, not that they had so much, they were able to work at the front desks of hotels and some of the establishments. They may have had electricity or something and they had one room too. Right, you know. And so they were afraid to lose that status. And, so a lot of them didn't vote for him, because of that.

As she spoke of the reality she remembered, Emma sounded as if she was still in disbelief of the notion of having to protect the right to have electricity because, someone of darker skin did not have that right. So, as a lighter-skinned person, it was not about electing the man who should be in office, but about protecting the higher status you might have been given.

The lessons Emma learned while in South Africa were things she knew she had to pass on to her children and grandchildren. Once she got home, she established a ritual she went on to perform with all her grandchildren. She described with pride, "When I came home I knew I wanted to teach my family about the significance of the South African election. I brought back ballots and stuff. Each one of my grandchildren - once they turned 16 - received one." Along with memorabilia from the first post-Apartheid South African election, Emma returned with

stories that impacted her family more than she realized. I asked Emma to recount a story I heard from her granddaughter, Cora, during my interview with her. When I asked about this story, Emma raised her eyes in disbelief and smiled silently. She lowered her eyes and said, “I can’t believe she [Cora] remembered that.” Emma humbly re-told the story her granddaughter told me:

I think it had to be a spiritual connection in a sense. Right, you know, because she, um, she was Jewish and she just spoke Yiddish. Her son – I think she only had one son – had put her into a mental institution. She was not crazy. I guess he just didn’t put her in a nursing home. I don’t know what – And she just, and nobody dealt with her, because she just, sort of, screamed a lot and she wouldn’t eat anything we brought her and, um, I was the supervisor over the area and I would go and sit with her, you know, sometimes. And, I found out – I realized that she was Jewish because I didn’t know what she was speaking at first. I realized that she was Jewish and so I started to get as much Kosher stuff as I could. You know, I mean – We didn’t have – when you are working for the state, you didn’t have a lot. When you are far from home – I found out she liked – I would give her tomatoes and she liked tomatoes, wheat bread. My mother, through her life, would work for Jewish families all through her life, so she would tell me things that they liked, you know, because that’s what she did for a living. She took care of Jewish families. And, uh, so, we made a connection, because when I found out she was Jewish and I found out what kinds of things she liked to eat – even if I couldn’t get it from the hospital, I would pick up some stuff from home and I would bring it to her. So, we had – we built a bond, right, and I know at, um, one point I had missed for a couple of days and I was asking where she was. Well, they had taken her to the hospital – I don’t know why for the life of me why they would give an 80-year-old woman a hysterectomy, but anyway. And, they –

I said, oh my goodness – so they came and asked me one day would I go to the hospital to see her, because they couldn't get her to do anything. Somebody had told them that I was the only one that could get her to eat and I was the only one that sort of understood her. I don't know where that came from, how I could understand what she was saying to me, but it happened, so I went to the hospital and she was just giving them and I looked at her and either she made a motion, anyway, she made me know that she was upset because she didn't have her glasses. And, so once I was able to determine where her glasses were and make sure they got them to her, she was all right! And, then they said she wasn't eating. So, then I told them, 'Well, you don't have everything she needs, but if you bring her some tomatoes and if you bring her some wheat bread, you know, and different stuff...' And then she started eating. Now, that had to – I don't know how that happened, you know. It just happened.

**Renée Brooks: I am most like my mother**

Renée Brooks is a 49-year-old mother of two adult children. She works in upper management at a major interstate transportation company. Her Miami condo was filled with pictures of her mother, daughters, and herself; she often pointed to various pictures throughout our interview while she spoke about her mother or daughters. Her walls were lined by the degrees her daughters received over the years. During the interview, Renée spoke with a smile on her face, even as she spoke about difficult experiences she had as a result of being a minority in a high-ranking job.

Renée Brooks was born in 1962 and raised in Chicago, IL. She described herself, first, as caring and went on to say, "I am an African-American woman with strong spiritual values". These "three biggest" identifiers meant so much to Renée, as she expanded on her experience

during the interview. It became clear she brought this identity to each experience that stood out to her throughout her lifetime. Even as a young child, she remembered an experience that quickly made her aware of her race and gender in school:

It was very, very, very early in my early childhood education. I would say at probably fourth or fifth grade and I can remember them posing questions in a classroom: What do you want to be? You had the typical fireman or policeman and I remember being really overwhelmed or being interested in medicine and law as a little kid. I remember saying I wanted to be a neurosurgeon and my teacher laughed. She said ‘really?’ and she said, ‘you know what that is?’ I said, ‘Yes, it is a brain surgeon,’ and she said, ‘You will never be a brain surgeon.’ And I mean, I kind of did not believe it because my mama always told us we could be whatever we wanted to be, but when I kind of thought back on that later, and you know I would hear people say what they wanted to do. I began to wonder, who am I? That had a profound, lasting effect. First of all, at my age, who knew what a neurosurgeon was and who was a teacher to tell an African-American kid what they could not be.

This experience brought up issues of race and access to certain professions for Renée in her formative years. She recognized this as one of the first experiences she remembers that made her aware of herself. As an adult, Renée is still constantly faced with situations that make her evaluate who she is, but more so in terms of her role within the family among her mother and siblings. She discussed this role during the interview:

I’m a leader. It’s really weird, because I’m the youngest, but I probably act in the capacity of the oldest. In other words, when things happen, I’m the decision maker, when folks’ backs are against the wall, I’m the rescuer, for lack of a better word.

Though these characteristics have become strengths in Renée's life, she discussed how conflicting it has been to be the youngest in the family, but to also be the responsible one that had to take care of everyone else. She discussed this as "necessary, because nobody else would fill the role" and something she felt she learned from her mother.

Renée credited her mother, Emma Nelson, for teaching her the right thing to do and the right way to be, even if others did not act the way they should. She is very clear about being "most similar to my mother – beyond a shadow of a doubt. That's not even questionable" and identifies her mother as "one of those ones I would do anything in the world for". Overall, Renée described her mother as "so phenomenal – she is – I think she is WOW!" Renée continued by discussing how many of her own strengths came simply from watching her mother:

[The role of the leader in the family] that came from my mom! Watching my mom make certain decisions even though we came from very humble beginnings, my mom decided that we would not be defined by the amount of money that we made. Everything that I did with my children I did not do anything new – because everything that she did, it appeared to have worked, you know, for her. I think having done that I kind of immolated her, for a lack of a better word, and my sisters kind of took more of a passive, you know, approach. I guess you can see it in our child bearing. You can see – you can see the strength and where she was. I think my mother is such a phenomenal woman and the more that I watched her, I wanted to be like her when I grew up.

Watching her mother have such success in her profession and as a single mother had a profound effect on the woman Renée wanted to be in her lifetime. Her mother's life was such a powerful example to her because of mother's selflessness, which taught Renée that the only thing that matters is how you touch the lives of others. She explained this further:

She is such a powerful woman and she planted such a seed in us saying it has nothing to do with education, it has nothing to do – when you see her come as a lady without, without even a elementary school education and touch the lives that she touched. I knew then it had nothing to do with a degree. Nothing.

One of the major relationships throughout her entire life, Renée's connection her mother did not change when she moved from Chicago to Virginia, back to Chicago, and then to Miami as a result of her job. She discussed this connection:

My mom and I spend a lot of time together. I mean at least two or three vacations a year. Wherever I am, even when the girls were coming up, she never missed a year that she did not spend a whole week with us or you know, my kids went home every summer. She would see them every summer. They went home with my ex every summer.

This connection with her mother allowed her the strength to make it throughout various obstacles, including being a single mother herself. Also, she felt she could handle much of the stress she continued to receive on her job because of the undying support her mother gave her. For both Renée and her mother, she identified spirituality as a connection to something greater that could help in times of trouble.

### **Foundation Based on Spirituality**

Renée identified spirituality as something that was always important to her family, particularly to the women of her family, for generations. The cultural tradition of a strong faith was prominent for both her mother and grandmother, even though they both observed different denominations. Renée discussed this strong connection to spirituality and religion:

My grandmother was, of course, the great old sanctified [church], but my mom actually got involved with one of the first non-denominational churches. That was kind of our

introduction. It did not have a name – it did not have a Pentecostal, it did not have “Sanctified” – it just had a church with universal thinking. It taught positive thinking and survival skills, so that is kind of how my family – my sisters and I – got that foundation. Spirituality, or some connection to God, became an important cultural value with the women in Renée family that continues to be passed down. Renée identified her connection to God as something she continues to instill in her adult children, as they go through various hardships.

Throughout her interview, Renée would often sit, staring in the distance in awe as she remembered various trials she endured. When I asked her how she thought she made it to this point in her life, she answered:

I still think a lot of it is broken down from that spiritual foundation. That’s where it starts. When I come home – this is the honest to God truth – I sit here on my balcony and say, ‘God I do not deserve... how did I get here?’ I don’t even know how I got here. I tell people here is the little girl from the projects in Chicago. Who would have thought her kids would all have college educations, because that was not even on the books for us. This connection to God was so much more than a religion for Renée, because she felt it was God who got her to this point in her life, when it often seemed as though she would not be able to make it through some of the experiences she had. In particular, some of the stress she endured on her job and people, like her elementary school teacher, who did not believe she would be able to reach her goals. The connection between the lessons she learned watching her mother and the strong spiritual foundation from God allowed Renée the ability to work through things and reach goals on her own. Doing things on her own was a lesson she identified early on in her life.

## **Be the Very Best**

Of all the lessons her mother taught her, Renée internalized the dependence on self that her mother instilled in her. She spoke about how her mother often told her it was important to take care of herself. Renée remembered her mother's lessons:

...Just different things that she instilled in me from as young as I can remember. 'I don't care how broke you are, you don't have to look broke. I don't care if you don't have a dollar in your pocket, you have to have your shoes shined.' Just outwardly things, so that is kind of how I lived my life and how I raised my kids.

Renée discussed how this lesson really allowed her to become reliant on herself for the things she and her children needed. It was about much more than money, but more so about how you carry yourself that will give you the confidence to get what you need out of life. This reliance on herself really affected Renée's relationships with her siblings, as she made the decision to isolate herself from family events because of the conflicts that inevitably occurred when they were together. She discussed how this decision came about:

I made a decision many, many years ago to limit those because it was very hard for me. I always came away feeling I was beat up, so I guess, I don't know. I guess in my kids' early teens I stopped going home for holidays – I stopped. I think when my grandmother died two years ago, I think it was the first time in years that we were all in the same place at the same time in probably about 10 years. They get together all the time, I don't.

While Renée discussed this decision it seemed to be a difficult decision she came to, because her mother and grandmother always discussed the importance of family. As the leader, who did not rely on others, Renée came to feel singled out by her siblings because of what she describes as the thought that she thought she was better than them. I asked Renée what it was like to have

such a strong role, influenced by the role of her mother, but to be judged by her siblings. She replied:

Beat up – drained. You have to justify why you did what you did. You have to watch what you say so nobody is offended and I just chose not to do it. It is just too much, Carla. I watch what it does to my mother and that is probably the hardest piece, you know we fight and I am watching her and she is stressing and I say this is crazy. I just think many years ago - maybe 10-12 years ago - I stopped doing the family dinners and I would just take them [mother and children] someplace after Christmas. I would take her to some island and we would just meet her and my aunt and just us. Or I would bring her here with the kids. She would come where I was with the girls, but it was too much for me that whole family thing.

This conflict influenced Renée to start to isolate herself from the family, even though she wanted to be close to her mother. The lessons her mother taught her, which was to strive towards her goals and continue to look like you have it all together, really affected Renée relationship with her siblings, because they felt she was actually taking that lesson and actually acting like she was better than them. Renée continued to explain how this affected her relationship with her sisters:

I perceive it – it's my own interpretation and in words – they have perceptions that me and my children were better. I didn't think that. I wanted better. So, many, many years of going through that whole, "You all think you're better than people" and struggling with it and finally deciding I really didn't care what they thought.

It was clear while Renée spoke about effects of this life lesson that she was hurt by having to think this way about how her siblings treated her. This was clearly the difficult part of not allowing others to dictate how far she got in life. Her voice became quiet as she spoke about her

relationship with her sisters. It clear she had to reconcile this within herself in order to follow her mother's lead and do what was best for her and her children. Along with this decision to do what was best, Renée internalized many of her mother's experiences in the labor force as education for her own career journey.

### **Education From Journey**

When I asked Renée to expand on her education, whether formal or informal, through out her lifetime, she focused on the education she received by witnessing her mother's career in the labor force. She became involved with her mother's work, but also took many jewels about how she might be able to advance in her own career. Renée explained this:

My mom says my real education came from her own career of labor. I spent a lot of time with her when she went to conventions I went – actually my gift when I graduated from high school was my first trip to L.A. I used to write her speeches for her because she just, she did not have that level of education, and so, when you are writing for somebody or you have to understand what you are writing about or you are having to ask questions about what they are doing. When you are watching your mother go to South Africa to patrol the polls when Mandela is running, that's the physical education. The education is in the work place that, when you saw the varying degrees of, I don't know, discrimination for a lack of a better word. All of that was probably a bigger education for me than anything. They don't think they got no degrees and understanding how to deal with these fools in the work place.

Renée's education came through witnessing her mother's work and by being on the job working through personal responsibilities as a mother, and the responsibilities of being a black woman. Her first job as a ticket cashier mirrored her mother's first job as a food service worker. It was in

the journey from cashier to administration that she learned what it was like to be a single black woman and mother of two among others who often did not want her to succeed. Renée described this education further:

You think you have it because you understand what a business proposal is or what a cost analysis is and then you go in the real world and find out that they really don't give a darn about that; they have hidden agendas. So my education really came in trying to unveil the hidden agendas and how do I navigate the system through these hidden agendas and find out what is real. To be bold enough to say what I wanted but smart enough to stay, you know, in the safe zone. So that was what the real education was about. I guess I would say the last 23 years on this railroad.

For over two decades, Renée struggled to integrate all of herself into her work, because she was often seen as just a black woman, which came with various obstacles. She talked during the interview about how difficult this was at times. The one thing she could come up with, as the learning process that helped her most through this, was to witness her mother's journey. She said, "When you see your mother do it, you just can't quit". Through the racism and sexism Renée encountered, she often felt she did not have the choice to quit. Not being able to quit made success her only option.

### **No Right to Quit**

Renée often spoke about the responsibility she had to keep going and never quit. She often felt this sense of responsibility, not only because of her mother's influence, but also because of her ancestors. She explained:

I mean your ancestors – for me, when I think about the blood, sweat and tears on our backs, I don't have a right to quit. You know I just have a right to position my children so

they don't have to do it – so I thought, to have to push as hard as I did to get the education, which I thought would make a difference and then I found out you can educate the hell out of it and they are still going to go through [hard times/discrimination]. But they are positioned or armed where people cannot deny them easily because they have preparation behind them. Where we are a generation that kind of got our education through the ranks. You had one job and that was it. You progressed through the company...well, our children and you all are positioned to say that I don't like what is going on and you could go some place else. We really did not have those options. Financially, progressively, whatever it was a great pace for me to have – the benefits were great. My kids had rail privileges. I mean it was a good fit and I think it was worth the abuse, because it was certainly abuse. That was the truth.

The sense of responsibility Renée felt in her position was connected to her role as a mother, but also as a daughter, granddaughter, niece, etc. She felt she had to stick it out to contribute to the legacy that was laid out for her and that she could leave for her children. Renée's voice was serious as she spoke about this responsibility, as she began to remember the types of things she had to endure through her various positions with the railroad. She began to talk about how she endured:

So I will stay on the railroads, dude – so I learned comebacks and defensives and I knew then that the only way that I would prove them wrong was be the very best at what I did. So I spent my career saying if they gave it to me, I don't want to do it as a title, that is okay if they gave it to me as a token, but when I finish I was going to represent us well as a race and as a woman.

Not only did she have a responsibility to stick with it through discrimination as a black women, she also felt it was important to pass on the same lessons her mother taught her through her own work: be the best you can be no matter what the position. This was the lesson of her generation, along with sticking with a company and moving up through the ranks through dedication. For her daughters' generation, though, the lesson would be something very different than what Renée learned from her mother. This lesson was to influence the lives of others by who you are and how you do your job. As Renée reflected on this, she connected her own lessons to her daughters:

I think for me, for my daughters, every time you think about most of what I did – it was not about, it was about Faith and Cora because most of back then I did not understand what the future held. I did not know that my children would go and get degrees and I am amazed by their Masters degrees. My whole thing was to make this railroad different and if, or when, they came out there they would not have to go through what I went through on this railroad. That has been my biggest fight. Not just my children, but my co-workers' children. And I have hired many of my friends' kids and whatever and probably my child Cora will probably end up working on the railroad somewhere – did not have to face what we went through. So they did not have to be considered less than because they were women. So that is what it has been all about for me.

This sense of responsibility for the next generation propelled Renée beyond entry-level roles into managerial roles in order to continue working for the best. There were often times, though, when Renée had to decide whether or not she would fight for what was right. She quickly learned that she would either be known for staying quiet or speaking up for herself. She discussed this choice further:

My position even now, I just said it the other day, they can fire me but they will not change my integrity or my work ethic. They can fire me but I will not change what I believe or what I think is right. They can certainly have a right to say, ‘We are going in a different direction,’ and I am okay with that, but I will not do unethical things to hold a job. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

The lesson never to quit came with ethical guidelines for Renée, as she had to assert herself as someone that would not change her moral standards to keep a job. Though she would never quit, she would stand by the values she was taught. Renée described this as something she was taught through the awareness of what her ancestors endured:

And they had my people with whips going across their backs picking cotton. Every time I wanted to quit and walk away, I swear that is what was going through my mind is, *they took worse than this so that you can be here*. My goal with this railroad – I am going to break this glass ceiling. I promise you when I leave this railroad, I will be the highest-ranking African American/black woman on this railroad.

The thought process behind enduring racism and sexism in order to advance in her career was that her ancestors before her went through much worse because of their identity as black people, or as women. As Renée discussed this, it seemed as if she thought she did not have the right to complain about the discrimination she endured, even though it was a daily struggle for her throughout her career. Thinking about her ancestors, her grandmother, and her mother, gave her the strength to go to work daily, keep fighting for what she believed in, and keep advancing. She continued to reflect on her process of advancing despite discrimination:

I only got two tiers to go and I have a funny feeling that I am going to hit one of them in about a year. We have no African American females in roles of superintendents or higher

throughout this company. However, we have been doing the work behind the scenes for over the last 20 years.

Throughout the interview, Renée was comfortable discussing how she persevered through her job for the past two decades. She spoke about her advancement from cashier to administration as if it was the only choice she had. Renée also discussed discrimination as part of her daily experience, as part of her life. She spoke about always knowing she was a black woman and a single mother every time she entered a room to interview for a new position. It was this constant confrontation with her identity that often reminded her of her status with others.

### **I Knew I Was a Minority**

Throughout her interview, Renée often alluded to the racism and sexism she experienced, even as a child in Chicago. She talked about disbelief at the differences between the early experiences of black children to white children, even in school when talking about what they wanted to be. While Renée discussed this experience, she situated her teacher's through processes within the context of the Civil Rights Movement that was going on in the United States at the time. She discussed how this influenced her teacher's view of her:

She clearly identified why. It wasn't that she said that, 'as a black, that is almost impossible, because do you know how long you would have to go to school?' Did you know – I mean she clearly identified, not that I was not smart enough or that I was not... she made it very, very painfully clear that it had everything to do with where we were in the Civil Rights Movement – that is not realistic, because that is just not going to happen.

During our interview, Renée had various times where she sat in silence reflecting on the meaning of certain experiences she had. In this instance she sat silently as she thought about the magnitude of how this experience, set within the time period of the Civil Rights Movement,

began to dictate the types of goals she could have and the things she could do in life. Though she would still be able to describe herself as a successful person, it was after more struggle than she felt prepared for. The things she did enjoy were things she was unable to do for one reason or another. Another example of this was with her affinity for sports and the messages she received about what she could or could not do simply because of her gender. Renée remembered this struggle that started early on:

I was a tomboy, for lack of a better word. I liked sports— I like b-ball, baseball and I remember folks would be like, ‘Well, you can’t do that because that’s a boy’s sport. Or you can’t do that because that’s for boys.’ I think from the time that I played league ball – in my early, early teens – I played every sport. I liked sports. ‘You can’t do that because you are not a boy – you can’t do that’. But when they started evolving with female teams – then it was okay.

By the time it became “allowed” for Renée to be involved in the sports she liked, she had already received the message that she could not do the same things men could do, because of her gender. More specifically, the things she liked were off-limits simply because of who she was. These two stories combine to show the things Renée learned she could not do because of her identity as a black woman. These scripts became part of her meaning-making process from an early age and began to dictate what Renée believed she could do.

Even in her profession Renée learned quickly the positions she would comfortably occupy and those she would have to fight for. As an adult, Renée remembered having to connect the lessons she learned as a child and teenager to what she was beginning to experience as an adult. She remembered connecting the two:

Are we not in these positions because we were told that we couldn't be or were we not prepared? Or are we not allowed to be in these positions? And then the reality check came in when I went to the railroads. That was a reality check when I got in – a wake up call.

This wake up call came in the form of blatant racism and sexism, especially when Renée attempted to get recognition for her abilities by advancing through the ranks. She discussed a time where she started to feel the pushback while she tried to advance:

One of the things that I remember specifically – and I guess this was in the early 90s – it had to be in the early 90s – I was working in a clerical position that was kind of like the assistant to the supervisor of operations, and this is the guy that makes the railroad happen; I mean, he makes it happen. And I thought, *'Oh My God, I can do this!'* And I remember I did all of the import [area of transport], and I remember there was a vacancy and I was like, *'Oh My God, this I my shot'*. I remember applying for the position and everybody was getting interviews and they never called and I thought, *'WOW!'* And I went to who I called my 'railroad god-father' and said, 'They are not even interviewing me.' And he said, 'Why?' And he is an Italian guy, and sent to them and questioned why they were not interviewing me and they gave him a song and dance. To make a long story short, they ended up granting me an interview that I thought was just the proverbial... Well, he took two days and he prepared me for that interview. He talked about what to stay away from and blah, blah, blah. We went through that and they interviewed me and I felt pretty good about it. They ended up offering me the position and I was really excited. Really excited, Carla, for about one day...for about one day...

In this particular instance, Renée thought it prudent to identify that an Italian, White man had to speak up for her and get her the interview in order to showcase what she already knew to be true: that she was qualified to do the job, because she had already done it for lesser recognition with her boss. Renée also conveyed the short-lived excitement and feeling of accomplishment she felt at the notion of getting a job “they thought she couldn’t do in the first place”. Renée continued her story by discussing what it was that made her excitement short-lived:

So I get there on the first day and that is now my very first management position, in 1990-91. I get there and the guy that was training me was, in every sense of the word, a “good ole’ white boy”... “good ole’ white boy”. I sit down beside him and he spoke [hello] and for 28 days that is all he ever said. He would not lift a hand to show me anything or explain what he was doing. I did not understand his line of training. He literally just sat me next to him. I have two very good friends that were conductors and train conductors and I remember calling them and saying, ‘I don’t know what this dude is doing. He is not even teaching me what he is doing.’ They told me, ‘Wait until he leaves at 3 o’clock every day and copy what he did.’ And I did. And those guys would meet up with me at 4 o’clock and explain everything that he did and why. So, I knew then that they [those who hired Renée] did not intend for me to succeed at this job, but they had to give it to me. So, day number 28 in the railroad... You have 30 days to qualify and you are either in or out – it was not a job that you *act* like you know; either you know it or you don’t. So day number 28, this dude marks off sick. He calls in sick! So the department head said, ‘Well you have been here 28 days, so you should be able to do it.’ Little did he know, I did. But they did not know because this guy was not teaching me anything. So they figure, ‘Alright he marked off sick, we can get rid of her today.’ The

joke was on them because we “railroaded” that day like we have never done. It was unbelievable!

This story exemplified Renée’s experiences as she attempted to advance in a career that was mainly White male-dominated. Even though they could not legally deny her the ability to interview for the position, the administrators attempted to create an environment where she was not prepared to complete the job and, therefore, seem incompetent. Part of what made Renée able to persevere through this seemingly impossible situation were the lessons her mother taught her about having the only resources she needed within herself to be successful at her job. Within her, Renée had the ability to reach out to other whom she trusted and learn from them. Also, within her was the ability to learn quickly and thoroughly the job at hand.

In retrospect, Renée thought about the treatment she received and identified the fact that “she knew she was a minority” and, at that point, it didn’t matter whether it was about her race or about her gender. She reflected on these thoughts in the moment:

They came back and said, ‘Wow, we had a 100% day,’ and I said, ‘Thank you.’ Then after that I was like, ‘*Oh my God,*’ then I gained creditability. I am not sure whether my obstacles were greater as a woman or because I was black. I think they were equally – I think I was punished equally for them. But what I later learned in that management position that I was so excited about was, I was getting paid \$18,000 less than the man that I was sitting next to. Then I knew I was a minority.

This awareness of what it was like to be both black and a woman on the railroad came from blaringly obvious messages from others about who they thought she was and the positions she should play. Renée began to discuss her struggles to remain true to herself while others attempted to use her gender and her race to create an impossible work environment for her.

Through it all, though, Renée remained clear that she would not compromise her self or the values she learned throughout her life to make her work life easier to handle.

### **No Compromise**

Many times Renée questioned why she had to endure such discrimination based simply on her identity. Her professional world was filled with White males who “were intimidated by [her] sheer presence” and who made it their business to make her environment so hostile that she would leave. Instead of stooping to their level, Renée remained herself and often reminded herself of the lessons her mother taught her. There were times where it was hard to remember these lessons. Renée discussed a few of these instances:

Even in that same position [first manager position] I can remember a guy saying to me that he did not even know why I was out on this railroad because you need to be at home baking bread or making babies.

While telling this story, Renée shook her head in disbelief. As she remembered, Renée identified that she was “still in disbelief at her experience just because she looked different and had different part than them”. This story reminded her of another that was even more unbelievable than the first: “I mean I have had people tell me they don’t care how many railroads I can get qualified on, unless I can give a good blow job, I would never progress.” Still in disbelief as she remembered these experiences, Renée reflected on what that was like for her:

So when you go into those positions, you learn very quickly either you are going to cry a lot or you are going to learn to fight. I made a choice that I was not going to physically fight them, but I am going to mentally suck them...and that is what I did! I would say I struck back, like when they would say I should be back home making babies, I would

say, 'I have a problem. I had a hysterectomy and I can not have any kids and I don't know how to fucking bake.'

Renée transitioned her emotional struggle between hurt and anger into a way to cope and emotionally fight back against the oppression she felt. She remembered often feeling as if “things were acceptable on a male level on a railroad or a white level that would never be acceptable coming from [her].” As a black woman, Renée often felt her only option was to do things “better than good” and to mentally fight back. Having to mentally fight back was more exhausting than being able to physically fight back, because Renée always had to think a step ahead of those betting against her. Those who bet against her attempted to scare her away from jobs by asking about her children or about her husband. Renée remembered one of these instances:

When you are in interviews - I have made myself aware of what they can say and what they can do because I knew that they would look for ways not to give me positions and Lord knows, but he strategically places people. They stuck me in interviews like, ‘Well, when we give you this job, who is going to take care of your kids?’ And I would have to say, ‘Well, first of all, that is an illegal question and my kids are not applying for a job!’

Renée began to think back and discuss the way these questions made her feel. She expressed surprise at how openly sexist many of the questions and comments were, confirming her earlier thoughts about the sexist, at times racist, environment she was in. Renée often felt she needed to defend herself, even in interviews, because of assumptions made because of her gender. She continued to discuss what this was like:

Then they would ask who was taking care of my kids while I worked – what does that have to do with the job or whether I am qualified. Those are the type of things. I never

used my children – I never even allowed them to entertain my children in anything they ask me. I am not talking about my kids with them.

From defending her right to her personal privacy to assumptions made about who she was sleeping with, going to sleep with, or do sexual favors for, Renée experienced blatant sexism in the form of inappropriate comments made. She remembered one specific event:

We were out of town at a staff meeting – I believe we were in Jacksonville, Florida – and one of the vice presidents said something really inappropriate. I told him, ‘The day that I sleep with you, every one will know because I will have a corner office with my name on it with no title and when people ask what I do, I will say nothing. So everybody will know I have slept with you, because I won’t be doing it and working no more.’ But, the unfortunate thing is so many of the women played that role, they did not know what was okay and what was not okay. So you had to set boundaries and define who you were.

While Renée told this story, she showed she still had feelings about constantly having to define, for herself, who she was and continues to be. Instance with other women showed Renée that even women were not used to her role in leadership; she described women who wanted to see her fired and wrote letters to Renée’s bosses to make false accusations about her performance. Renée discussed these hardships on the job as people trying to get her to quite or to give in. She discussed being able to deal with this by remembering all she learned from her mother about not compromising who she is.

I’m not compromising. I am not compromising. I have literally walked out of meetings and said, ‘You guys will not talk to me like this. I don’t know who you are used to talking to.’ I mean I have used words that would make your damn ears ring. I have said, ‘Ya’ll have lost your damn mind if you think you can talk to me like this’ and get up and

leave. One – more than one – many, many, many occasions – I am not going to compromise. I am not going to play the dumb blonde role because you all needed a statistical number in a slot. I am in the best position ever now because I am an African American woman over the age of 40. If they fire me, it better be real good. And they know that.

Renée found her power through the struggle of being who she is, in an environment where she was the minority at every turn. As an African American women and single mother of two daughters, she constantly had to re-define herself for herself and identify what she wanted to stand for. She realized early on she wanted to pass on a message, given to her by her mother, to her daughters that she did not need to compromise who she was in order to reach any career goals.

Even today, Renée continues to hold on to those values as she receives racially charged emails or has her job threatened by subordinates who cannot stand to work under an African American woman on the railroads. She continues to “hold on to herself, without compromising one thing” in order to survive and to find enjoyment in what she does. These are the lessons she passed on her daughters. In particular, her oldest daughter who struggled with striking a balance between dedicating her life to work for others in the social services sector and meeting her own needs.

### **Faith Lorde: Lessons of Education**

Faith Lorde is the 29-year-old granddaughter of Emma Nelson and daughter of Renée Brooks. She lives in Atlanta, GA, was born in Chicago, IL in 1982, and grew up in both Chicago (until the age of 8) and Alexandria, VA (through high school graduation). Faith described herself

as an “African American Christian female” and discussed how being a Christian was a major part of her identity starting in childhood:

As far as the Christian aspect of it, honestly, that is something that I grew up with on both sides of the family. They are not religiously rooted, but they are very spiritual so I knew that was a big part of who I was.

Faith also discussed that, from a young age, she learned to have a sense of pride in her African American heritage. This included being around people who looked like her in order to feel a sense of community. Faith discussed what this was like at an early age:

I think really that, growing up in predominately white areas I always wanted to be – I would say, ‘well these people around me – I don’t look like them.’ So – not ‘where did I come from,’ but where are people like me?’ My mom would always make jokes like, wherever I am, I can always find the black people somewhere. I think that is what I did. I don’t know but I think I have always been one of those very proud – I embrace my African American heritage, I don’t know – it just said a lot for me.

Her desire to be around people who “looked like her” and learn about her heritage, left Faith with the ability to think about various situations differently. She often thought about them within the context of the African American history her family taught her. Faith described this as acquiring “militant” views:

I was in elementary school, I can tell you – I know the principal was Ms. Smith – I had to be between 4th and 5th grade. I remember a class ending and I was a bus rider and the teacher asked me to stay back – it wasn’t for a punishment or anything like that, she wanted to do something or had to talk to me so by the time I got back to my bus - So it had to be 3rd or 4th grade because I was not on patrol yet – but by the time I got back to

my bus there was only one seat left and it was in the back of the bus. I guess I did not realize that I really had been – I am a radical or militant. I used to say, ‘no, you aren’t going to mistreat me.’ – So, when I got to the bus, there was only one seat left and it was in the very back. They were like, ‘Faith, you sit there.’ I was like, ‘no, you are only making me sit there because I am black. Rosa Parks didn’t, so I don’t have to do it anymore.’ I would not do it, so my mom had to come pick me up from school because I would not ride the bus.

As Faith and I chuckled and made light of this incident, she continued to think about how these two differing environments, at home and at school, impacted her view of herself. Having been educated in predominately white schools for her primary and secondary education, Faith struggled to identify what type of school she wanted to attend for college. There was the draw of a historically Black college or university (HBCU), but she was a first generation college student and had no idea where to start. Faith talked about this experience:

We talk a lot about my early education like elementary, middle and high school. Most of my education – the majority of my education was in Alexandria, Fairfax county – and then I went to college straight out of high school. I attended Clark University, a historical black college and university, that is in Atlanta. I was there from 2000-2004. When I applied for a college, which I knew nothing about – it was by the grace of God. My mom was dating a guy that – I don’t know if you met anyone that graduated from North Carolina A&T. Well, if you do, you will remember forever – they have this sense of pride and that never dies. I swear, he came into her life just for me. I have never seen anything like it in my life. It is worse than, I don’t know, Georgia Tech. I don’t know what it is. He was like Aggie pride and he was like a million years old and walking around talking

about Aggie pride. But anyways, I met him. Him and my mom were dating my sophomore and junior year of high school. My mom wanted me to go to college. I never thought that was an option, but negotiating that process – neither of us knew where to start. Contrary to popular belief, at the high school level, they don't help you with that. If you don't have an athletic scholarship or you are not going to Stanford or UVA, that process is really independent. So he literally help me write my entrance essays, helped me write out checks to the school for application fees. He would say, 'Hey, we are going to do this.'

Even though Faith and her mother felt unprepared for getting Faith into college, she believed it was “by the grace of God” that this man helped answer questions she did not know to ask. Faith was able to get an understanding of the process, because her mother's boyfriend had gone to college and knew the ropes. After being exposed to the possibility of college, Faith began to tune into the opportunities around her. She discussed the experience of going on a college tour to the HBCUs in the area:

But, I had known my junior year – I found a flyer of an HBCU [Historically Black College and University] tour. I just saw these letters on there – they were Greek letters of Delta Sigma Theta. I had no idea who they were or what they meant and I ended up going on a week tour. Amazing experience. There were 30 black high school students and these older women who were in this particular organization. We went to all the HBCUs up through southern Virginia. Atlanta was as far South as we came. We went to North Carolina, Livingston College, NC A&T, Hampton, Morehouse. We went to about eight to ten schools in a week. It was an amazing experience. At Johnson C. Smith, I remember thinking, *oh my gosh, is this my college? You mean, there are all these fine men?*

Despite the draw of the cute boys, Faith described being exposed to a new world she never envisioned for herself. Coming from a family of women who did not have formal education, but were very successful in their long careers, Faith did not readily see the necessity of higher education. When she attended the HBCU college tour, though, she was able to start to *see* herself in college and want that for herself. Faith described what this process was like for her:

Crazy! I remember going into a cafeteria and, mind you, I was coming from a place where there were black people everywhere, but this was like The Million Man March. I went into the cafeteria and you could eat whatever you wanted! You can have fried rice and fried chicken and ice cream...just fat. So, when I was on that tour it was great and then I was able to identify schools. I was able to have conversations about what I wanted to do and the types of programs schools had and how much does it cost. You know what I mean? I remember saying, 'Mom, you don't have this kind of money in the bank.' Money never became an issue with my mom.

After being able to envision college for herself, Faith noticed how her mother bought into this dream with her. Renée may not have had the information to get Faith to college, but she had the ability to support her in whatever decision she made. Faith felt this support, but also needed the information, so she turned back to her mother's boyfriend for guidance. Having this guidance allowed her to make some decisions that impacted her college choice. She discussed what it was like to walk through the unknown with this guide:

I have always been insecure academically, just never really had confidence in myself and never felt sure. So when that whole thing about SATs came up, I was thinking, *where can I go that I don't have to have SAT scores*. But there was nowhere that you could get in that you did not have to have them. So I began to have conversations with my godfather –

conversations where he would tell me, ‘okay you need a safety school, a home school.’ So I looked at places at home. I looked at places that were my number one choice and my very first response from a school was a semi-rejection letter. After I received that, I was like, ‘well, stupid programs.’ But, my godfather would say, ‘maybe if you go to community college for a year and take these...’ – NO! I was not doing that. My very first response was very discouraging – Clark in Atlanta was where I knew I really, really wanted to go. I just had not gotten a response back, I was literally about to go to Hampton. One night – it was about 8 or 9 o’clock at night and I was not thinking about it. I went to the mailbox and I was opening the mail and I was thinking, *if it was a small envelope, the letter would say, ‘you had a great application and we regret to inform you...’*

Faith began to learn the experience of applying to college – an experience she never knew to want for herself. She continued to tell the story:

...and if it was a big package because it was all the paperwork you needed in there. But Clark Atlanta’s was a small envelope and I did not even want to open it. But, I opened it and I called my mom screaming that I got in! I think she was at work. So we just began to make moves and then we had the parent weekend where you come and do whatever and kind of moved forward. So Clark Atlanta was an amazing experience. Academically, socially, politically – it just exposed me to a lot that I had not even thought about. I think college is so much more than academics. To be able have that experience to push you into a place to find your own voice where you are able to take classes to hone your skills and not have to take classes because someone else said this is what you need.

As Faith relived this moment, she screamed with excitement during the interview. She was brought back to this time where a flood of emotions came upon her. These emotions were new to her. Not only were the emotions new to her, but the freedom to learn what she wanted was new. Faith described no longer having to learn what “the others” wanted her to learn, but what she was *supposed* to learn about her own heritage, taught by people who looked like her. From Clark Atlanta, Faith went on to complete an MSW degree at Barry University in Miami, and is completing a Master of Divinity program at Emory University. She admits her educational attainment was not expected, given that she is a first generation college graduate. The lessons she learned from her grandmother and mother, though, kept her throughout these experiences. During her interview, Faith went on to discuss how her family made sure she was connected to both her “blackness” and a spiritual foundation, rooted in God.

### **Connected to Blackness/Spirituality**

In her home, with her family, Faith remembered an emphasis on black history and culture that taught her pride in where she came from. She grew up in schools that were predominately white, so her mother and grandmother took special care to teach her what she did not learn in school about her identity. Faith remembered how her lessons at home influenced her learning at school:

Growing up I was in predominately white areas, so I think that my mom was very positive about making sure that I was connected somehow to the blackness. She also let me know that, in that environment, I brought something else with me. So, I can remember like as early as elementary school when there was opportunities to do research or projects, I wanted to do like Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King because I wanted to identify with that piece of me. My grandmother was really active in a lot of things as well

– in regards to who she embraced in her African American heritage. So that was something I saw and could remember. I was in elementary school and she was actually on the campaign with Nelson Mandela and Apartheid.

Included in these lessons about her black identity were lessons about spirituality and about serving God. Though Faith was primarily in three different locations/households, there was often a similar message about putting God first always in order to make it through anything. Faith did remember some differences between the households she transitioned between as she grew up:

I remember I had to reflect on this before when I was in a class. I was talking and this whole image of religion and environment came up and it allowed me the opportunity to just sit and think. It is so funny because it was like – not necessarily a polar opposite when I was growing up in Chicago and in Virginia, to go back to Chicago. For the separation [of her parents] I went back every Christmas and summer and my dad's side is what we would name now as Pentecostal [church] or very charismatic – like my grandma did not wear pants, we could not play cards and there was no cussing. My grandmother on my mom's side was religious based and it was very different. I mean there is this really, really strict God and there is this other God my [maternal] grandmother knew. We would identify as a metaphysical church. God is with you and, wherever you are, God is. Not that there was really like tension, but it was like this God won't let you do nothing and this God will let you do anything. You just have to ask for forgiveness and it is okay. I knew the base religion or believing in a God. Maybe it was faith, faith was very important and I just knew whose ever house I was at we were going to somebody's church on Sunday and all the conversation was about faith. Looking at my mom's progress in being a single mom – those are the things that we had experienced throughout

our family. It resonated on both sides. My aunt died of breast cancer – I remember it was the faith that got us through this. My uncle died when I was in college and faith was always a big aspect. When I lived in DC, maybe like, middle school and high school. My mom – it was just her and my sister and she worked a very complex schedule. I had to be, what I know now as a parentified child. She would work like crazy midnight hours and something like that. There was a point that she could not take us to church and I remember, when I was able to drive, that is something I would do on my own. We went to Union Chapel Church and it was so like people would know this church because it was known for – you know how you go to most churches and they have Jesus and the resurrected Christ or other pictures, and stain glass windows.

Faith's upbringing taught her to have a spiritual connection to God and her family made that evidently important through their actions of attending church and through their words through difficult situations. She went on to discuss how being black and being Christian were reconciled in her life:

On the pulpit there was a mural of the Last Supper and I can pull it up and show you a picture later. There was a mural of the Last Supper behind the pastor, but what was interesting about this was the twelve disciples are African American and are civil rights leaders. That is where my identification of the black Christ came. I never really remember people saying God or Jesus. I never really had an image. I know it sounds crazy but I would see Casper, kind of like a ghost, because I was like it would be unfair for our God to be black or Jesus to be black because what would other people identify with? So I remember in that moment the mural helped me to understand this is what black people had to do to get strength. Like, if you don't identify your God as connected

to you or having similarities with you, how do you really believe? So I think at that point it really helped me to realize maybe the black Christ or how African Americans could use Christ in their life. Even at that church everything was Afro-centric – the Afrocentric African garments and drum beats and making that connection from what it means to be rooted in Africa. So that was huge for me.

Being rooted in this tradition allowed Faith to gain an understanding of how being black and a Christian go together. She explained how this gave her a better understanding of who she was:

I don't know if it actually affected my identity, maybe an understanding. Maybe I was able to put it in a place – like okay I get it. It made me wonder what church was like for white people, you know what I mean? It was good for me to see a Jesus that wasn't white, blonde hair, white skin, blue eyes.

Faith described these two major aspects of her identity, being black and a Christian, as the parts of her that influenced her feelings of responsibility to others. She took after many women in her family, particularly her grandmother, and chose a career in social work and, later, chaplaincy. Throughout the interview, she spoke of these career choices and not really choices at all, but her responsibility.

### **It Was a Responsibility**

It was known in the family that Faith was always going to fight for some cause and be active in the community. She discussed how her family members came to attribute this to who she was:

It is a running story that always comes up, like when I am fighting something or exploring something or just really socially active. My family says, 'Faith you have always been that way.' I think I was the first – I don't remember if I was the person that

formed the environment or the environment formed the person. I think that growing up in predominately white areas really had an impact on me. That made me...

From an early age activism was a part of Faith and was in her blood. She remembered a particular time in school where she felt this social responsibility most:

It was like this responsibility for me because I remember I was the first African American president for our school government in elementary. I remember Ms. Brown, my 4th grade teacher, when I got inaugurated she was crying and she brought me flowers. She was like that black teacher that everyone knew and she had been there since like 1907 – she was so old. She was just like crying and was like, ‘I have been here x amount of years and you are really making a mark on this school.’ I guess I have always been like that. I did not know at that time because when she started crying, I was like, ‘lady, what is wrong with you?’ But I remember the tension when I was running. I remember it was [classmate’s name] that was running against me and he was like from this prominent family and his brother had been this and his mother was the president of the PTA and all this stuff. They were all looking at me like, ‘where did this black girl come from?’ My mom was ridiculous – Hobby Lobby all the way. She made all this stuff for my campaigns and they were looking at me like she is not only black, she is creative, so – yeah, signs and everything. Whistles and pencils with my name.

This experience with running for school government was very similar to an experience Faith’s grandmother had 30-40 years earlier as she ran for her own student government in high school. Faith recognized this similarity and discussed how activism and “being the first” was in her blood. In particular she discussed a story connected to her grandmother’s activism work in South Africa during the presidential election of Nelson Mandela:

I remember that time I went to school and did a report about it. I can't remember what was going on here socially or politically here in the states, but I just remember it being a big thing. My grandmother has all my life – she just retired a few years ago – has always been a lobbyist or labor activist. Not just black rights, but always fighting for people that. To this day, even if my gas tank is really, really low I don't use a Shell gas station because I remember something about – I can't even remember what it was. She informed us at that time, but I can't remember, 'don't use Shell because yada-yada-yada' To this day, I don't tell her when I go to Wal-Mart. She is very serious about that. So I remember the whole Apartheid thing, she was very serious about informing us of what it was, why it was important and then kind of like the whole aspect of supporting Nelson Mandela. She actually went to Africa. We were all excited about her taking a picture with Nelson Mandela – it was just a really big thing for us. I think if you go to everybody's house right now you will see that picture of her and Nelson Mandela and now she has a picture of her and Barack Obama.

The transition of responsibility throughout the generations is something that Faith readily recognizes as having a significant influence on her current career choices. She discussed her grandmother's activism work with admiration and, with a look of pride in her eyes, discussed how she could not just sit idly by because, even with what was going on social in the US during her grandmother's younger years, she continued to fight for justice in labor and with the blacks in Chicago. Faith also recognized her mother's personal struggles as a black woman to be promoted in her job. It was the lives of these two women that activated Faith's feelings of responsibility. She talked about the continued influences of the lives of her mother and grandmother:

I knew that my mom did not have the opportunity, my grandmother did not have the opportunity and my dad did not have the opportunity. I knew it was something I wanted to do. I just knew I wanted to be a counselor or a psychologist or something like that and I knew college was the only way to get there. Other than that, I did not know the process and how to make it happen. I just knew I was either going to college, or to the military – that was [my mom's] push and everything she worked so hard for. I did not even work hard in academics in school. I was just lazy. I just knew for me it was a responsibility because my cousins or no one in my family – I did have a cousin that started out at Jackson State, she is older. She is like in her 40s now, but something happened and she came back home. I don't know – it is kind of a sense of responsibility. I grew up watching *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* and that is something that they pushed.

As Faith discussed the opportunities she took, because her parents and grandparents could not have those same opportunities, she reflected on how having these relationships encouraged her to keep moving forward, even in times when she felt she could not.

I just think that relationships are so important and support and someone showing you that you can and this is how and this is possible. I know that is a fearful thing to talk about resiliency, but just understanding that no matter what it looks like, hard work does pay off and you really can get to where you want to be – not that it is going to be easy. It is not going to look the same for you as it did this person over here, but just – I am really big on you creating your opportunities and not waiting on someone to give you your opportunities.

One of the things Faith often referred to as the lesson she learned from her grandmother and mother was the sense of responsibility she always had to be great no matter what the

circumstances. So, even though she did have experiences of oppression in her high school or experienced the difficulty of her parents' divorce, Faith maintained this feeling of being responsible for the work so many did in generations before hers. In order to do so, Faith felt it necessary to use her difficult experiences to add positive attributes to her character.

### **Difference Helped You Identify**

Faith made it clear she grew up in a predominately white school system and experienced some difficulties because of her difference as a black girl. She told various stories that she rationalized as experiences that helped her identify who she was and the type of person she wanted to be. Aside from those lessons she learned at home, she often learned lessons during her educational career that taught her more about who she was. Part of this lesson was because of the friends she made who shared similar experiences while in school. Faith described how she made sense of this:

I think it is amazing how influential your education system, beyond academics, can be. I still connect with the few other black kids I knew in elementary school on Facebook – you can do that now with Facebook. Being the fact that you were different, your difference helped you identify who you were, if that makes sense.

Through the struggles of having to prove herself, Faith began to learn valuable life lessons about how she identified herself both ethnically and culturally. She discussed an example of this during school in the student government:

I always had to fight and prove myself for something. Whether it was like academically or socially – like through the SGA. My mom would have to come up to the school. I knew I was different and I don't know if that is the woman piece, but it was definitely the race piece because I was young and did not know what it meant to be a woman. So those

encounters diversified as I went up in grades in middle school and high school – I remember the same kind of issues. I remember running for student government – and the way our system worked – it was overall president of the school SGA and then you had class officers. The way they did it first they would do overall school officers and then they would do, you know, the class levels so this girl ran or attempted to run for SGA president. At that time I already knew I was going to run for SGA president and she lost and when she lost she was like, ‘So, Faith, you are going to run against me?’ I was like, ‘Yeah, that was my plan.’ She said, ‘So why would you run against me?’ – it was like the entitlement... I just always felt like it was this ‘us against them’ type of thing.

Faith described a competition that formed simply due to race within her high school and this feeling that the black and white students automatically had to be on opposing sides. Faith quickly learned how to handle these things by doing what she was taught at home – do the best you can and do it better than everyone else. She went on to remember how her identity as a black person in her high school continued to influence her relationships:

Even I can remember my high school – like the way it work out I went to what was called a secondary school connected to a middle school so it was really big – I remember us having one black school counselor. We broken up into teams – I mean there might have been four teams – and there was one black school counselor – I can’t remember her name but I can see her face. I remember her helping this black girl apply for her college stuff. The girl was a year ahead of me and I wanted her to be my counselor because I felt the other ones didn’t care anything about me. It was different. When I talked to her she was looking at me like she understood, but she said, ‘you have a counselor.’ I know her position as a professional now, but then I didn’t. I always wanted to see an awesome

black woman who is doing great things and is being progressive. When I saw her helping Sharon, she was giving Sharon assignments and feedback on when to take her SATs. I felt like, *Dang, ain't nobody helping me!*

It was clear that Faith felt neglected by her high school counselor because she was black and thought it would be better if she could learn from the black counselor who at least *looked* like her. She went on to discuss how she thought about this experience:

I mean I can tell you my high school counselor's name but it was nothing phenomenal. I never felt like *let me sit with you, let me sit under you, let me talk to you, let me see how I can be where you are*. I have never experienced that.

Faith wanted to learn from and be near the counselor who knew her experience of being a black girl and felt she could teach her more because they identified the same, at least the same racially. Faith described how she felt a closeness to the black counselor simply because she was black and felt she was in competition to, not only the white female students, but also the white counselors and teachers. She discussed how she often felt disrespected by white women:

I probably could not name it at the time. I have probably always been the type of person that, you cannot tell me if you have not been there. I don't know if that is a positive thing or a negative thing, but I know that is how I think. I just totally, totally just looked passed people. I remember some very ridiculous experiences with white women, so it took me a long time to work through that to where I could actually consider white people as just a different ethnicity than me. I just remember some very horrible times of being called out in class, being embarrassed. I remember my mom had to pull a whole conference together because a teacher totally just disrespected me in front of the whole class in the library – it was just crazy – like I remember those experiences with white women.

Faith remembered a particular encounter with Ms. Sanders that influenced her to continue to feel less connected with white women:

We were in the library – come to find out she was my first experience of what bipolar was – I can't even remember her words. But I remember being in the library and it was library time and we were all sitting in a circle. I just remember her yelling and screaming and I was sitting there by myself and I remember her face being like red. Just red! And I remember just feeling so intense and so small and everybody looking at me like – and I can't remember what she said – but I remember I was done. I think I either pressed through the day or went to the office to call my mom. The next day it was my mom and five other black sets of parents in the office. The teacher apologized. I was like, 'No, did you embarrass her in the office? Did you call her out in the office? Did you embarrassed her in front of a body of students?' I think that ended up being her last year teaching because, like I said, come to find out she had a mental illness.

As we began to discuss this experience together, Faith was explaining how she felt closer to black people, particularly women, than she did white women because they share the same experiences on both the race and gender identities. From a young, impressionable age, Faith experienced white women to be in competition and the differences in race helped her identify completely as a black woman, without separating the two identities. Faith discussed this further:

I never really had good experiences with white women or white people. I am sure when I think about it, it was the conversations that would come home. Like my mom would come home and she worked in a very male dominated industry. She had the sexism and the racism and I would come home and get these stories, and I think that built a distrust. Then everything that my grandmother went through and things like that – I think that

built a distrust. So I knew from the door, like I had no idea what college meant other than *A Different World* and I was going where there were black people. I was going. I was doing that. So I don't think it was until maybe high school that I began to have positive experiences like with people of other ethnic groups.

Faith described the feeling of wanting to be with other people like her, given her negative experiences early on. She discussed the fact that her decision to attend an HBCU was based on the fact that she felt so different in high school and this propelled her towards people who looked like her and, therefore, had some similar experiences.

Education was a significant factor in how Faith identified herself and was the foundation for much of the lessons she received about herself throughout her younger years. She attributed her abilities to think positively and continue to move forward to the lessons she learned from generations before her. Faith described a significant family connection, particularly to the women of her family. She gained much insight into the lessons that were passed down from her mother, grandmother, and even her great grandmother throughout her lifetime. It was these lessons that continue to influence her decisions and the impact of difficult experiences today.

### **Generational Transitions**

Faith began to learn about her ancestors when she had to complete various projects in college and graduate school. She knew of her great grandparents migration from the South to Chicago and discussed this history with me:

My paternal grandmother – she got here from Mississippi. Then from Mississippi to Chicago. And what landed her in Chicago was that she got married and her husband worked on a railroad and that is how they got to Chicago. My maternal grandmother, I want to say my great-grandmother's family was somewhere from down here in Georgia,

deep-south Georgia. I can't tell you how they got to Chicago, but that was a transition there. My mom and my grandmother both grew up in Chicago but my great-grandmother, I want to say that she grew up here in South Georgia somewhere.

Though Faith remembered southern roots, she also remembered the influence of her parents both growing up in Chicago. She discussed the early 1980's, when she was born:

My parents lived together on the north side of Chicago and I think both grandmothers' families were like from the south side and they moved to the north side. I can remember that from when I was very, very young but then that marriage did not last very long. I remember up until I was 8 years old – I had my 9th birthday in Virginia. We moved to Virginia the summer approaching my 8th birthday. Yeah, because it was at Chuck E. Cheese and we moved in about August or September. Up until then I was raised in Chicago. But my parents had a very amicable relationship, even with the divorce, so I used to go back to Chicago. My dad would get me every summer and the holidays. But both roots of the family are pretty much outside of Chicago.

Even through the divorce of her parents, Faith remained close to both sides of her family, who remain in Chicago to this day. Faith remembered a strong tie to the Civil Rights Movement coming from both sides of her family, including the fight for equal opportunities for blacks. Within this fight, though, Faith's mother and grandmother felt the best way to fight for equality was to be working, starting from the ground up, and fight your way to the top – like they did. When Faith wanted to go to graduate school, she met some resistance from her family, because they did not see how she could fight for the same things they did by going for more education. Faith described this conflict:

It wasn't like. 'Let's go call the NAACP' or 'Get the Freedom Fighters.' It is just interesting just looking at the different levels of tolerance with certain things just based on our three generations. I remember when I was looking for a job straight out of grad school, I was turning down jobs I didn't want. I went straight to grad school for a reason and my mom was like, 'Faith, why would you turn down a job when you don't have one?' So there was that tension and then my grandmother was like, 'okay what are you going to do? You have two degrees.' Being able to negotiate who are going to share what and at what level.

The differences between Faith's, her mother's, and grandmother's generations are that of formal and informal education. For her mother and grandmother it was more so about learning on the job and fighting for yourself through your actions of doing the job better than anyone else could. For Faith, going to school taught her that she could have the formal education or "pieces of paper" that would initially qualify her for the higher-level position that she could then work hard to keep. What it boiled down to for Faith was the access to the opportunity to get a formal education, which she felt her generation had more so than those before her. She discussed this further:

I think if we keep on the level of my generation, I think it would probably be the same on both sides because all of my cousins have had opportunities at education, life experiences, children – things have happened – or even personal choices, but the opportunity has been there for everybody. Or just about everybody. I'm not sure if my mom and my aunts would say the same thing – I think they would. I just don't like people saying that I am educated, because I have more degrees than they would have ever cared to have. I felt that my mother and grandmother are so intelligent, even without degrees.

So, I don't even know. I know what I mean when I say educated but I don't know if they would use that because they have not been formally education.

The ultimate lesson Faith learned was that she was to work very hard at whatever she decided to do. She learned by watching her mother and grandmother's generation work hard to have great jobs after starting at entry-level positions. Faith learned that, no matter where you start, you can be the success story others tell about. She talked about how looking at the generations that came before her influenced her vision of her own abilities:

My mom, my grandmother and my aunts all have awesome jobs. Like my grandmother is retired – I mean awesome jobs. My aunt is a litigation database manager so she works for some huge law firm and she has worked for several and she has managed all their stuff for court from the data side of it – easy, six figures. Mom is a supervisor, but she is the story that you would hear about on the first day – you know you are starting off as a janitor, ‘you know you have the opportunity because here is Renée Brooks who started off selling tickets and now she is’ – you know.

Many of the life lessons Faith discussed as positive influences on who she became were from the women in the family. When I asked her to discussed the role of men in her family, she had a different view of what the role of men should be.

### **Anything for the Boys**

While creating her genogram, I began to notice the lack of stories Faith knew or shared about the men in her family. Further, I noticed her omission of positive influences the men of her family had on her life. After asking about this observation Faith discussed some of the men in her family and the sheer lack of presence they had while she was growing up. Faith started by discussing her paternal grandfather:

I think my father knew about him, but I don't think they had a close relationship. But he came back into my father's life I guess sometime when I was in high school. I remember my father taking him in and actually he had a two-bedroom apartment downtown. He cared for my grandfather and when he got married he took him to the house and took care of him until he died. He died January 13th of – had to be 2006 or 2007 he died – they finally had to put him in a nursing home because his Alzheimer's had gotten so bad, but my father – they had not talked for years and I guess that my father found out that his wife had died or that something had happened when he was out there on his own. My father took him in and cared for him until the day he died.

Similar to her paternal grandfather, Faith's maternal grandfather was not an active part of the family until recently, when she connected with him on Facebook. Faith described his position in the family:

I did not know very much about him at all. Growing up there was some kind of tension where he had another – you know how that goes – but he is like one of my top Facebook friends now. Like my mom she can tell you more about that – but there was some kind of tension there, I don't think he was there growing up but now he tries to be. I just know that he is my grandfather and we are Facebook friends and he gave me money to go to Ghana. I don't know – he is kind of weird.

Even while discussing her grandfathers, Faith stuck to the facts about their whereabouts, without giving any detail about how they influenced her life. This prompted me to ask about the role of men in the family and Faith's point of view of their influence. She described her view of the role of men in her family:

So my mom's side we don't have too many men, it is all these women. There are a lot of boys now. My generation we are all having all these boys. Now my cousins have sons but we did not have too many men. Now, there was my Uncle Clint. He died of cancer in 2003. There is my Uncle Corky – we don't necessarily do the half brother thing – he is my mom's brother. So even when I think about my maternal side of the family, I don't see men, I see boys. When I say boys – we grew up together age wise. So from that aspect women have always just kind of been the providers, kept everything together, plan everything, really strong foundation spiritually, that is – I mean really when I envision, all I see is women.

Faith addressed the questions about the role of men by discussing the lack of men in the family and, therefore, the role women play in raising the growing number of boys there are. She began to jokingly paint the picture that the boys seems to get spoiled while the girls are expected to do everything:

But really when it comes to the boys it is a running joke and my mom will tell you. All they do is for the boys. I don't know if it is because we don't have many men, but the boys get away with everything. When the boys are home, it's 'what do you all want to eat? I'm going to fix you something to get. Oh, Faith, fix his plate.' I say, 'What?! I am not fixing his plate. He can fix his own plate! I have a cousin who is the only male who went to college – every one else got degrees from the state school – the state penitentiary. So because of that this male cousin can walk on water. My mom buys him laptops for his birthday. But maybe it's just her cause she has two girls. When it is holiday time and we are all going out for Christmas, the boys they can go out and do whatever they want to do. The girls have to answer all types of questions – it's just rude!

Even though the royal treatment for boys is a running joke in Faith's family, she discussed the fact that it may just be a by-product of not having many men in the family. She went on to point out the fact that the accomplishments of the boys in the family were deemed more important, because of the lack of presence men had overall in the family:

I honestly think it is just a result of us not having a lot of men and us just trying to compensate. I mean other than that one male cousin all of the other boys are going to jail. One of the other ones is getting it together. He is married, he has kids, he is getting it together. Yeah he did not get a formal education, but I notice with my mom she will do anything for the boys and I don't know if it is because she don't have boys or it is just something like it is a joke but it is just a thing that she has with them boys.

Faith's mother is not the only one who spoils the boys of the family, but it seems there are different roles and expectations for them from all the women. During holidays, for example, Faith described a difference in what the boys were expected to do:

At the holidays they are never in the kitchen – NEVER. Not that you would want them to be, but still. They take out the trash, they bring in the stuff for the Christmas tree. I don't think there were ever any roles. They did not have to do nothing. There were not any roles for them – there is not! Now I find the girls in the kitchen, we are at that point now where they are trying to transition us to be the ones making dinner so our parents and stuff can relax. So it is us doing that. The guys are going to get the liquor – I am just telling you what goes down.

It is because of this preferential treatment and difference in roles that the boys have come to expect that treatment from everyone, including Faith. She told a story of one of her cousins expecting her to cater to him:

I remember being home because my great-grandmother died – it was not last December, but the December before that – and we were all being at my grandmother’s house for a while. So, my grandmother had downsized to a condo and we were all crowded as she does not have a house anymore. I remember my cousin being like, ‘Faith, can you iron this shirt for me?’ WHAT? ‘Why can’t you iron? I am not ironing no damn shirt for you.’ But they expect to be spoiled and catered to.

As Faith told this story, she smiled and seemed to be thinking fondly on the influence of gender roles in the family. She elaborated on this by identifying she had no choice but to cater to the boys – this is something she learned by watching the women of her family. The discussion of gender in her family began with the absence of important men and how this influenced the women to coddle the younger men and boys in the younger generations. Faith continued this discussion of gender in her family by discussing the connections she had and lost with important women in her family – these losses were by death and impacted Faith’s life greatly.

### **Losing Relationships with Women**

Faith was greatly connected to women throughout her life. She expressed learning much from the women she encountered, particularly the black women in her life. From the guidance counselor she wanted to have in high school to various women she grew close with in and outside of her family, Faith always felt immensely connected to phenomenal black women. Faith remembered how some of the physical losses of these women began to make her question God:

I remember my friend’s mom, who I was really close with died in May. I don’t know if I was frustrated with God or hurt or just confused – it was like the women, outside of my mom, who I had these phenomenal relationships with - my paternal aunt, not necessarily raised me but when my mom was trying to get adjusted and just trying to work crazy

hours and do all kinds of things she would drop me off with her and I spent like all of my childhood days with her. My earliest memories – she was the aunt that had the candy store on her back porch and we were always so close and I would go to see her every summer – I guarantee if you interviewed any of us from that generation they would all tell you that they were her favorite. She was that person that always made you feel like you were the favorite. I remember in 5th grade, it was my first experience with death and I still struggle with it to this day, it is crazy. In 5th grade she died of breast cancer. It was March. I remember one day my dad calling, and I never heard him cry and he was on the phone with my mom and she was like – because everyone knew how crazy I was about her – ‘You got to get Faith home, you got to get Faith home.’ My family, to a fault, is horrible with secrets – so many freaking secrets. I remember my dad crying and my mother – apparently my aunt had been sick and never told anybody and of course it did not get to me in 5th grade right. So, my dad had always been a pharmacist tech all my life and he was at the hospital that she was at and he was able to pull some stuff to get me in. My grandmother happened to be in Virginia at that time, she was probably at a conference. But she happened to be in Virginia and I remember it was kind of like everyone was making these decisions around me and I remember them saying, ‘no I don’t want her to remember her like that. Maybe she shouldn’t come.’ I literally remember all these conversations going on around me and my aunt, who is one of my mom’s sister went to see my aunt that was dying and was like, ‘Faith told me to tell you hi.’ She said that, when she said my name, my aunt just started smiling and she told her I was in Virginia doing very well and I really wanted to go see her and they were making decisions that I couldn’t. I remember laying in my bed and the school clocks – the little

brown clocks with the hands. Well in my bedroom, that was on my wall and I remember laying in my bed and I had woken up on a Sunday morning and my grandmother – my mom’s room was right across the hall – my grandmother and my mom were in there talking. They were both deciding who was going to tell me and they just walked into the room and I was like, ‘I already know.’ I had not heard them say anything about her being dead, but I already knew. I remember that when I looked up to the clock – it was significant because the clock stopped at the time she had died. So I remember that and I remember going and it was my very first funeral. It was a horrible experience because in Chicago they are really big on wakes and so they had her in this place where there were two bodies. One right here and one right there and I remember wondering, *where is she?* because she did not look right and it was awful and I was just – it was scary, it was crazy.

The memory of losing her Aunt Dot was still fresh in Faith’s mind as she recounted this story during the interview. Her eyes welled up with tears and she fidgeted in her chair as she told the story. She went on to discuss the connection she felt to this women and the lessons she learned about becoming close to other black women. Another black women she became close to was her Aunt Julie. Again, Faith had to learn what it was like to lose a women she was so close to. Faith remembered what it was like to get that phone call:

So the other person that I spent a lot of time growing up with was my Aunt Jenny. My Aunt Jenny was someone who was, she had moved actually from New Jersey. She was young and she had three kids and was struggling and was trying to make it and was actually working for the union place that my grandmother worked for. My grandmother just took her in and was trying to help her out. So when I came into the world, she was already there and I did not know all the background information and so I spent a lot of

time with her growing up. So when I was in 9th grade, I did not know she had even been sick but she had an aneurism and she had been in the hospital and it happened so fast. I got a phone call.

While telling the story of losing these women, Faith tried to make sense of the harsh impact of their loss on her life. She really felt a connection to these women who took the time to connect with her and give her something she needed before they left this earth. Faith described this in her own words:

Maybe I am the person that I feel like I have these close relationships with everybody but it was like these women that really poured into my life were all dying around me.

As she remembered the women who poured into her, Faith remembered yet another woman who meant a lot to her before leaving this earth:

Then there was Ms. Terri, the mother of an ex-boyfriend but I have known her since I was in 7th or 8th grade. When I would run home with him, she was there. She was whenever I needed or when my mom and I would go through things, she was always there. Like she was this woman who had to doctor or foster care all these kids throughout their life. I think she was the one that lead me to social work, I don't know, but when she left here in May I was just like, *God what is this?*

The losses of these women were due to death and, even though Faith was able to be happy they were no longer suffering, she began to question God for His choices to take them out of her life so soon. Faith attempted to make sense of this:

It was just crazy – all these women that had these phenomenal experiences or effects in my life. I am not one to say, but they all left prematurely. Like in their absences, it was just too much and I think about all the times like what our family would look like if my

aunt had not died. She had 6 kids and it was difficult bereavement, they are stuck in places, a lot of foolishness our family has experienced over on that side. If she was here I know it would be totally different. Now my aunt Jenny that died of an aneurism, her son is in jail for murder. You know what I mean? When his mom died he cut up somebody's body and they found it on the highway. I mean me and him grew up playing together – like watching wrestling all day together – like Shake Rattle and Roll. That is what we did – like he is a year or two older than me. How did he become a murderer? That is what happens when we don't deal with death properly. It is just crazy...

These women held their families together, while pouring what they could into Faith. She spoke of learning from the lives they had and taking a piece of each one of them as part of her own identity. There was a similar profound affect on Faith by the women who left without dying, but left for reasons out of her control. Specifically, the troubled relationship between her mother and aunts always made Faith feel she could not get close to them for fear she would “not be on her mother's side”. Faith described how this affected her as a child:

Growing up, we skipped a lot of Christmases because my mom and her sisters don't get along at all. Growing up it was really, really bad and I can remember holidays where they would like get literally into physical fights, so my mom stopped going. She was like I don't want my kids to experience this. So we stopped going for a while – I did not start going back to Chicago until I could go by myself. So maybe like high school, maybe even college that I started going back.

When Faith could make the decision for herself, she began to foster a relationship with her aunts, because she knew how important it was to be close with them. Faith also attempted to have professional relationships with black women who she thought she could learn from. She began to

notice quickly, though, that many professional black women did not have the same philosophy she learned about helping young black women learn the ropes. Faith remembered various instances where older black women were actually in competition with her, rather than attempting to help her:

There is some type of challenge or something, I cannot necessarily name as a young professional that older women specifically are threatened by. I don't know if it is your naiveté or something that you come in with these bright ideas and bushy tail and they just act really nasty or territorial. Of course me and my experience and my sister, is it because I am black, but then you experience these things from black women and possibly they feel threatened, but I don't think what they realize is your experiences is way more than my ideas can fathom at this point.

One particular story stood out for Faith, as she remembered what it was like to be a newcomer in the social work profession:

I can remember when I was working at this place called the Bear Foundation, it was a therapeutic agency, for kids in foster care, and just one of my supervisors she was just nasty for no reason. Anytime I would have ideas or questions – I know my ideas are a little bit ridiculous, but – it was always like this tensions like, 'Faith, we just can't.' I think I have always been really, really ethical but when you are starting out as a professional you don't want to get your name tied up in anything because you are 23 and you will never get to work in the field again. It just got really frustrating and I would ask questions and people sometimes, when they are not secure they feel that your questions are threatening. But for me, I just want to be informed because if I know I am equipped and prepared to do a good job. It was just like the things they were asking me to do and

my push back and it was just this tension and I remember one day one of the supervisors came to my office and talked to me. She was like, 'are you okay? Has everything been okay with you lately?' I was like "yeah, in what regard are you referring to." She said, 'Oh you just don't seem like yourself lately.' I was like, 'Well, permission to speak freely? Do you honestly know what is going on?' I just kind of told her because I was frustrated. The things that are going on and what they were asking us to do – it was a Christian agency. So the things that were asking us to do was just not right. We are not DFAC it would be totally different if we were DFACS or some other agency, but we use God's name. That makes it even worse. I remember her tearing up. This stuff is unethical. This stuff isn't right, it is ridiculous and she was like thank you for being honest with me it will stay between us. It was not 48 hours later that the regional director had flown into town and said, 'I heard that you are not happy.' I told her that the stuff they were asking us to do was ridiculous – it wasn't right. I didn't want to just put kids in any home. I have to sleep with that. If I put a kid in a home and something happens that is on me and she was like well I understand what you are saying and we had a staff meeting later that day and she made like a conference hall table for about 12 people and said that I heard some of ya'll are not happy here and I want to let you know that I am taking resignations up until 3:00 today and this was around Christmas time and it was around November. As a matter of fact we were approaching the holidays – I will give you whatever number blank weeks of unemployment. I will give you blank weeks of vacation and I wont fight you on unemployment. So I am thinking *is this the way that people handle this work?* This is crazy, It was white women and I could not identify if they were challenged by me and these ideas as the new graduate and my ambition or if it was that I was a black woman – I

can't tell you what it was. So then she tells me I meet with her and she was like, 'Faith I am willing to take your resignation and I will give you six weeks of vacation and I won't fight you on unemployment.' They were pushing me out the door. If you would have seen the legal papers they had drafted up to pretty much say I am resigning and I am not going to say anything and pretty much they were afraid. I resigned and took the six weeks of vacation and that was that.

Throughout her life, Faith began to experiences losses that made a profound effect on how she created her identity. It was her ethnic identity that connected her to he black women in her life, but she began to pick and choose how she would learn from these women based on how they lived their lives. Whether she lost significant relationships with women through death or through other reasons, Faith learned hard lessons about the black woman she wanted to become. Further, she learned lessons about the woman she wanted to present to her younger sister and to other younger women in her life.

### **All Each Other Has**

Towards the end of her interview, Faith began to speak freely about the relationship she has with her sister and the responsibility she has always felt to provide a positive example of black womanhood for her. Faith described the feeling of responsibility she felt to protect her sister from a young age:

I think, one, with us being four years apart, two, it just being the three of us in Virginia and, three, with her being sexually abused as a child, I have always strived to tried to protect her. I think it is just as a sister what you would do and we had such a close-knit family growing up. All you were told it was drilled into your head, in a good way, we are

all each other has. Especially being in another state and the fact that she was sexually abused and I never wanted her to have any more pain.

Faith took on the personal responsibility to help shield her sister from experiencing anything similar to what she already. This was something she took on from the women she watched in her lifetime – to take personal responsibility for changing the plight of yourself and those who come after you no matter what. Faith remembered feeling this responsibility from a young age:

Well, one, when you grow up in a single family household, a lot of things don't look normative, like the fact that we were staying home with ourselves when we were not supposed to be. I had to protect her in that aspect. You know those home alone days –if the phone rings, don't answer it. If someone knocks on the door, don't answer it – learn to cook small meals for us and heat stuff up in the microwave and stuff like that.

Even after her sister moved to Europe, Faith felt a sense of responsibility to make sure she was okay or to always know what was going on with her. She had to learn quickly how to connect with her sister:

Yes. Thank God for Skype or Facebook, because the last time that we were all together was the service for my great-grandmother's funeral. We tried to get her home but being overseas and the last minute it was \$3,000 and it was too much. So it is always like Skype Cora or lets get her on Facebook.

When I inquired about where Faith learned to take on this responsibility for those who came after her, she began to discuss her role in the family and the lesson of always passing on what other gave to her.

It has been nothing but my family support that has. When I was in pageants, I would make one phone call home and I would be getting checks. What could I do or go home

for Christmas breaks and here are some checks for your books and then as my other cousins began to approach you know that place in their academic high school seasons where it was time for them to look at or explore. It became my responsibility – “hey, Faith can you talk to so and so. Hey, Faith can you so and so come down and visit you”. So with the privilege, I don’t even know if that is a privilege, but with that came responsibility and that has been fine and then other kids have graduated. Like my sister graduated with her bachelors in 2008 and my cousin graduated in 2008 as well and then my other cousin went to Florida Memorial, but she never made it past that first year. I have another cousin who just began her Masters program –Master’s in Public Health.

The connection she felt to her own family began to translate to the lesson of learning to pour into other and always stay connected. Faith discussed the specific lesson she learned from the women in her family and the other phenomenal women who crossed her path:

It is trying to find a balance of – focus but not disconnected. I mean I have to be intentional about not being disconnected whether people verbalize it or not, because you are doing certain things. I never wanted to be in that situation where I think people think I am better than them. What I have found out is it is never the person who has been exalted by other people that think they are better – it is the people who projected that. You know what I mean? I am intentional about going back and asking, ‘do you need anything? How can I help you? Hey what is going on with this?’ I thought they were always trying to make myself available and sometimes it can be overwhelming, but sometimes things in life that are overwhelming, you just kind of normalize and it comes with – it is a baseline. But just kind of taking that responsibility and making sure that people know, look – just how I got here, you can get it here too. I am not saying that is the only way – but

whatever you got to do, you really have a lot more power and authority in your life than you claim.

Faith learned these lessons from the black women in her life who felt it necessary to pour a little of what they had into her. She described what it was like to feel this connection, learn from it, and foster it with younger women. When I asked her whether or not this was something she felt with only black women, she began to discuss the differences she felt among black and white women and the disconnect she felt to their experiences.

### **There is a Difference**

Faith was clear about the differences she has come to learn about between black and white women and how this continues to affect her identity as a black woman, and not *just* a woman in general. She began this discussion by talking about the differences:

Honestly I think there is a difference. I mean when you work with black women there is a difference a totally other experience. I can distinguish if it is me and my distrust of white women that comes into it or if it is just their – for me I have been able to identify or find that I don't have a problem with white people, I have a problem with people who are uninformed and chose to use their ignorance as it kinds of makes everything okay.

Several experiences have led to Faith's assessment of white women as being "uninformed", starting from the teacher who she discussed earlier. She also had a recent experience that contributed to an overall distrust of white women:

When Leah got married in 2007, I even flew to Texas to be at her wedding and lo and behold, I was the only African American at the wedding. It was an after 5 wedding and I had on a black dress, it was almost like an Aubrey Hepburn, it was pleated and my hair was pulled up in a bun. After the ceremony there was a cocktail hour or something like

that. Her reception and stuff were at a botanical garden and they were still setting up and kind of ushering us outside and I was kind of like waiting and I had another girlfriend with me and she was African American. One of the grandmother's had to be 9 million 7 – I had to let you know that so you knew what time she was born in and she was like, 'excuse me ma'am, can you get us some chairs please?' I said, 'I don't work here.' She said, 'But you are just standing here.' I was not bothered by that, this is not a reflection of my, but it is ridiculous. I did not tell her about that, that night it was several weeks later and she was like, "oh, Faith, welcome to Texas."

Faith's experiences of discrimination and stereotypes from earlier in her life prepared her for something like this and taught her how to react. When she was younger, though, Faith did not know how to respond to comments or jokes made about something she so strongly identified with. Faith remembered another experience where she was less prepared:

I can't forget I was about 15 or 16 working at KB Toy Store in the mall and – now I hate myself for it, but it was an Asian girl that I worked with and we were all young. She said, 'Faith I got a joke for you and you can't be mad. Today I would just punch her in the face - you know how people make you so uncomfortable, you just laugh. I was kind of like, 'okay I won't.' She was like, 'I have a black person on my family tree...He is still hanging there .' I went home and I did not know what to do because I promised her that I would not get mad.

Faith began to remember conversation she had with her grandmother and mother about race and about instances such as the one Faith had with her co-worker. As she remembered these conversations she began to make the connections of how she learned to deal with white women and with racism in general:

You know, I am looking like, ‘grandma be ready’ She told me that is how white folks do! It is so funny that I was doing a genogram and I was asking her about one of her situations and she was like, ‘yeah, she was a real nice lady. You wouldn’t even know she was white.’ I can remember having conversations with her about race or inequality or maybe even with my mom too – because my mom has actually been in class action lawsuits because of racial oppression and gender oppression about her jobs. She will be able to speak lots about that. She has had lots of experiences that just – I remember my cousin was in Sutterville Virginia. She had to be in her mid to late 20s and I had to be in high school and something happened. One of her customers called her the “n” word. I don’t know how I would be able to handle that. I told one of my friends at work we could always talk about race and she was like, ‘Thank you, Faith, for us being able to talk and be able to ask you questions without you laughing at me.’ And I think everything is about conversation. I think my mom and my grandmother would give me that space to relate.

Faith continued to connect with her mother and grandmother as an adult when she had experiences because of her race, gender, or both. One lesson in particular significantly influenced Faith’s decision to become a social worker and to give back to others. She learned that, no matter what others said or did to her, that she had a responsibility to mankind to do good in the world.

### **Learning to Give Back**

Faith’s educational endeavors were a big aspect of her identity for most of her life. She described most of her journey as it connected to her educational goals and the people who influenced her decisions in education. Learning to give back was something she mostly learned from her grandmother’s experiences in the labor unions, along with Aunt Terri, who influenced

her to become a social worker. Faith described what it was like to come to the realization that she was to give back to her communities within the field of social work:

But to have the chance to actually take classes that you have an interest in this, have an interest in that, to have advisors because I had actually applied to schools as a psychology major and as I began to take the classes and began to think that at that time for me. Black people weren't - black people were not seeing psychologists. For me it represented that you had to be elite and you had to have money and black people had to be crazy, that is what they were thinking not what I was thinking. So my first semester I pulled out of psychology and declared myself undecided. We had what you call first year seminar and it was like all the first year seminars were broke down into majors. So if you major pursuit was business and mathematics and whatever and there was a group of us that were undecided. We took a lot of career placement tests and yada-yada-yada and everything kept coming back counselor and social worker and therapist so one of my advisors sent me over to the school of social work and I did not even know what a school of social work was. My knowledge and experience did not expand me beyond the facts, even as bad as that sounds but that is the reality of it. But when I met Dr. Sprigs that day, it was it. I was like oh my Gosh, I finally picked a major and I loved it, and loved it and loved it. It was amazing. I did so many things in undergrad that I never would have done. I was an RA the best experience I had of my life for two years. I was vice president of student government for the school, graduate and undergraduate school. I was like sophomore class president.

When Faith found something she excelled in, she realized the calling to go to graduate school and learn all she could in order to be the best help to others.

Clark Atlanta was very good about graduate schools and bridging the gap. Whether it was for a career or school, so we always had graduate school fair and it was a couple of schools of social work there and I met a representative from Berry. Berry is in Miami, Florida, and it represented from the George Warren Brown School of Social Work, which is – which is in Washington – no St. Louis and I had started correspondence with both of them and they both offered me scholarships and I ended up going with Berry because they gave me more money and I did that and I went with the advanced student program and I did that in 10 months, would not recommend that to anybody. I worked and worked and I was fine and I loved it and everything was great then I felt like I received I felt like I received a call of my life and maybe my vocation to explore seminary.

Aside from her formal education, Faith was able to make the connection between all her experiences as a young child up into adulthood. Those experiences inside and outside of her family contributed to her passions for helping other and the women she encountered nurtured that and helped her feel comfortable working towards those goals.

I think different experiences help you define your likes and dislikes and your passions and things that you are numb about. I really, really, really enjoy being able to, as squishy as it sounds, being able to work with people. But be like in a development or programming type of capacity and to be able to work in counseling but not be limited to just in office and talk therapy and processing but actually creating programs and doing more of the talk. Because talk was very therapeutic but sometimes as people explore and identify and focus on things and just kind of reflect and to sometimes get where they need to be. It sometimes has to be out of the office that helps them get to that and that is what I really like to do. I like to work in the community. I really also like politics and if I could

work at the UNC School of Social Work, being that professor that expands beyond the classroom that helps to build that bridge and also doing work in the community, that would be ideal for me.

Faith's grandmother dedicated her life to the labor community she was apart of. Similarly, Faith's mother fought to pave the road to higher-level positions for her daughters and generations after that. Several other women gave Faith examples of selflessness simply by the way they lived.

Faith continues to live her life for other people, through her work as a Social Worker and through her plans to be a chaplain. She feels a "strong connection to women, particularly black women, who are struggling to identify who they are within a spiritual context." She attributes her strong work ethic and desire to achieve to both her grandmother and mother. Faith uses these terms as she describes her identity as an African American women and can think of a community of black women who gave her "little pieces of themselves to travel with and emulate and [she] navigated the world."

### **Family Summary**

Three themes emerged across the three narratives of Emma, Renée, and Faith: professional success, independence, and retaining the matriarch role within the family. These themes speak to the conscious and unconscious process of ethnic identity development within this family of women. Each of the women discussed the values they cherished as African American women.

Speaking to these three women helped me better understand the culture of their family and how this contributes to their individual identities as African American women. During their family interview they elaborated on some of the aspects of their individual identity they learned

from one another. Even in retirement, Emma continues to give of herself tirelessly to the labor movement. Her consciousness of social issues continues to influence how she lives her life. For example, to this day, she “will never step foot in Wal-mart” and makes sure she is “first to volunteer to work the election polls”. Renée “does not proclaim to be socially conscious”, but does proclaim to “represent positions of upper management”. She and her mother “often have debates about different sides of the labor coin” and Renée likes to “push her mother’s buttons”. She will also say she is “happily divorced twice” and, “now that her children are grown”, she can be “found on a Royal Caribbean cruise ship 3-4 times a year” (she is a member of the 50 plus cruises club). Faith prides herself in being “as socially conscious as her grandmother”, but with “a connection to the stories of underrepresented black women of Black Christian churches”. Her cause is more specific and she “learned to fight through her education and attaining higher-level degrees”. All three are the “ones others go to with their problems in the family”. They each described being “the fixer” or “the bank” (when people need money).

Overall, Emma, Renée, and Faith spoke of a self-sustaining process where they learned (from the women who came before them) that they needed to be independently successful. Emma is a woman who prides herself on independently raising her children and advancing through the ranks of her career by being hard working. Renée identified she is most like her mother than any of her siblings and learned to also independently raise her children, while working hard to advance in her company. She learned to work hard and sacrifice by herself in order to reach her career goals. Lastly, Faith also learned the value of independence and professional success, but she chose to work hard through formal education in order to achieve higher ranks in her jobs. Each discussed this self-sustaining process as something they learned to do in order to reach their goals.

## **Professional Success**

The first theme looked very different between the women, but became very important to them all early on in life. Through Emma's life she worked hard and did her best in any position she had, whether it was as "a food service worker or as the head of the labor union". She "wanted her children to see what it looked like to work hard at something, even if it was not the ideal job". Emma learned from her own mother the value of "working towards a goal and making your job the ideal one until it actually was". Hearing her mother say this made Renée chime in that she "remembered when [her] mom was working for the Department of Children and Family Services and the early and late hours she had". She remembered watching this seeing that "working was not easy, but it was what put food on the table. It was what you do day in and day out in order to say you have something". So, when Renée became a ticket cashier, she knew what it looked like to work hard and didn't mind the long hours. Further, she "didn't mind having to prove herself to be promoted and having to sacrifice to work the hours". Emma and Renée discussed "working this hard so that their children didn't have to". Renée may have had a similar process to her mother, but she felt it was "made easier, because she knew how to put in the work and how to put in the time to reach higher positions. [She] watched co-workers struggle with the idea of having to continuously prove themselves amidst racism and sexism, but she knew it was coming, because she watched [her] mom go through it". For Emma's granddaughter and Renée's daughter, they both wanted the way to be easier. They "struggled with seeing Faith go through the same issues of racism and sexism they had at her age". Faith felt these situations were different, because she "knew what it looked like to succeed in spite of the realities of racism and sexism. [She] had already seen her mother and grandmother go through it". So, when it came to reaching her professional goals, she was "able to look at those things and say, 'Oh,

that's what people do to black women. That's how they treat us". She decided from an early age, "that was not going to stop [her]". Her fight for success was within the context of higher education, as she received two master's degrees, in predominately white and/or predominately male fields. Although all three could remember times when someone helped them along their way, they spoke about an overwhelmingly independent journey towards success at achieving their goals. Specifically, each woman discussed learning from the generation before that a man was not necessary in achieving her goals. In fact, it could be possible for men to slow you down.

### **Being Independent**

To be independently successful, not relying on anyone else (particularly not a man) is another theme that emerged as these women told their stories. Both Emma and Renée discussed the difficulty of raising children on their own, but preferred that to the trials of being in a marriage. Both stayed away from mentioning specifics of their relationships, but made sure to mention they raised their children completely on their own – financially and emotionally. During her individual interview and discussion of her family genogram, Faith commented on "the pattern [she] saw, on both sides of her family, among the women: they were often very successful professionally, but did so on their own". In her own life, the lesson of independence translated to Faith securing her education and professional goals before getting married and having children. This quality allowed all three women to be self-sustaining and learn to rely on themselves to meet all needs. I suspect, due to their ability to be so self-sustaining and independent, these were the three women in the family who had the role of nurturer within their generation.

## **The Matriarch Role**

The final theme across the narratives is that of retaining the matriarch role of the family. All three women discussed learning to take care of everyone else and being the one that brought the family together. All three related to this role differently, but discussed the lessons they learned from young ages. Emma was the oldest (by far) of three and took care of her younger siblings early on. Renée was the youngest, but was the most like her mother and the most self-reliant. This deemed her the one who had it together and could help others. Lastly, Faith began taking care of her younger sister when her mother worked late. She is among the oldest of her generation and has the most education, also deeming her the one the rest go to for advice or help.

For Emma Nelson, Renée Brooks, and Faith Lorde, their identities as individuals and as a family relied heavily on professional success, independence, and being the matriarchs of their family. It is “just [they] are as African American women and who we learned to be”. Some of the lessons, like learning to live independently without the need for anyone else, were taught consciously, but others, like being the matriarch of the family, were roles given to them based on their level of success and personal characteristics.

During the family interview the three women discussed how these qualities that contributed to their being self-sustaining were developed as they learned to be and see themselves as African American women. There were many difficulties that came their way because of their race or sex and the best way they knew how to survive was “to be the best” and to “learn how on [their] own before asking anyone for help”.

## Family Two

The second family I interviewed for this research project consisted of three women eager to participate to discuss the love of their family, despite having unique circumstances that connected them. Mrs. Gwendolyn Clarke (who uses her maiden name often) is the step-aunt (by marriage) of Toni Walker, and step-grandaunt of Nikki Walker. Her father was Toni's husband's grandfather, who had four marriages, including his first marriage to Toni's husband's grandmother. Despite the complicated nature of their biological/family connections, these three women were very close and connected. To be in their presence, you would never know the intricate family tree they described.

All three women live in various parts of Georgia, but were born in northern states. Mrs. Gwendolyn Clarke is a 53-year-old marketing consultant, with a master's degree in public administration. She is married, with no children, and lives in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Mrs. Toni Walker is a 52-year-old bank administrator, who currently lives in Alpharetta, Georgia, and attained a Bachelor's degree. She is married with one daughter, Nikki. Nikki Walker is a 25-year-old full-time student, who currently resides in Athens, Georgia. She will be graduating with a Bachelor's degree in the coming months and is looking forward to continuing her education to become a social worker. This family of women has an expansive genogram, which showcases the intricacies of their family. Before participating in this study, they had already done some genealogy work with their family tree.

One of the most intriguing connections these women share is the focus each of their families had on nurturing them as self-sustaining individuals, while simultaneously cultivating the importance of family connection. These three women are extremely connected – I was able to witness this during their family interview and the ways they spoke of one another during their

individual interviews. Gwendolyn and Nikki share many of the same qualities of being comfortable in the center of attention and talking to anyone they meet, while Toni is more laid back and reserved. All three compliment one another and are in (or plan to be in) the perfect professions to match their personalities. What follows is the detailed genogram, used during the individual and family interviews, to elicit stories and members of their individual and family development. After the genogram comes the three individuals' narratives, constructed using the stories told during their individual interviews. Lastly, there is a family narrative, showcasing the themes generated across the three individual narratives.



**Gwendolyn Clarke: I Am**

Mrs. Gwendolyn Clarke was born in Brooklyn, NY and raised in West Hampton Beach, Long Island, New York. Her mother's aunt left her a home in the affluent, predominately white neighborhood known as "The Hamptons". Mrs. Clarke's father was born in Savannah, Georgia and orphaned at an early age. Her mother was born in Brooklyn, New York, but also lost her parents at a young age, and was sent to live with her grandmother in Raleigh, North Carolina. Both of Gwendolyn's parents worked hard and "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps" to succeed. Her father, with a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education, worked to become a top chef for affluent politicians in The Hamptons. Her mother raised Gwendolyn and her two brothers and was a talented seamstress.

During her interview, Gwendolyn offered artifacts and pictures from her family history. It was clear she was the family historian and kept sacred many of the family's stories. As she spoke of herself, she interweaved the intricate story of her family.

Gwendolyn described herself as "an African American woman" and said, "I can't duck and dodge from that when you look at me". As she went on, though, she described herself in terms of the era, cities, and family in which she grew up. Aside from describing herself as being born in Brooklyn and raised in West Hampton Beach, Long Island, Gwendolyn situated her birth in the larger social context:

I grew up in the days I call the assassination period – from 1962-1968 – with the Kennedys – both Kennedys – and Martin Luther King. So that impacted me from that standpoint, because of Civil Rights.

Gwendolyn reported not immediately recognizing the impact of being born and raised in this social context, but discussed how it began to impact her and her family as she got older. Even

while living in New York, there was some tension between the lessons Gwendolyn learned in school and those learned at home. She discussed growing up in “an all-white neighborhood and all-white community and not necessarily understanding [her] roots until [she] got older”. The result of this tension was that Gwendolyn was “called an Oreo” by her peers, meaning she was black on the outside and white on the inside. This impacted the way she viewed herself and developed a sense of identity. She said, “yes, I grew up in an all-white neighborhood and all-white community and not necessarily understanding my roots until I got older.”

As she got older, Gwendolyn started to get a sense of her black womanhood and began to develop a sense of self. She remembered going through various stages:

I was you know the quintessential, you know, “Oreo” and then by my junior – sophomore/junior year I became a little bit more radical because I was going back and forth into the city with my sister. You had the Dashiki’s going. And then you had the Hour or Rose, Black Power and James Brown going and all that revolutionary work going – the revolutionary work with Jimmy Hendrix going on.

She began to have a sense of pride in who she was and her African American culture, including dressing in a Dashiki and listening to Jimmy Hendrix. She continued to discuss some of what she thought to be “rebellious” behavior – behavior an African American girl, thought to be an “Oreo”, wouldn’t do.

I was more rebellious. Back in the day I wore my hair in cornrows with different colored beads on the end - oh, and I wore a Dashiki. Also, back in the day you could only wear dresses or skirts - you could not wear pants to school. I wore pants! My mother, to the day she passed, she was very supportive in all of us and so she would um she would allow me to wear pants and so I would say my mama would allow me to wear pants – so I

would wear a skirt over my pants – and no you could not do that you have to take your pants off when you get in school – well what sense does that make, and I would sometimes be in the principal’s office and in junior or senior high school – junior high is when I really began to be a rebel.

As an adult, Gwendolyn feels a strong identity as a woman and as an African American. She discussed, “I am a liberal kind of woman, okay? I am a Jane Fonda – I grew up in the 70s, girl – I believe in equal rights.” As Gwendolyn told her story, she discussed her “connection to her mother’s experience” and the ways she learned to be a black woman from her mother and other women in her family. From seeing them as “independent, yet connected to family”, she was able to take the lessons she learned about who she is, both at home and at her predominately white school, and combine them to develop her identity as a “liberal, proud, God-fearing black woman” Even though she did not learn the history of her ancestors at school, she came to learn (from her family and older siblings) there was a history “her people possessed.”

### **We Have A Lot of History**

One of the things Gwendolyn distinctly remembers learning as she grew older was there was so much missing in her knowledge about the history of black people. She expressed this during her interview, “black people, we have a lot of history.” Coming to this realization allowed her to think about where she grew up in relation to where her parents grew up. Gwendolyn reflected on the importance of education that was born from a lack of opportunity for her parents and grandparents to be educated.

I grew up in very white environment – but my mom and dad were very – especially my mom – was very adamant about education. My dad only had a 3rd grade education and my mom had a high school education and my mom worked her way through when she

was down in Raleigh, North Carolina. When she was with my great grandmother she had to work her way through a lot of things and back in the day, in the Jim Crowe days – my mother would say, ‘oh we were poor, we were poor’. When we moved down to Georgia, we went back down to her roots in Raleigh, North Carolina. She showed me where she grew up as a child and I always wanted to see where she had grew up at.

When she went back to North Carolina with her mother, Gwendolyn was able to get more of a sense of who she was and her roots. Particularly, she was able to see the humble beginnings her mother had and was told stories of how hard her mother worked to get to where she was. Another major lesson Gwendolyn learned was the connection she had to a community of black people that, by virtue of their personal closeness, were like family. She discussed what it is like to be raised with such community:

You know black families have a lot of folks that you always call aunt and uncle and cousins. You were raised – oh that is Aunt so and so, and that is Aunt – we have that extended family that black folks have always had due to slavery. We have learned that, because you were taken from your natural mother, you would find that you had to make family. People that you were around became your family.

This lesson was completely different than the lessons she learned in school as a child – she had to learn these lessons by talking to older people in her family. Gwendolyn remembered “how difficult it was to learn anything about [her]self because the school teachers never taught [her].” It was not until she “began to ask questions and look closely at her own family that she learned the rich history she came from”. When Gwendolyn asked questions she began to hear the rich family stories that were carried through the generations. Today, Gwendolyn is the keeper of these stories. As the only female of her generation alive, she has taken on the role of keeping these

stories and passing them on to the next generation. During our interview, she discussed some of these stories and the lessons she learned from a young age up through adulthood.

### **Family Stories**

One of the major turning points in Gwendolyn's family was when her mother inherited a house on Long Island, New York. It was this home that allowed Gwendolyn the ability to attend a "better" school than she would have in Brooklyn, where she was born. The education and social environment of The Hamptons afforded Gwendolyn, her brother, and both her parents opportunities they would have received in other parts of New York City. She was always told the story of her mother and her great-great Aunt Lucinda, which she recounted during her interview:

My mother's aunt which is my great-great-aunt had a house in West Hampton Beach, Long Island. My mother had all three of us kids my aunt never had kids, so my mother was basically her child. To make a long story short, when she passed away she left my mother her estate. I knew she was a special woman but I did not realize *how* special my great-aunt was until I was able to go through my mother's house and came across some paperwork. But my mother really loved my great-aunt – she just adored her.

The closeness of Gwendolyn's mother, Grace Eliza, and her aunt was something that "saved [Gwendolyn's] mother's life, because of the humble beginnings she came from." She had family that took care of her and told of these stories frequently to "let [Gwendolyn] know where [she] came from." Gwendolyn remembered, "my mom was one of two girls. Her parents died at a very young age from various health complications and my great-great grandmother raised her." Gwendolyn's mother made it a point to tell her stories, starting from a young age, about her own parents and grandparents. This gave Gwendolyn "the chance to learn more of herself and to better understand where [she] came from". One aspect of herself Gwendolyn "always finds joy

in talking about” is the connection of names on her mother’s side of the family. During the interview, she told me this part of her family’s past with the same pride in her voice:

My middle name is passed down from my great-grandmother, which is Eliza, and my grandmother’s middle name is Eliza, and my mother’s middle name is Eliza... and my middle name is Eliza. I guess that is that aspect of my family – we cannot do the Jr. thing but we can have Eliza to be with all our girls. So all of our middle names are associated with my mother’s side of the family. I guess from a female stand point I have to make my mark somewhere.

Gwendolyn briefly trailed off to discuss the fact that she and her husband had decided not to have children. Even though she didn’t have children, she felt it necessary to somehow keep the stories of her family alive, particularly that of the importance of connection of names in her family.

As Gwendolyn got back to discussing her nuclear family, she discussed her connection with her older brother and how this established her position in the family narrative as “the only girl” in the family that was “always protected by her older brother”.

I was protected, to a certain extent, by my oldest brother, Martin. When I grew up, all I had to say is, my name is Gwendolyn Clarke. Even today when I go home - oh you are Martin’s little sister, oh you are Emmitt’s little sister- because I am shorter than them both they call me little. So for me, I was – I was protected by my brothers. I was also protected by my mother. If my oldest brother Thomas did not like what I was wearing would say, ‘you go back upstairs and change or otherwise I am leaving without you.’ Or if I was at a school dance or a community dance – back in the day they used to have

community dances – if he did not like who I was dancing with he would come up to he would take his hand like he was cutting his neck.

Gwendolyn was positioned in a way that her older siblings took care of her as the youngest girl. Though she was the second to youngest (the middle child) in her nuclear family, it was as if she took on the position of the youngest simply because she was in a position to be protected as the only girl.

Gwendolyn's father had "four sets of children with [her] and her brothers being the last set". He had been in three other significant relationships before he married her mother and had three other "sets" of children. So, of all these groupings of children, Gwendolyn was the second to last and she was the youngest girl. Therefore, within the narrative of the family, she almost served as the baby of the family because of the position girls held with both her mother, father, and older siblings – that of needing to be protected.

Even as an adult, Gwendolyn cherished this position and reminisced about what it was like to have this position as "the baby" when she was younger. She discussed a role with her father that was different than her older siblings, which included more time with her father. She recounted a memory of a birthday party where her father "went all out" for her:

My parents would have parties and – I am talking about – my daddy, for my 12th birthday – most kids would have hot dogs and hamburgers and potato chips. No - that was not good enough for his baby. No – I had a turkey, macaroni and cheese, string beans – I had a formal dinner. I had a formal dinner!

The stories that contributed to the overall narrative of her family allowed Gwendolyn to produce a sense of self from a young age. She embraced the position of being her mother and father's baby, along with being the one to be protected. Gwendolyn's position in the family was not the

only lesson she learned as she developed her identity. She also learned different lessons from her mother and father that significantly contributed to who she wanted to ultimately become.

### **How My Mother Raised Us**

There were crucial lessons Gwendolyn's mother, Grace, taught her that she attributes who she ultimately became. One of the most significant was she could do anything she set her mind to and could expand her worldview just by trying new things. Gwendolyn remembered how her mother and father set the foundation for these lessons:

When I was growing up I liked music and entertaining and another aspect of my life that I think has molded me like I am was my girl scout years. My parents weren't able to travel a lot, so I was able to do those things through the Girl Scouts. Both my mom and dad encouraged us a lot to get out there and just experience the world.

Because of her position as the one who needed to be protected, there were family members that did not agree with Gwendolyn's mother's philosophy that she needed to experience the world, even as a young girl.

Because my great-grandmother's daughter passing away and all this stuff she was very close with my mom and my aunt – not letting them go out and do things to explore who they were. Whereas my mom was like, you know, 'the world is your oyster' and a lot of friends that we grew up with was like, 'Mrs. Clarke, are you going to let Gwendolyn ride the train from Long Island into New York City – aren't you scared?'

Her mother defended her decision to allow Gwendolyn the chance to explore the world around her in order to learn who she was.

And my mother was like, 'I am not going to be scared. I am not going to be with her always so she is going to have to learn how to do it'. My mom was the kind of person

that if you proved yourself –if you proved yourself trustworthy then you could do more, and more and more. So through girl scouts, being responsible – I tell everybody being responsible, understanding goals and achieving goals and in order to get a badge, you did not just get a badge, you had to go through all those assignments in order to get that badge, so it – things were not handed to you so that was another aspect and girl scouts gave me the opportunity to understanding organizational skills, team building skills, I mean I was involved in almost everything in school. Girl scouts, band, cheerleading, chorus – I was selected to be in the special choir and most of the time I was the only black female or only black. There was another black family with a set of girls and pretty much that family and we were pretty much – people would call us ‘tokens’.

Gwendolyn discussed how being “the token” allowed her the opportunity to “learn who she is and establish who she was going to be among her peers without assumptions being made about who she should be because of her race or gender.” Her role as one of few black girls in West Hampton Beach could have been a hindrance because of the instances of racism she encountered.

Gwendolyn’s mother combated the oppression by teaching her children there were no limits to who they could be. “My mother did not hinder us. You know, so that was influential a lot.” Along with the lesson of not being hindered, her mother taught Gwendolyn and her brothers that they were to learn how to do everything so that there was no time where they had to lean on another person to get things done.

My mother’s philosophy was everybody would – out of the three of us [kids] – everybody knew how to sew, how to cook, how to clean because she gave us – her tactic was survival skills.

By learning survival skills, Gwendolyn learned that she could control what she did in life. She looked at her mother's life and decided early on that she was going to take the skills her mother taught her and add onto them to propel herself forward in life.

I grew up and my mom kept us grounded but I realized that I knew – my mom was a laborer and she worked in a laundry mat and I knew that I did not want to work in no laundry mat because I saw her friend's kids go through that way. I was competitive and I did not realize this until about a couple of years ago. I was competitive with my brother, Martin, who is the doctor. I knew my daddy wanted my brother to be a doctor and me to be a nurse and I told my daddy, 'that ain't happening'. But I knew I was gonna be more – I knew I was not going to live out there in Long Island and not be productive I had to be something. Back then there weren't that many role models for black women. I wasn't light skin and tall, so I knew I could not be a model, even though I was pampered and I did go to a modeling school. That was my finishing school – my dad wanted me to have some kind of culture.

The lessons her mother taught her, particularly through the way she lived her life, stuck with Gwendolyn throughout the various stages of her life. She knew she did not want to struggle the same way her mother did and she wanted to get "the culture" her father worked hard to expose her to. Although there were no role models, per se, she was able to decide what more she wanted out of life by witnessing her mother's struggle. In the same vain, she learned to challenge herself and stay competitive to reach her goals.

Just like Gwendolyn's mother taught her lessons overtly, and through the way she lived her life, her father, Luther, also taught her lessons through the ways he raised his four sets of children.

## **How My Father Raised Us**

As much as Gwendolyn's mother was concerned most about encouraging the individual development of her children, Gwendolyn's father was just as concerned about contributing to the status of his family. "He worked hard to get the family the status. He was very – my father was very status oriented", Gwendolyn explained. She speculated this had to do with the beginning of her father's life, where he was not afforded many luxuries or opportunities as an orphan. Gwendolyn went on to explain, "especially my father being orphaned and all, but he worked himself – they called it 'worked himself up pulling it up by the boot straps.'" Gwendolyn spoke of her father as the head of the household who, despite their unique situation, took care of his family and worked hard to become successful as a private chef.

Gwendolyn discussed her father's story with ease, as it had become her norm. She comfortably described:

Our family is kind of new and unique. My father was married and had four sets of kids. So there are four sets of kids – there are seven of us in total. That is how I say it because my father did not raise us separately, or as step-siblings. Now my sister and my oldest brother were raised by people without my father, after their mothers had passed away – so he entrusted a lot of his friends to raise them as he worked on his craft.

Because of the large age gap between all of her father's children, Gwendolyn noticed a difference in the ways her father parented them all. The ways his children were raised was dependent upon the timing of his career. Gwendolyn's older siblings had "a different experience of him simply because he was younger when they were born. By the time [she] came around he was able to spend quality time raising them." She discussed the differences further:

So my older sisters were pampered. They were really, really pampered – I ain't jealous of that because I saw another side of my daddy when he was older and really couldn't do all that. Because he was that – when he was younger he was always working and going, going, going. Loved his family and made sure they were taken care of. I loved my daddy and no matter who you talked to, since I am his only living daughter, – but if you talked to my nephews on my sister's side – my oldest sister's son, Nikki's father or his brothers and sisters, and my sister, Shirley's son – they will all tell you that my father brought down through the generation 'you take care of your family. You dropped the seed, you water that seed and you make sure that seed is planted and grow. You do not forsake any of your kids.'

Luther Sr. made it abundantly clear he was going to always take care of his family, no matter what the circumstances. His goal was to become a private chef and work for "high society", which would sufficiently take care of his family and provide the status he worked for. Status was his goal and with that came a responsibility to always show the best. Gwendolyn discussed the type of parent her father was at home:

I never saw my parents drunk - ever! That was part of parenthood - you did not get drunk in front of your kids. Responsibility - you did not get intoxicated. My mom smoked, my father would have his martinis when he would come home. My daddy worked in the city the majority of the time and would come home on the weekends. He would be gone with his people three or four months to Florida, because he was a private chef. He would call every week and talk to us. He was very responsible. My father and my mother never scuffled - never fought - that was never - I was not raised in that environment. My father

never put his hands - my father put his hands on me once and he apologized and never put his hands on me again.

Even during his absence, while working, Gwendolyn's father maintained the role as the head of the household. Along with that role, he taught her that "you could always control your circumstances and just work harder to get into a different or better situation." His level of responsibility made a "profound effect on [Gwendolyn's] life. It was less about what someone else told you you couldn't do or where you came from, but more so about what you did to be better." This notion continues to follow Gwendolyn as she maneuvers through various professional decisions. Being able to make these decisions can be attributed to the tenacious qualities Gwendolyn clearly got from her father – there continues to be nothing that can stand in her way.

The family stories passed down through the generations, along with what Gwendolyn witnessed as her parents raised her, often taught her that survival was possible no matter what the circumstances.

### **Surviving Humble Beginnings and Becoming Something**

The circumstances that met Gwendolyn's parents were far more substantial than hers as she grew up in The Hamptons – the lesson, though, remained the same. For Gwendolyn's mother, Grace, the circumstances were losing her parents at a young age and having to work most of her life for all she had. She had to forgo formal education in order to work and bring money into the house. Gwendolyn remembered what her mother told her about her upbringing:

She would always say, 'oh we were poor, we were poor', but great-grandma, great-grandma was not poor! Great-grandma had five acres of land that she share cropped but

to my mom they were poor because she had to do – milk the cow, do the chickens, bring in and cut the wood. My mother's role was the male role because there was no boys.

Her mother taught Gwendolyn she had to work for everything she had in life. These were lessons that came out of the necessity her mother's family had of working the land for food, heat, etc.

The lesson translated into a lesson that Gwendolyn “couldn't take anything for granted and had to utilize the advantages [her] mother and father worked for to get her own food and shelter”.

Similarly, Gwendolyn's father was born into circumstances that made him have to work harder to gain success. She discussed her father's beginnings:

My father had a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education but they both worked very hard. My father was orphaned when he was 7 years old. His mother passed away and his father went off on his own, so he was put in an orphanage run by Catholic nun's in Savannah for about two or three years.

Having a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education and then “pulling himself up by his bootstraps” became the difference for Gwendolyn's father to move ahead in life. During the interview, it was a source of pride for Gwendolyn to discuss her father's self-actualization through hard work and determination. She beamed, “because back in the day, to come from very humble beginnings and very poor beginnings, then to work very hard to be one of the top chefs for the high black society back then – that was awesome!”

As her father worked his way up to becoming “one of the top chefs for the high black society”, he learned to first act as he would if he already had that stature. Gwendolyn speculated on this, “my father was poor from the beginning and people from that generation often did not want to show that they were poor, so he strived to be of stature and of class – you never saw my father in jeans.” To her father, “moving ahead” meant attaining a level of class he never had as a

child and the he was not born into. He was not born into a class of people that would be able to cater for high society or even be able to enter those circles. His emphasis on these things was transferred to Gwendolyn. Even as she reminisced about the names of the people her father worked for, she displayed a sense of pride in *who* her father became:

My father catered to the very wealthy and rich. When I say the very wealthy, and very rich, I am talking about – he was the private chef for the people that used to own Budweiser. He catered for people like Al Capone – he catered for at the time before he became President – John F. Kennedy when he was a senator, before he became President. And that is how he survived from his humble beginnings as an orphan – remember how I told you his humble beginnings? The way you saw him – he just pulled himself by the bootstraps. He became something.

At that time, it was about who you knew and how you fit into higher society. Gwendolyn learned the importance of getting in with the “right crowd of people” from a young age by watching her father. She also learned that, in order to get in with the right people, you had to look and act the part. Gwendolyn remembered how her father made sure her sisters became part of high society:

My sisters were pampered. Although people think that I was spoiled – they were spoiled I mean anything they wanted. I mean back in the day – Saks Fifth Avenue – because my father had to go into those places with his white people he worked for – they got clothes from Sacks Fifth Avenue, Nordstrom – My oldest brother’s god-father owned the Empire State Building.

Gwendolyn’s sisters were considerable older than she, so they learned to dress the part of higher society as their father continued to work his way up. By the time Gwendolyn was born, her father was established as a top chef and her mother had inherited the home in the high class area

of The Hamptons, New York. The lessons about being “high class” Gwendolyn learned from her mother were very different than those she learned from her father. Even though her mother came from similarly humble beginnings, Gwendolyn learned that things came to you by doing them yourself. She remembered how her mother made sure both she and her brothers knew how to live independently:

With my mom, in our household, we all had to do the same stuff – wash dishes – everything. We grew up in a humbled beginning. My aunt’s house was heated – the hot water was heated by coal – so when we grew up, coal would come in and we had all heating. The whole house was central heat but if you did not start that fire – that coal stove from 1961 to about 1971 or 72 – you would have to put some hot water on the stove. We all had to help out with that.

Similar to when her mother was a child, Gwendolyn had to learn what it took to “work for what [she] had and not to take it for granted.” It would have been easy to look around and see the nice home they lived in and the high society crowds they were a part of and assume they had made it and decide not to continue to work hard for what they had, but Gwendolyn’s mother “was always a reminder that you had to work for what you had.” She remembered seeing her mother fall on difficult times, but continue working hard for what they had:

My mom would find time in her busy schedule, with a sick husband, three kids, a house... She would stay up until one in the morning making us socks. She would make us gloves and stuff for Christmas. She would just make these things until Christmas.

When my father got sick Christmas was much harder - it was 'we don't have enough for you'. She made Christmas ornaments and things of that nature and we would love that she

would have a nativity scene. She would have a nativity scene and above the nativity scene, she would have crocheted angels.

Looking back on this during the interview allowed Gwendolyn the insight to identify the work it took for her mother to both keep up the status her father felt was so important and instill in her children the importance of working for what you have. It was not until she became an adult that Gwendolyn realized that her father and mother were “keeping up a façade of status”. As she thought back, she reflected, “My dad would give money to my mom for televisions, bicycles, clothes, etc. I would get clothes from New York – Bloomingdales and Sacks Fifth Avenue... I didn’t know I was poor.” It was important to both her parents that their children have a good life.

Gwendolyn learned about moving ahead in life no matter what the circumstances by hearing her parents tell of their humble beginnings and watching them fight to get ahead in life. She also learned the value of family from her parents, whose own parents were not in their lives. Gwendolyn stated, “the humble beginning of my parents – both of them losing their parents at a very young age – they treasured family very much.” She learned to treasure family because her parents held them so close – this became part of her identity. Gwendolyn reflected on this during the interview:

So for me – as being a black woman and my identity – I can’t deny that because I understand the humble beginnings. As far as I can remember I came to know that my mother and my father both had – well didn’t have parents and I was fortunate enough to have them until adulthood – until they became a ripe old age. My father died at 75 and my mother at 85.

Family became part of who Gwendolyn learned to be – it was an important part of her fabric and make-up. She knew that is could have been different, given the type of beginning her parents

had. Gwendolyn reflected, “from that stand point I am very blessed to have the parents I had, because they could have taken another turn in life.” Even with humble beginnings and even with “being poor financially”, Gwendolyn’s parents (particularly her mother) had the sense to learn from and take advantage of being able to “sit in” with high society. She discussed this further:

And then we had my parent’s wisdom. I do not know why or how it happened but they took my great-aunt’s laundry room or shack or building and they converted that into a two-bedroom cottage. They rented that out and as long as I can remember we always had tenants to help pay the mortgage – and I don’t know if that is something that my aunt told them to do – I don’t know. To this day we still have that property up in Long Island and we are renovating the big house now. And that is part of how my parents paid their bills and we always had gatherings and even to the day, we all get together for whatever reason and we just have a big old time.

Family is such a big part of who Gwendolyn describes herself to be. For her, “it was family that taught her that, no matter what, you could survive and become whatever you want.” Even as we discussed being singled out because of her race at times, she “attributed surviving all that to family. Because with family, [she] was so much more than her race and so much more than what people called [her].”

### **Sibling Culture**

In Gwendolyn’s nuclear family, at home, she was in the middle of two brothers who learned, just like she had, the importance of getting ahead through determination and hard work. Her father wanted his children to work hard in fields that would continue the status he worked so hard for. “My daddy wanted my older brother to be a doctor and he wanted me to be a nurse,” Gwendolyn remembered. Though she knew nursing was not for her, Gwendolyn was determined

to work just as hard as her older brother and prove herself a hard worker too. She said, “my oldest brother Luther, being 5 years older than me, was going off to college when I was still in middle school, but I was like if he can go to college so can I!” Gwendolyn knew what she was capable of, but had to prove herself to everyone else around her who compared her to her older brother. She remembered what this was like for her:

So my older brother by him going before me – so when I was going through school there was the question, ‘are you as smart as your brother? Can you do this? Your brother did this and your brother did that’. I did not take it as a rebel as that – well I am not as good in the sciences as he is, but I can hold my own. And I did. I had to prove that ‘I am Gwendolyn and no, I am not good in the sciences, but I can come up with a B. I cannot come up with an A like Luther did, and I can sing and I can do this’. I just became who I was and when Martin Luther King passed away, and the Revolutionary thing came about, my brother was going to college then so I had that exposure to college thing.

Even though Gwendolyn and her brother had different strengths, she learned by his example that it was possible to go to college. When I asked how she was able to know at such a young age that she did not have to be exactly like her brother, but could “just become who she was”,

Gwendolyn attributed this to her mother’s example, because her mother was the traditional laborer, but she taught Gwendolyn that she could do whatever she wanted to do, as long as she did it well. Her mother taught all her children this and gave them the tools to be independent in the world.

Though many of the lessons from the mother were the same for Gwendolyn and her brothers she did learn that, as the only girl, she was to be treated differently in some aspects. For example, Gwendolyn discussed the “golden rule”:

This was the deal, we could fight, but the Golden Rule in the house was ‘if you put your hands on your sister, you get...’ My younger brother failed one time to remember the Golden Rule and he was threatened with his life by my mother. 'If you put your hands on your little sister one more time, then you will be out the house.' This is when he was 18 or 19.

Instead of breaking the rules about putting his hands on her, Gwendolyn’s older brother taught her lessons to defend herself. Gwendolyn remembered a story of her brother defending her against a white boy who “felt it necessary to pick on [her] because she was a little black girl”:

My oldest brother wrestled, so he taught me how to fight. My older brother got put in detention because this white boy decided - it was back in the 60's of integrated Long Island - to put his hands on me. My brother beat his ass! He said, 'If I can't put my hands on my sister, you can't either!'

Gwendolyn made a joke of this story as she told it during the interview, but then discussed how she “remembered things like this happening all the time”. She said, “growing up as a minority affords you these types of stories of white kids picking on you or trying to make you feel less than because of what you look like or how you were born”. Gwendolyn’s older brother was also there to teach her this type of lesson, because she witnessed him “go through similar things, which taught [her] it’s never-ending”.

Gwendolyn learned that, though she had to learn to independently move forward in life, her older brother was there as a motivator. He motivated her through his own success and by teaching her she was always to be protected. Of all the lessons in their household, Gwendolyn and her brother learned “all you have is family” and “it’s important to preserve it at all costs.”

## **Importance of Family**

It was customary for the Clarke family to often get together and have large gatherings. Gwendolyn's father had four sets of children whom he made of point of raising together as full brothers and sisters (as opposed to half-brother/sister). One way of doing so was to orchestrate yearly gatherings for special occasions. One such occasion was Gwendolyn's parent's anniversary. She discussed this yearly get-together:

When mommy and daddy moved out to Long Island daddy would have a festive gathering in August, because that was their anniversary. Back in the day I can remember my dad would get a limousine service for the whole family to come to our house.

The family would gather around food, which was Mr. Clarke's way of celebrating. Gwendolyn remembered the importance of food:

That is the best portion of our family. Yep, on my daddy's side. Pigeon peas and rice, and see, we would just – we had a blended family. People say, 'oh the blended family' – no black folks had the blended family before white folks called it that. Sister's, brothers, stepsisters, cousins, everybody just came together to PARTAY...that was the partying house. You partied from the top floor to the basement and when I said party in the 70s – use your imagination.

Part of what Gwendolyn valued about her family was the tradition of closeness to one another that was passed down. Each of her siblings "understood the importance of being with one another and continue that to this day." Gwendolyn discussed this:

Every other Thanksgiving we all get together – they first started getting together and the word grew to a point where at Thanksgiving – it is either here or Florida – we have between 45 and 70 people at a gathering. We cook about 7 turkeys, 4 or 5 hams – my

specialty is my mother's rolls. 'You got to cook grandma's rolls, you got to cook grandma's rolls' – my mother's rolls are yeast rolls. I am the one in the family that has perfected her rolls. They were baseball bats in the beginning.

Laughing, Gwendolyn expressed being grateful for "having [her] mother around long enough to pass on recipes and quilting." It was these traditions that became part of who Gwendolyn is in the family – she learned to make the rolls that became a staple in the family over generations. Similarly, Gwendolyn makes quilts, like her mother did, for every member of the family.

### **Breaking the Cycle**

Family continues to be one of the most important aspects of life for Gwendolyn. She discusses her family fondly and remembers various stories that speak to the importance of family to her "above all else". Gwendolyn knows the contributions her mother and father made to the identity she describes so proudly today. Their contributions, though, were not always so conscious on their part. She learned what she *did not* want to become or the way she *did not* want to live by watching her parents' struggles. She discussed this:

I did not want to be poor. I did not want to be a laborer. I knew I had enough stamina, personality and I made sure I was educated. I was competitive with my white counterparts and if they were able to go to college, I was able to go to college. My high school counselor was trying to – 'oh, don't you want to be like. I don't think you are as smart as your brother' – and I was like, 'yeah right!' I was in competition with my older brother. Did not understand it then but I understand it now. I wanted to prove I could go to college, even though my older sisters did not go to college.

As a girl in her family and as a black girl in society, it meant everything to Gwendolyn that she succeed by everyone else's standards, as well as her own. The way she had to do this was to take what her parents showed in their life and become more.

I had to break that cycle and I knew that I was the last girl. I would be the first girl to go to college and, back in the 70s, to be the first to do something in your family was big. So Luther was the first boy to go to college and was going to med school. I was 5 years behind him and I needed to do the same thing. I knew I was not going to med school but I knew I had to go to college. Luther was on my case at all times. I graduated as about a B student – 3.35, 3.4. I wasn't dumb enough to be in the C's or to be challenged but I was not a Harvard kind of person. With my mother's salary and my father's social security I was in that cusps' kind of thing with financial aid. I did not know what I was going to do, but I just knew I was going to college.

Her older brother was the only view into college Gwendolyn had and she had to hold onto his advice, even while being in competition with him. Like many black kids that were able to go to college during the 70's, Gwendolyn did not have many role models from the generation before that could teach her how to survive or how to get through. Gwendolyn simply became motivated by the thought of her parents' struggle as laborers.

I did not have any role models. I love my mom, I love my dad, but I was not going to be a laborer. And my freshmen year, between my freshman and sophomore year in college I worked in my mother's laundry mat. That taught me a lesson – it taught me a lesson. I almost fainted twice! I am like mama, 'how the heck' (couldn't say hell then). How the heck – I don't know how you can do it. I just knew. And the other ladies she knew, their daughters when they graduated would go there to work and I was like 'NOT! Oh my God

NO!' My father had instilled pride and although he loved his wife and although he took care of her – his ego was like, 'oh my wife is working'. But, you know...

Part of what Gwendolyn learned from her father was to have enough pride in yourself that you did not have a job that would *look* bad to others. Further, it was important to uphold the image of status. The purpose of going to college for Gwendolyn was, in part, to have this image. College was difficult for Gwendolyn, because of society around her, which felt that black people (particularly, black women) were not able or worthy of being college-educated. Gwendolyn remembered an instance that taught her just how unprepared she was, as a black woman in college:

So, when I went to school, this white professor freshman year – it was a psychology class, all white class, Lutheran school, in Pennsylvania, all white school, 1 of 13 blacks on campus. Freshman year, first class, 8:00 – I can remember the first class – skinny ass white professor walking in with emphysema and an oxygen tank on his back and did this IQ test and skills test thing. I guess he had the privilege of reading everybody's files and, after you took the test, you had to go to his office and visit him. His comment to me was, 'don't you want to be like your mother and father and be like a domestic engineer?' You know back then – he was getting smart with his comment – domestic engineer? He gave me my first D. He gave me my first D. I told him, 'No!' So, you know, those are the kinds of things that molded me –that was 1976.

Gwendolyn remembered being "thrown off" by her professor's lack of believing in her abilities just as a person, because "all he could see was the color of my skin and that I was a girl. He took one look at me and decided all I could do was be like my mother and father." This lack

of support all around her took its toll on Gwendolyn's success in college. She discussed a turning point that involved her brother:

And I was like, 'I ain't gonna make it.' I had just had my first year and my oldest brother pulled me aside and said, 'we ain't wasting our money – you better get your grades. You better make your grades.' I mean my brother was the disciplinarian. My mother allowed my brother to do that – that was his role in the family – it did not work too well with my younger brother, though. My younger brother – if you think I am feisty! But, I had to start shaping myself.

Gwendolyn quickly learned that, if she “wanted to succeed in college and have a better life than her parents, [she] had to do better in school.” Another change forced Gwendolyn to fight even harder to attain a college education. As the only girl and, simply, “the only one who could do it” she had to come back home to help her mother take care of her elder, ill father. She remembered that time and what it meant to her:

Then my father was getting very ill and I came back home and saw my mom struggle – she stopped work to take care of my dad. My oldest brother by then was in medical school and I knew that he could not stop – he could not stop medical school. My younger brother went to my older brother's alma mater – I knew it was miracle even for him to get into school. He got into school based on my older brother. So, I was the one in the family that could – I chose myself to be the sacrificial lamb to help my mom take care of my dad. My older sister also took care of my dad when she could get off work and could come to Long Island, until he passed away. So I came home and went to school part-time. There was this Catholic Nun – between my sophomore year, junior and senior year when my teacher told me I was “too black” because I was wearing my Dashiki, and I had my

hair in cornrows, the professor at this white school saying that the best I could ever be was a domestic engineer – and then this white nun at a community school telling me that I would never write well – could not do well, but I busted out every single paper or test that she ever gave me. Nun's can be very prejudiced – oh yeah! You would be surprised. There continued to be instances of racism that followed Gwendolyn's college career, as she struggled to develop her identity. With her Dashikis and her cornrows she was “expressing who she was as a black woman and loving it!” But, it seemed to make her way harder in the two schools she attended, because those expressions “said something to her teachers and others around her.” It said that she was proud of who she was and believed she could be something more than a domestic – “they did not like that.”

At this point in her life, Gwendolyn began to think about what she wanted to do as a profession. She started to “think about [her] experiences and think about the type of person [she] was”. Gwendolyn discussed this process:

But those are some of the things I went through. And when I was going through undergrad and I started formulating in my mind what I wanted to be, I started looking at newspapers to identify all the opportunities. I knew that I wanted to make money. I was a sociology major, with a minor in business. When I saw how the social service system was treating my dad and my mom when she quit her job and was trying to help care for my dad during his last year of his life, I came home. My mom and dad were on welfare and I was working part time and going to community school. They told me the money that I gave my mom was going to be deducted from the money that they gave them! That was my end for wanting to work in social services! I thought I wanted to be a social worker and stuff and I was like, ‘no, I ain't gonna make enough money to live the lifestyle that I

think I am capable of living'. Once again not understanding that was the competitiveness – the competitiveness with my older brother, although some of it still exists! I started looking in newspaper and seeing what kind of careers were available and I heard about this things called computers and when I was at school in Pennsylvania, there was this other lady who was really smart – I was pretty good at math – and she was like look into computers, but I am not the kind of person that sits still to do coding.

Gwendolyn continued to fight for two things: to break free of the cycle of domestic work and to be competitive with her older brother who was in medical school. The advent of computers and jobs working with computer was Gwendolyn's ticket to a better life, because of the money offered for those jobs. Also, if she did a good job and got good grades, she would be right "up there with Luther Jr."

So I knew I had to finish out in four years – I finished out my degree. Once I came home my father lasted for about nine months before he passed and I helped my mother out. I went to South Hampton University, which was a part of the Long Island University system. I finished my undergrad studies with a major in sociology and minor in business. I took a lot of computer classes and I took summer internships, where I could, at a local utility company called Long Island Lighting Company. Back in the days you had the cards that you had for the big IBM machines and I started taking more and more classes for computers because I saw more and more jobs out there for computers. I did not know what I wanted to do with computers but if I knew something about computers then maybe I could get a better job because if you knew something about computers you knew the salary was better. I was fortunate enough to have people around me that – my grades were very good – by then I had started to get real focused and I was on the Dean's list

and President's list and yada, yada. At South Hampton College – between the summer schools and my grade average – I graduated with Cum Laude – because my brother graduated Cum Laude so I knew I had to – he did Cum Laude or Magnum Cum Laude.

Gwendolyn went on to talk about the choices she had during and after her undergraduate career:

A couple of my professors and administrators at South Hampton College knew I was on the president's list and all this other stuff. The sister school to South Hampton College is C.W. Post in Long Island, in Suffolk County, Long Island, and those professors heard of a graduate scholarship. Now I knew when I graduated from college that one of three things was gonna happen: either I was going to go to grad school, going into Armed Services, or get the hell out of dodge – Long Island, West Hampton Beach – because there were no careers there. I was applying to all kinds of jobs and could not find anything. But my professors and administrators found out about a graduate-ship at the sister school for a Master's Degree in Public Administration. I got a full graduate scholarship to do my Master's. And the trade off – I did not have enough money for room – it did not cover room – so I negotiated with the housing department and with the student activities (that is where I got my scholarship) that I would start out doing statistical analysis and whatever they needed. When they had rooming for the kids to help kids register for rooms and stuff. So that was my trade off for a single room on campus when I did my first year at grad school and I did such a good job and the director of housing, which is the director of student activities said, 'we want to bring Gwendolyn over to our division and she can continue to do her graduate work because she is doing such a good job we want her to be a director over a residence hall.' So I would have 5 staff and be responsible for 125 students.

Gwendolyn continued to use education as her ticket to something better and her ticket out of West Hampton Beach. Her mother taught her there was nothing she could not do and to at least try anything, so she worked hard for scholarships, trying anything that would allow her to finish school without student loans. She learned something about herself at that time:

I was just really a go-getter – internships, I would do whatever I need to do. I married Public Administration with computers. I knew that if you had any knowledge of computers and could do what you needed to do in computers that you can move forward. I learned I had this knack to talk with folk. By the time I finished all my class work it was 1983 – no 1980 – 1983. I finished all my class work and a small company called McDonald Douglas had a big surge in getting more minorities into companies – I was a token black – but that is okay. I was exposed to more and more computers and one thing led to another – but I was feisty there too because they were using me like a token because they gave me a territory that they knew was dead.

In the early 80's companies were increasing the number of minority employees they had, so it coincided well with Gwendolyn's desire to get into the field of computers. There continued to be some struggle, though, in establishing herself in the field because of the lack of opportunities she received as one of few (if not, the only) black employees hired. But, she continued to move on with the motivation to break the cycle and build upon the foundation her parents set for her.

And from there – a friend of mine did some work on my resume with my background of understanding computers and other stuff. With another friend I had the opportunity of working with another small company called Pepsi Cola – as a supervisor of their telecommunications department. This all happened with my background that I had building up and building up and building up.

With the experience she was gaining, Gwendolyn began to prove herself worthy of promotions and moved up in her field.

And basically what I have done is over the years I have taken one skill set and built it up and rounded myself for whatever I thought I needed for the next level and rounded myself for the next level, and next level, and just challenging myself. At one time I was doing one year goals, three year goals, and five year goals. The white man that was from where I took that other job at the Department of Corrections – he said, let me tell you something, ‘you have the skill sets and the knowledge. I see you in here doing this and doing that.’ He said, ‘for every – back then it was for every year of life you should be earning at least a thousand dollars for that year.’ Ain’t nobody tell me this – but he told me this behind his closed door – he just bailed out all this knowledge base and the stuff stuck with me and I took that knowledge with me. I had my Bachelor’s by then and I was going – I had my Master’s courses with me. I would say, ‘I am worth that much? A white man is telling me I am worth that much? Okay, I will take it!’ So I just started plowing through that and by the age of 26 I owned my first place.

It was an unbelievable lesson that Gwendolyn’s white mentor taught her about her worth in the job market she was in. For such a long time Gwendolyn’s peers tried to teach her that she “wasn’t worth anything because of the color of [her] skin or because of what was between [her] legs”. During her 20’s though, she learned that these things did not matter, but that her job experience and book knowledge that she worked so hard for would carry her through and that it would give her the money she always hoped for.

After getting married, Gwendolyn got married and moved to Georgia, the same state where her father was born. She quickly learned that, in terms of her jobs and wages, it was a

mistake because all of the experience she gained up North meant nothing. “In the South,” Gwendolyn explained, “there were more opportunities for employers to be racist and sexist in their hiring practices and in how much they offered experienced, but black, employees.” She still stuck with the life lessons that brought her through so many times before: just keep working hard. Gwendolyn talked about her experiences in Georgia:

After I got married and moved down South, I went from making \$45-50,000 per year to \$10/hour - I had to work myself up again. I prayed to God and said I need a company that is small enough that I can move up in and utilize my skills and do something internationally, grow the company, yada, yada, yada. So, I was doing consulting work from 2002 to about 2005 – I was doing contract work. 2006 I was working for the Department of Education for DeKalb – MISTAKE! My mom was here and 2007 after she died – about 5 months before she passed – I stopped working there and took care of my mom and went back to doing some consulting work and contracting work with AT&T, once again getting my background – getting all together and helping sustain this house here because I am the typical black woman – I make more money than my husband. Now I work for an internationally run company – German based. I am the first Global Program Manager for this company managing across various regions – North America, Europe and Asia. I am the first female – the first black female in this role.

She spoke with pride of her journey to this time in her life. After having to re-invent herself in the South, Gwendolyn is in a place where she loves what she does and has the power (and money) she feels she deserves. Even though she continues to be the only black woman in the room sometimes, she takes pride in being the first or being the only, because she “gets to be the one setting the standard for how black women work.” When I asked her about her experiences

with racism or sexism she discussed an unfortunate phenomenon in business (and other fields) where it is “actually other black women that are making ways hard for me.” She discussed this further:

And I am making, once again, in roads. I was, again, brought on by a white man. At At&t I was working for a sistah and it was hell. Down here [in the South], it definitely makes a difference with the – within a racial group connections it is very hard to make connections within your race because a lot of people feel that they have a lot to prove or the woman that you worked with who is black is probably – it was probably difficult for her.

Though her way was difficult, Gwendolyn is “proud of the fact that [she] was able to take care of both [her] parents and get [her] education so that [she] could move ahead and break free of the cycle of feeling that domestic work was the only work we could do.”

### **Toni Walker: Identify/Identified As**

Toni Walker is a 52 year-old married bank administrator. She was born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin, and is the oldest of five children in her family. Toni is the wife of Gwendolyn Clarke’s nephew. She comes from a family of highly educated people, who passed down the importance of education throughout the generations. Toni’s father was born and raised in Americus, Georgia and her mother in Paris, Tennessee. Both were in Madison, Wisconsin where they met, married, and started a family.

Toni’s interview was conducted in her office at a large bank in Atlanta, GA. She discussed what it was like to experience movement, both physically and professionally, throughout her life and have it centered around education. In her professional world in corporate America, Toni has often “felt [her] blackness and her woman-ness, but never allowed those

experiences to define who [she] is.” Who she is has always been defined by the family she came from and the one she worked hard to create with her husband and daughter. For her, “it’s the movement forward in life that defines” her. As she sat, poised at her desk, in her tailored suit she described a life that beautifully defines itself.

When I asked Toni to describe herself, she quickly answered:

I am an African American woman. I generally try not to reference age because I don’t want anybody to know. You know, I still say ‘black’ on occasion, so I know that is different, as time has evolved. What I describe myself as has become different over the years, based on how we are defined around us.

Toni discussed “always being aware of herself due to the environment around her as a child.” She remembered “always referring to [her]self as that way. That’s how my family growing up described themselves.” Toni remembered having only positive (or normal) experiences with her race until high school. She discussed a time when being black was not so positive:

I do remember the first time that I felt mad about being African American because it was name calling and I was actually – if you can believe it – in high school before I ever had a really negative experience. Where somebody was very pointedly picking on me, calling me bad names or whatever just because of my ethnicity, which is odd because I think that many people face it younger. Well, it was sports and I don’t remember all the particulars, and we were in a competition, and it was gym class and we were playing soccer and somebody on the opposing team just started calling me ‘nigger’ – and I don’t even remember why just to be truthful – and I was like ‘what is he talking about.’ And I think I was also mad because I didn’t get a real reaction from the teacher. I mean they said don’t say that but they did not really react. And they should have been as mad as I was.

It was at this point that Toni realized that she was “different” and that the negativity of her peers was not going to be addressed by those in authority. At this point, Toni realized that, “when it came to race, it had become socially acceptable to be racist.”

As the oldest child Toni experienced things that she then had to teach her younger siblings about. Also, being the youngest positioned her for certain roles within the family – it became her job to pull the family together and to be the teacher or the first one to experience things. She discussed this further:

I am the oldest of five. I think being in the oldest you have certain responsibilities to help out with everybody else. I certainly had that in terms of – between me and my next sister there is only a year difference and even the youngest two – the twins are – 5 years younger. I did not do a lot of babysitting or anything but I was the go-to-person I guess for them. So I think, you know, that was certainly part of my role. I was a real, I guess, rule follower and so, you know, that creates its own set of challenges for them who are not! But, so I was kind of in that role at times and sometimes that was a wedge but sometimes that was a, you know, link – A gatherer in different times and different circumstances.

Given her position and role in her family, Toni was not focused as much on what was happening in the world around her socially. In her personal world “there were slight experiences based on race, but for the most part [she] was able to just be herself and focus on education, which was really important in the family.”

Toni discussed her experience of learning about African American culture in her early schooling and what that was like for her. Given she received the “traditional American History

lesson” there was not much she learned outside of her home about what it meant to be African American.

You get a lot of information just from school. And traditional school everywhere – not just there – does not necessarily promote a lot of black history. So I learned – I don’t know – American history that is in the history books – from a formal education prospective.

For her, “to be African American meant to be about family and take your responsibilities in your family seriously. Also, to make sure you were a leader.” Toni reflected on her focus on education, instead of what was going on in the world around her:

Other than that one experience that I mentioned to you right away, I can’t say that I had any terrible experiences, but I was a little bit younger in the civil rights movement. Like I could not go eat somewhere – so, maybe there was racism, but I didn’t know it. But by the time I was a teenager, when we were thinking about going out somewhere, we could eat in a restaurant.

It wasn’t necessarily that Toni was oblivious to the Civil Rights Movement, it was more so that “in [her] part of the country, in The North, it wasn’t as obvious and you were able to live your life, go to school, without being reminded of the struggle.” She speculated, “and I think that is a transition that is challenging for younger people today because, if you don’t have that experience personally, you kind of think that is not true. I don’t mean to say not true but it is not real to you.” Toni had an advantage as she was developing her identity, because she did not have to integrate the negativity surrounding being black that others may have, simply because of her location in Wisconsin – it was less overt. So, for the most part, her “experience of being black

and being a women was great and [she] was able to develop a sense of self that was mostly influenced by family.”

This influence of family on personal development strongly included the belief in yourself no matter what stood before you. Toni reflected, “a large part of who I was became more about the level of control I had in determining what and who I could be.”

### **Don't Sell Yourself Short**

As the interview continued, Toni made it clear that her parents, through the way they lived, taught her that it was an essential quality of self to be the first (and sometimes the only) one to believe you could do something in order to actually do it. She stated:

The community I grew up in was actually predominately non-African American and I knew that something was different but I think my parents were always very focused on ‘you can do’, ‘you can be as good as’, ‘you *are* as good as’, ‘don’t sell yourself short’. The confidence level never really made me feel deprived or deficient in anything or in any way because of the way that environment was.

From her perspective, Toni’s individual development as an African American child had this strong foundation of always knows she was just as good as anyone else and could do anything anyone else could do. She discussed how this influenced her:

I think it was a good influence – it certainly did influence me – I think that, as an individual, things that happen around you, you feel them and you feel good about them or mad about them or whatever and I think all of that absolutely influenced the way that I looked at the world, but I always come back to this microcosm of my family and so even when you thought there were bad things about, from that perspective, you felt good about yourself because of your immediate environment.

Within this environment, grounded in the idea that you can do anything, Toni learned to strive to attain an education at any cost. This started with her parents:

The most important thing for both of my parents was education – it was making sure that we were all handling our business – that is the best way to say it – that we were all doing what we were supposed to do and to stay focused on not just being in school but doing well in school. I don't think there was any question that we would all go to college – you know- and we can talk more about that later but it was just an expectation that it was – I want to say it was unspoken, but obviously it was spoke. We were well aware of it and it was not a question. My sister right next to me went to University of Wisconsin and then joined me at FAMU [Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University] because I was describing my experience and she was living her experience and she thought mine was really good. And so she came. My youngest sister actually went to Wisconsin for one year and then she went to Xavier. And that is where she finished and my brother, he finished from Wisconsin. Yeah – but we all finished.

Going on after high school was not a choice in Toni's family because generation after generation attended college. It difficult for African Americans to be educated in this country, but Toni's mother, aunt, and uncle attended college no matter the cost. Her uncle, in particular, paid his way through his own college education by working and going to school full-time. Toni added, "this was a great feat in those days."

Toni's parents may have said aloud that there was no choice in getting a higher education, but their actions *showed* the importance of school. She remembered the encouragement her parents gave throughout school:

That was our environment. I think a lot of encouragement and involvement and things that we did in school – our parents were involved and came to the band concert, came to the choir concert, all those kinds of things.

Her parents showed they supported their children's involvement in educational activities, with then encouraged them to do it more often.

Toni knew she was missing something that could greatly influence her ethnic identity development. In high school, as she was choosing the school she would attend, she realized she needed to go somewhere she could learn about herself as an African American. She told a story about this:

So this is kind of an interesting story... I applied – I was a very good student in high school and so I had a fair number of options. I was not a 4.0 student, but I was a good student. So counselors would make recommendations and so I applied at all of the Big Ten schools, University of Wisconsin, Michigan and all that and I also applied at some private schools like Oberlin College but I did not apply to any Ivy League schools. I think it was more like a mind-set on my part that I just did not want to go to 'that kind' of a school. I mean, I was about school and I wanted to go to school but I did not want to go to, maybe, a prestigious – or what I perceived to be a school with too much pressure – I knew that was not for me. I sort of had it in my mind that I was going to a Big Ten school and certainly, growing up in Madison, going to the University of Wisconsin would certainly be the logical choice. At that time it was 30,000 students but it is probably five times that now. But it was big and I was hesitant because I was not sure that a big school was right for me. But I thought, 'I had done well in school so I could handle it'. But one of the things that had always been sort of gnawing for me was – I knew that I had grown

up in this community where I had not had as much exposure to black people and I really wanted that. I don't know what it was inside of me but I just felt like I was missing something, I wasn't complete, I needed to have a better sense of my identity and so I started exploring and told my parents that I wanted to go to a black college even if I did not go for all the four years. Before I graduate, I wanted to spend at least one year in a black college and so I started exploring and thinking about where it was that I wanted to go, I had not particularly identified any place. My mom had a very strong opinion, and I don't know if my dad did or not, and my mom felt that if you go to a black college you need to go to Fisk, because that is the BEST.

She continued:

I was like, 'I don't wanna be going to Tennessee. That is where the country people are.' All of these things were trying to influence me. I said, 'okay well if that is where she says I will go. Okay I will make that work.' So I started doing more research and checking it out and. Coincidentally, I was a National Merit Scholar and Florida A&M University was soliciting National Merit Scholars for their program. They had just expanded and invested in a phenomenal business program and I had expressed interest actually in economics, which at that time was part of the business school. And so my name popped up on some list of theirs and they reached out to me. So I talked to them and of course I got excited and all that and they were offering scholarships and so I had to go tell my parents. And they were both very reluctant – they were not familiar with the school or anything like that. So, it was getting close to graduation time so my mom and I went on a trip and that was my first airplane ride – I was on my way to check out colleges. Was that my first? No that was my second. That was my second airplane ride and so I went – my

mom and I went and we met some students and we met the Dean and not only was I blown away, but she was blown away.

Both Toni and her mother were impressed with what FAMU had to offer. Toni was interested in what the school had to offer her by way of her identity development as an African American woman, along with their academics. Her mother, on the other hand, was more so interested in how they were going to take care of her oldest child – the first to go so far away from home. She talked more about this experience:

And she was like, ‘oh my God!’ The dean was very much an academic and brilliant, but she also made the parents feel like she was taking care of their kids and she made us certainly feel like we were part of the family. The students were impressive, articulate and could talk about the program and talk about what they were learning and were just very inviting and so all of that together – it was like ‘sold!’ So we went back home and of course we talked to my dad and we decided I would do it. So about a month later or six weeks later we worked all the details out and so at the end of the summer – I went! And I went by myself!

Toni never doubted she would be able to move so far away from home because of the encouragement her parents gave her as a child, no matter what she was doing. Plus, as the oldest, she felt she had to continue to show her younger siblings what it was not to sell yourself short and teach them (just as her parents taught her) ‘you can do anything’. To this day, Toni teaches her daughter, nieces, and nephews they can do whatever they want to. She tells the story of her first day in Florida, moving so far away from home for college:

I went by myself! I was just telling my nieces and nephews this this past weekend my first experience. When I got there our plane arrived late and we did not know the

registration office closed and the dormitories and everything, so we got to the dorm and we could not check in or nothing. And so it just so happen there was another girl there at the same time and we became fast friends and found our way to a Holiday Inn and checked in and shared so we could save money. Yeah and we connected and we were friends through school. So, anyway she and I both called our parents and said that we could not get in our school or anything and that we were with somebody else and were checking into the hotel and then the next day we went over early in the morning and got everything squared away. And so that was sort of a growing up experience, because there was nobody – you had to do it yourself.

She continued her story:

And that was school and that initial transition was a big deal. I talked to my family all the time and every time I hung up the phone my dad would say, ‘are you ready to come back’, and I would say, “no, dad” – he really wanted me to go to Wisconsin. Yeah and so that experience and going to college and the decision to do that was I think a big transition, you know, because I always wanted to go away to school. I really did not want to stay in Wisconsin even though it might have been a great school or it was a great school. Because I felt that I could grow up more and become more of an independent person by going away so I really- there were several steps in this thought process. First – ‘did you want to be home or away? Do you want a big school or small school?’ I wanted the black experience and of course my initial thinking was it was going to be part of my college experience, not all of my college experience. Then, you know, just getting up the nerve and going on a plane – halfway around the country compared to where I grew up.

Taking the risk was rewarding for Toni, because she got out of the experience what she needed: a deeper sense of herself overall and, specifically, as an African American. She was surrounded by peers who were equally as smart and from all over the country – she was able to see all types of black students, an experience she never had in Madison.

[FAMU] was a phenomenal experience and of course you didn't really know what to expect and remember I had met those four students during my visit and they were very impressive. They were smart like I was smart, you know, and I felt confident, even though there was certainly some anxiety because you didn't know.

She learned to be a confident person and believe in herself because “she wasn't just a number.” Most of the experience deciding to, and then ultimately going to, FAMU was a positive one. The counselors at her high school were not as positive and talked against going to a black school. She remembered their words:

And I do remember that a counselor said, ‘you don't want to do that’ and actually planted doubts in my mind. ‘You know you will not have good career opportunities coming out of, you know, a black school.’ So I would say they were either luke warm or negative I can't say that any of the counselors were positive. You know, they would say, ‘you are a really good student and you are black. You can go anywhere – why would you want to go there?’

Toni's counselors did not see the importance of going to FAMU to develop a positive African American identity, as she did. They attempted to convince her an education from a Historically Black College/University would not grant her the same opportunities and were “for black students who could not get into better schools.” It was the encouragement of her parents,

particularly her mother, that allowed Toni to trust her instincts and get what she needed out of her college education.

Once at FAMU, Toni's world was opened and she was able to be with like-minded peers, with experiences similar to hers. She discussed the importance of this to her development:

Any how – but when I got there, it was full. Now, again, I was in the business school and my roommates weren't initially in the business program - eventually I converted them – but initially they were not initially in the business program. But the people that I spent every day with were part of the business program and they were all like me. Many of them grew up in, you know, environments similar to mine where they went to a school where they were one of 10, one of 20, one of 50 black students out of a class of 3,000 or you know – their experiences were really not that different than mine. And certainly there were others that had the exact opposite of my experience, but there were enough people that I knew who had a similar background that I could get comfortable and reach out to people who had a different experience.

The connections Toni made to other black students is what made her experience and is what continued the confidence her parents encouraged from a young age. It was during college, as she made these connections with a diverse group of black people, she was able to see the plethora of options she had – she wasn't held to any choices just because she was African American.

These are the lessons she continued to teach her daughter. From a young age, she taught Nikki that she should not sell herself short, but to see the opportunities she always had. She taught Nikki, just as she learned, that connections with others will show you your opportunities. She talked more about this:

[Nikki going to school] wasn't a choice in my mind, I don't know how she felt about it – I know she felt it was a choice in her mind. I think she certainly always knew that college was an expectation and it was the thing to do. I think Nikki, in figuring out where she wanted to go to school, was motivated more by friends than opportunity. A lot of kids obviously go to UGA but UGA to me is principally a commuter college – it's a big school. Everybody lives in Atlanta or Albany - all within a few hours. I mean they are all from everywhere but a significant part of the population. And I think that even if I had stayed in Madison and gone to the University of Wisconsin, at that time, there were lots more – probably more than half of the people were from somewhere else. Whereas today because of HOPE scholarship and they have those programs all over the country – it is not just a UGA phenomenon – but schools are trying to keep students in state. That is their intent and so I think you miss some of the extra experience of the world you know and UGA, better than many, does have people from all over the world. But I think you know what I am saying. And so when you go to college with 15 of your good friends you don't tend to reach out and meet new friends – it is just different. I think sometimes that she missed some of the college experience that I had regardless of majority school or black college or whatever. Some of that experience – I think she has missed.

Even though her daughter missed out on the same opportunity to learn to rely on herself and develop that part of her identity, she did teach her that higher education was the only option. Like her parents, Toni made it a point to let her daughter know that, though the option is yours on where you go, going is the only option. Her parents showed her that going to college affords you the opportunity to develop an individual identity best.

But, yeah, no she was always - I guess she was ingrained with the idea that school was important, that you had to do good in school. She is a good student, you know, so that is all really critical and I think that is something that she will carry forward too.

This was a conscious decision of Toni's parents, and also of herself and her husband, to teach their children that education was important, mostly for what it taught you as an individual – to believe in yourself and to know your abilities.

Being able to leave Wisconsin was a pivotal aspect of Toni's life that contributed to her identity development. She was influenced by the experiences of her parents when it came time to move so far away from home. By knowing their story, she realized moving, in order to have a better life, was important.

### **Movement**

I found it interesting that Toni's parents both moved from the South to the North for better opportunities for their family, but she then moved back to the South because of the opportunities it could afford her. Toni told the story of her mother's movement to Madison, Wisconsin:

Both my parents were transplants to Wisconsin. My dad is from Georgia - Americus, Georgia. And my mom is from a place called Paris, Tennessee. I have never been there – I have been to Americus. At a very, very young age, under 5, they moved to Chicago and they lived there for a while and Milwaukee for the bulk of her time.

Her father moved North at an older age:

[My father] left as a young man. Again, I don't know the exactly the age – late teens, maybe 17 or so – to go to school. There was not great opportunity for schooling in GA for black men and he wanted to do more. And he uprooted himself and went to

Wisconsin and stayed with a family there. I don't really know what the connect was to the family but a family in Wisconsin that he lived with for many, many years – it was really the end of his high school and into college when he moved. He went to college but he did not finish.

Even though her father did not complete college, “his opportunities for jobs were much better”. He knew he was going to be able to raise a family and have a good job by staying in Wisconsin, as opposed to battling racism in the South. Her mother was able to go to college in Wisconsin.

And my mom went to Business College which at that time is what they called schools for like administrative people. That is where she learned her kind of schooling and her education around her discipline for being a secretary.

Better opportunities are what drove Toni and the generation before her to move so freely. She was able to learn particularly from her father's experience not to fear leaving what you know if it will afford you a better life. For Toni, moving to Florida (and then Georgia) for school afforded her better opportunities to learn about herself. Going to college started a string of life lessons that she passed on to her daughter. Just like her parents passed on the importance of movement for a better life, she passed on the importance of recognizing the life lessons around you.

### **Life Lesson**

Society was in a great state of flux and transformation as Toni grew up. She was born on the tail end of the Civil Right Movement and grew up during the Black Power Movement. She could “sense a lot of change going on around [her].” She discussed the social climate surrounding her birth:

I was born in 1959 so there was a lot of civil rights activities as I was growing up and my mom and dad, I they were involved – I don't know if I would call them activist but they

were involved. They would participate in marches and they belonged to the N.A.A.C.P. and they belonged to the Urban League and so there was always activities and opinions and thoughts about what was going on in the world. One of those things that I remember a lot was actually related to Muhammad Ali when he changed his name and he decided to be a conscientious objector and I remember that being something that was a lot of conversation. In our family – and I think those things were just because of the environment at that time certainly had a lot of influence, not book learning but life learning.

Having these experiences made it possible for Toni to live the process of transformation, rather than read about it as generations do now. For her generation it was something they experienced and learned from just by living through it. She always wanted to make it possible for her daughter to understand the changes the country has gone through:

I didn't read a lot of books and so that is one of the things that I always wanted to try and encourage Nikki to do. There was a phase when she was a big reader and then not so much. So to find books and put books in front of her that either had black faces in them or were by black authors was important. I am not a big reader in general, so I would try and be purposeful about that in some ways for her, but, you know, I think that is something that would make a difference – make a bigger impact if you were a person that was more of an avid reader.

Learning through experience was big for Toni's parents, particularly her mother. Instead of sitting by and watching what was going on, her mother taught her to be involved in the movement and to do what you could in your part of the world. Toni discussed her mother's involvement:

So I guess that is the better way to say it. So that is challenging cause I think [just reading about it] leads to some apathy – you know. So, connecting the dots, my mom was very, very involved in voter registration. She participated in the polls every year as a volunteer. My dad had to learn to cook so he could feed us on that one day because she wasn't doing it! And we used to laugh because he just was not good at it.

Her mother's involvement in voter registration naturally taught Toni the importance of voting and it became important to her throughout her life. This was an example of Toni learning about the importance of voting by seeing how important it was to her mother and other blacks around her, rather than reading about it. She learned that voting was a part of what you do, as an American:

That is certainly a very prominent memory for me and her background and why she felt that way about that – unfortunately I do not know why. That was never one of the questions that I got to ask her, but I know it was very important to her. So by default the very second I was old enough to vote, I registered to vote. It was not even like an option – you are 16, you got a driver's license and, at 18, I registered to vote. Over the years I have gone through peaks and valleys in terms of active involvement in understanding of the political process, you know. I am far from an expert and I wish I knew more, but I do vote.

Political involvement was not the only thing Toni learned by watching her parents. She also learned the life lesson of hard work and dedication. Both of her parents were hard working and were seemingly dedicated to the jobs they held over the years. Toni talked about the impact of her parents working on her life:

My parents both worked. Early on in my younger years my mom had a secretarial business out of the home and my dad worked for the Department of Revenue – State Dept of Revenue. My mom, in her business, worked for a number of people who had projects but she did a lot of work for the university helping people type dissertations. So she accessed a lot of good information. And she also had some projects for the State where, you know, if they had big documents that needed to be prepared either for the city of Madison or for the state of Wisconsin she did some of that work and so in later years I can look back at that and assume that she was very trusted. To be handed that kind of stuff and back in those days there were not laptops and computers. Back in that day there was copy paper – carbon paper and copy paper. Mimeographing machines and we made copies to help her out and stuff. And stuffed envelopes and addressed envelopes and we played a little bit of that role. Definitely she would put us to work from time to time and she did that for a number of years until my youngest brother and sister were in regular school – I don't know what grade.

Her mother worked from home while her children were not school age. Toni's mother felt it important to work, but to also be at home until all her kids were in school. "Then she worked for the Wisconsin Chapter of some organization and she was an Assistant to the Executive Director there so she did that for the next segment of her life."

Toni feels she was influenced by both her mother and father in her career choices. Her mother taught her about communication and her dad taught her about the money side of things. She discussed this connection:

My dad was always working for the Department of Revenue as an accountant. That was a financial background and I guess in some ways that influenced me being exposed to both

of those kinds of experiences - even today I work for a bank, but my job is a communications jobs.

Toni described herself as extremely close and connected to the experiences of her parents. She learned from the way they lived their lives and developed parts of her identity by watching them. Her parents unconsciously passed down many life lessons, including the importance of family. Toni often described herself in relationship to her parents and her siblings – this was something she made a point to teach her daughter too.

### **As a Family**

Toni's parents created a sense of connectedness by the activities they engaged in. It was never an overt conversation, but it was clear that “you learn family is all you have – it was very important.” One such way Toni's parents established closeness to family was through road trips.

We did vacation as a family – seven people in one car. I don't know if that is really a vacation but that is what we did. Mostly it was a driving vacation – we did not fly anywhere or anything like that, but we would drive to wherever it is. A lot of times it was to visit family but a lot of time was spent learning the history of America. A lot of times the highways had historical markers along the way. We would take those trails and we would drive and the oldest one would read the sign and then 10 miles later... It was fun – until we all got big and it was just crowded and we were anxious to get where we were going.

Most of the time, Toni was with her siblings and parents, but she was connected to her maternal grandparents as well.

My grandmother, my mom's mom, lived in Milwaukee about an hour and a half away, so she would often come to visit for the holidays. We didn't really travel on vacation – I

mean it was at our house and it was just us usually. We did not have a lot of big broad extended family where we had a lot of people gathering. My husband and I are each one of five. So now a small gathering is 40 people for us.

Holidays for Toni normally only included her nuclear family. In her family now, though, the gatherings are bigger. She learned the importance of extended through the absence of her extended family growing up.

My mom is one of three and my dad is actually one of 8 maybe. They were all kind of down south and every where and we rarely, rarely saw my dad's side of the family. I would say my grandfather and grandmother – I met three times maybe. Then he had a couple of brothers and sisters that we had opportunities to meet. Then when we got older one of his brothers, in particular, we got – I got very close to and the rest of us did. But they were a long way away. Whereas my mom's mom and her brother and sister were all within a couple of hours.

Naturally, due to distance, Toni and her siblings were closer to her mother's side of the family. In her family now, she always wanted her daughter to be equally as close to her husband's side of the family as she is her own.

Traditions were created within Toni's nuclear family, since most holidays were spent just amongst themselves. She remembered one such tradition on Christmas:

We celebrated most holidays. I can't think of any particular significant traditions to the holidays other than we were together. We always had a Christmas tree and I know my mom did have some Christmas ornaments that she and dad bought when they first got married for their first Christmas. When I got married they gave me one. So there is always favorite ornaments or things like that.

As she thought longer about Christmas in her household growing up, Toni remembered the traditions that made that particular holiday special.

We would decorate the tree – it was more mom and the kids and then as time passed maybe it was the kids, and then it was mom – dad was usually filming. I do remember that my dad was taking pictures of everything! He had one of those 8mm cameras and he had a spotlight. And he would always be flashing that spotlight in our face. But he loved taking pictures and I know that we were able to restore some of them and they were converted. If it was not that millimeter camera, he had lots of slides.

Christmas tree decorating was not the only family tradition. Another included traveling for Toni and her siblings' extra curricular activities. It was customary for the whole family to be involved and support one another.

Sometimes family time was not looked at as a good thing. As teenagers we were involved in different activities like track and band. Two of my sisters were in drum core and so some of our family vacations were following them around. It was lots of different things like that.

A lot of time was spent with the family and each member had roles that emerged. Toni's role "where what you would typically think of with the oldest child." She discussed this further:

I did do – especially when my mom started working outside the home, I would sometimes cook for the family. I remember when I first went to college my roommates started laughing at me because, when I cooked, I cooked for seven.

She continued:

I remembered making pots of spaghetti. I would have to come home after school, you know, and do whatever you do and try to start dinner or something and then as we all got

older. Sometimes I had to do that but neither of my parents really worked, late, late crazy hours, like in my world today. We usually sat down as a family to have dinner at – my dad walked in at 10 minutes to 5 and at 5 we sat down.

As a family it was a tradition to eat together and to gather at the end of the time, regardless of what everyone had going on outside of the house. This was something that was important to her parents that she was unable to duplicate in her own family. Toni's work expectations, and her commute, are drastically different than what her parents had.

Something Toni was able to duplicate from her family of origin was the division of labor between family members. She remembered what it was like to see everyone pitching in as a child:

We ate together, at 5pm, everyday for many, many, many years until some of our sports activities or different things took precedence over some of the time. I would say the girls were more involved in traditional man activities, then my brother was involved in typical girl activities. I would cut the grass with my dad more because I wanted to hang out more with my dad than cut the grass. So, you know, we had the push mower for a long time and then we got the riding mower and so we would do that. My dad was a fisher – he liked to fish and so we would do that – and you know anything around the house – I would not say I am a handy man but I kind of know stuff. Before I got my driver's license I had to know how to change a tire, how to change the gas, how to change the oil.

To this day, Toni has such a relationship with her husband, where there is a division of household duties. There are times where her husband cooks and she always made sure her daughter knew how to take care of her cars.

There were also traditional gender roles within her family. Toni said, “My mom – of course, she did the traditional cooking, the cleaning and the ironing. I can’t say that my dad did a lot of cleaning but he did some.” Toni learned many lessons about how to be a wife and a mother from her family of origin. There were many things she appreciated about her family, like the division of labor and many non-traditional gender roles. These were things she was able to establish in her own marriage and with her daughter. There were some differences specific to the changes in the times, like the demands of Toni’s job and her inability to often be home when her daughter got off the school bus. But, these were things she still cherished and was able to work out with her husband to at least have someone there when Nikki came home from school.

The importance of having a connected family was definitely passed down from Toni’s parents. She attributes this connectedness and value of always doing things together to the way she and her husband created their family – it is always important to gather as a family. The very fabric, or culture, of Toni’s family of origin strongly influenced her identity development. Many of the ways Toni would describe her family of origin’s culture is also the way she would describe herself and her ethnic identity – “it’s more so about the way [she] was raised and what’s important to [her] today than it is about the color of [her] skin.”

## **Culture**

I was intrigued by Toni’s discussion of her family’s culture and how her identity development was influenced by it. Many cultural aspects of her family of origin were different after she was married, because her husband was born and raised in the South. Food, for example, was important in both families, but is two very different things. She discussed this further:

Of course I learned to cook from my mom and I learned later that I did not really know how to cook soul food. I could not really cook salmon because my husband was from

Miami. And so he educated me – and that was pretty funny and I did not know at the time that it was different. I think the difference between northern and southern soul food is - I think it is just the seasonings are different and even some of the types of foods you know. They take a basic food like macaroni and cheese – we would just do regular macaroni with maybe Velveeta cheese and that would be it – but to make macaroni and cheese in the South there is just a little more to it – a little more to it. And it is just maybe some of the seasonings are different – maybe greens – you know, same thing – the amount of seasonings and pepper that you use to season the meat before you cook the vegetables or things like that. I grew up with oatmeal, maybe cream of wheat, whereas in the South it is grits. And I know it is not just north and south but just maybe some of those kinds of basic differences.

To simply learn to cook was culturally different in her family growing up than it was for her husband. Within the culture of her family in Wisconsin, you cooked because you had to eat. For her husband, cooking meant you were showing love. Therefore, cooking was never as important to Toni as it was to her husband.

I had to kind of re-learn and I still am not a good cook. I am an okay cook. I mean I can cook for a big like holiday you know do all the whatever, but I don't particularly enjoy cooking. And my mom did not really enjoy it either. But she did it – but my husband is a good cook so I had benefited. And Nikki has benefited from it.

Toni described other aspects of her family of origin as things that were engrained in the fabric of her family – things that, when she thinks about the culture of her family are aspects that stand out. For example, being kind to others and putting family above everything else stands out because that's what her parents taught her. Toni continues that today:

I try to live my life as an example and so hopefully that is a lesson just in itself of the kind of person that I would want Nikki or any of my nieces or nephews to be. Especially for the girls because you do have a different connection with the girls than you do with the boys, but I think that the things that you do everyday speak really loud. You know I can't say that we have formal traditions going back to the holiday thing. We spend holidays with families, whether it is just us or extended family, but you know that is a big deal. The first Christmas that Nikki is not going to be with me is going to be horrific – you know? So that – kindness and family are just really a strong thing. And I look at that in hindsight and I think, 'how did my mom and dad feel the first Christmas that my husband and I did not come home?' What did that feel like? – I don't know.

There are “many other things” Toni would identify as a part of the culture of her family that she made a point to pass down to her children. Another is the connection to family without the sacrifice of independence. Toni's parents made sure to nurture each of their children as individuals by encouraging their specific talents, while also instilling in them the importance of connection to family. That is something Toni always wanted (and does) continue with her daughter.

So that is one thing I think that I have tried to mimic and speak to her about being an independent person. I love being married. I love my husband. I have been married 30 years coming up in a just a minute. So I want her to have that same kind of sense of self. Part of that is independence but part of that is other things, you know maybe confidence or whatever, some things that come from within – that are part of that process. I think that is important, particularly for girls, to really know that they can be their own person. That's the kind of modeling they need with raising their families. I want her to be a mom.

I think it is a great thing to be a mom. It is stuff like that. I want her to have a career that she is happy with. You try to demonstrate those things and it is not that you sit down and have a conversation and say, “Nikki, I want you to be a....” But you hope through what you do and live and say that it is kind of coming through with that kind of meaning.

That’s how Toni’s parents lived – teaching their children through the way they lived rather than just telling them what to do. Toni makes it a point to live her life “as an African American woman whose life can be an example for [her daughter].”

It is very interesting because you can have specific conversations – and I will use a simple example using a broad category of ethic. You can talk to people about ethics and ‘what is morale’ and ‘what is right and wrong’ and you can say whatever you want in words, but what you do and how you act and how you live it speak so much louder. Kids will be the first ones to say to you- whether they are yours or somebody else’s, ‘well that is not what you said, mom or auntie. How come you can do that?’ They are quick! They remember when it is to their advantage.

Toni made it a point to live the way she wanted her daughter, Nikki, to learn to live. Through interviewing her daughter, it was clear Toni succeeded in teaching her daughter many of these lessons, continuing to greatly influence the ethnic and cultural identity Nikki is developing in her mid twenties.

### **Nikki Walker: I Am**

The daughter of Toni Walker and the grandniece of Gwendolyn Clarke, Nikki Walker is a 25-year-old student in her final year of her undergraduate studies. She was born in Summit, New Jersey, but moved with her family to Alpharetta, Georgia at a young age. Nikki is

completing a dual degree in psychology and child and family development – she is looking forward to a career as a social worker, working with traumatized youth.

Nikki has a developed sense of her identity, particularly her ethnic identity. She attributes this to the way she was raised to explore herself always, along with the two majors she has. She says, “Most of her college career as a psychology and CFD major were spent exploring myself and my family.” Nikki’s personality filled the room during her interview, as she was “excited to learn more about her family and take the journey with her mother and grandaunt.” She started out by giving a full description of herself.

Nikki described herself in relationship to her identity as a woman, and as an African American woman. She showcased how self-aware she is:

I am a female and I definitely appreciate it and I like it. I have a tendency to be a touch boyish, I’m not dressed like that today but I have always been a little bit like that. I grew up in a large family of boys, but I am an only child, my extended family is that way.

She continued to describe herself:

I am an African American woman and absolutely proud of that. I am heterosexual and I am - I have Christian roots, however, as I have gotten a little bit older and have experienced a little bit more of the world I have had a little bit of questioning about that and as I have researched religions even in school as a religious class and asking questions of different people I know from different religions, I am not 100% grounded in one faith and there are lots of different parts of a lot of different faiths that I completely understand and completely see truth in and I have never really liked the idea of ‘somebody I know is not a good person because they are a different faith than I am and is damned and is going to spend eternity in Hell because they call their God a different name’. So that is kind of

where I am at, I am in this kind of limbo religiously but I definitely still believe there is a God and a higher power that judges us and wants good for us, but as to exactly what realm I stick that in, I am unclear at this time. But I have been baptized.

Religion is not strictly practiced in Nikki's nuclear family, but the entire family has a Christian influence. Given her position and developmental stage, she has been encouraged by her family and peers to explore the things that are important to her. Specifically, Nikki expressed pride in being an African American woman and discussed having "multiple examples of great black women in her life, like [her] mother, grandmother, aunts, etc."

Nikki continued to discuss how she would like to be described and the aspects of her identity she thinks about when someone asks, "Who are you?"

I identify as a very smart person, I have always liked school and have always done very well. I like learning. I like asking questions and figuring things out and I get joy out of that and I think that is fun. I am definitely a lover of kids. I don't know necessarily if I am going to have kids of my own – but I plan on having a family primarily by adopting.

Because kids are really cool. I am a big kid and I am that person that goes to a barbeque with some kids and I will hang out with the kid more than I will like my friends. And they are like, 'oh no, the kid is fine. Nikki will play with them'.

Nikki's affinity for children "probably began with having such a large extended family with so many cousins." As an only child, her connection to her cousins was close and she often spent time with them.

Her connection to her own family and to children contributed to her decision to become a social worker after she graduates. Nikki "connects to the experience of mistreated children who don't have anyone to speak for them." She discussed this further:

I love kids and that is probably why I am going into the fields that I am going into because I love spending times with the kids and they need somebody to protect them and speak out for them because not everybody is blessed with a great home and sometimes crappy things happen to people – so, I definitely am a lover of kids. I love animals too, particularly dogs, but animals in general – they bring me joy. How else do I identify myself? I am sill. I am very talkative. I have never met a stranger and my mom was actually terrified of that when I was a kid because I would go into the grocery store and have my own little shopping cart and like wonder off for like two seconds and come back with a best friend. I would be like mommy look a best friend and she is coming home with us okay? But she was terrified somebody was going to snatch me up.

One of Nikki's "defining qualities" and what she's known for amongst her friends is her personality and the ease with which she can strike up a conversation. Nikki also "tries to make people feel comfortable in her presence." As she is going through the development stage of identifying what profession she would like to move into, Nikki is using her knowledge of all these qualities to make the best decision.

As she stated earlier, Nikki connects to her "tomboy-ish" side and enjoys being comfortable. She discussed how this is received in her social circles and with her mom:

Girl or not, I liked sweatpants and a hoodie and I didn't care – and my mom was like, 'you need to take more pride in your appearance'. Like, I am not trying to land a husband – that is not my goal. I don't really care – she – I distinctly remember she would be like, 'what if you meet your husband today, he is not going to want to date you if you look like that' and I remember that and I just did not really care – it was not that I did not take pride in myself but I was not going to get all boobs up, short skirt this, that, and whatever

to try and attract a boy – I really did not care that much. I mean guys were my friends but not necessarily interested in dating – that does not mean I did not have crushes or ever have a boyfriend that is just kind of where my tomboyish came from. I know I am a girl and, trust me, I learned once I started developing really early I was a girl! But I just – I was never really prissy – I was never really pink, I did not do ladi, ladi, lah. I did do kind of girly sports – I did gymnastics and ballet for a number of years but I don't know. I am a girl but I am kind of a boy's girl. Maybe if I had grown up with girls that were nice I may have been a lot more girly than I am now.

Nikki has utilized many aspects of her life to describe who she is and how she has come to be proud of who she is. There continues to be things she “would like to change”, but is coming into her own, “vowing to be a good person.” Her status as an only child, along with the ways her mother and father have raised her, contribute to “an ethnic identity that, to [Nikki], is so much more than what other people think [she] is because of [her] skin color or gender.”

It was “a difficult road” getting to where she is a 25. Nikki went on to discuss what it was like to “often be the only one” and what that meant to her growing up.

### **I Don't Fit Anywhere**

The first 25 years of Nikki's life included various ups and down that culminated into the identity she is able to state so eloquently today. One thing that was often difficult to endure was the feeling of “being alone, the only one, or one of few”. Nikki described these feelings:

I grew up actually in a predominately white area, in an affluent area. There were a lot of gated communities around me. I went to a practically all-white high school and daycares and all of that and it took me a while to even understand that I was different in terms of race, because when I was in New Jersey it was a very diverse preschool. I never noticed

race, never noticed color, never noticed anything and when I moved to the South it was something that became aware to me as a term of “otherness” and when I was younger it kind of made me a little bit uncomfortable because I did not feel different, but as I got older and started learning more about my family and learning more about the things that make me – like some of the things that I do that I got from my family and some of the things that my family has done that makes my name very proud – and some of the things that I have done that have made me very proud – it has just become something that I was not always necessarily proud of but I was in a weird place growing up.

Nikki continues to discuss how her ethnicity makes her stand apart and how she has come to be proud of who she is and what her ethnicity is:

As I have gotten older it is one of those things that I have identified more with than when I was a child. So that is where that comes from a sense that I am proud of it because when I was younger I didn’t know it was something to be proud of – you know what I mean – especially when you are younger and you see around you nothing for the most part but white faces it is very strange. It was not until middle school or the beginning of high school that they actually had a program in my school, an M-to-M program, where they would bus kids from South Fulton county into North Fulton county because we had better schools and that was that.

More exposure to different types of people exposed Nikki to herself through the ways others viewed her.

Then I got more exposure that way to diversity – not just to black people but to people in general and it was one of those things that I did not know how to take because I was always known as the “white-black girl”, just because of the way I spoke, the way I

dressed, the way I was surrounded by white people because that is what was available to me. It was really awkward because other black kids would ask ‘why are you acting like that, why are you acting this way’, and I was just like, ‘this is the person that I am and I did not really understand how there was cultural differences in behavior and as I started spending time with my other family members, especially my aunt in Miami, where I started seeing people that looked more like me that had more cultural things in common with me that my family did that I could speak about and it would make sense, but if I had made that same comment to some people back in Alpharetta (where I was from,) they would be very confused. So as I got older I became more proud because I understood more and I found more of a common ground than other people.

Nikki described the various cultural differences between herself and the other black kids from South Fulton, Atlanta. Given her exposure to a different type of culture, but still black culture, she was put into a category of “trying to act white.” She shared this experience with both her mother, Toni, and her grandaunt, Gwendolyn, so she was better prepared for it.

The culture of Nikki’s family, both her father and mother’s side, combined to create a family culture that was expressed through traditions during holidays and food. This acted as a protective factor for Nikki as she experienced the feeling of being “the other” amongst her peers at school. She remembered a time she brought a friend to a holiday celebration:

Like going home for Thanksgiving or going home for Christmas holidays and kind of – it was kind of strange because I had invited one of my best friends when I was younger to our house for like a holiday function. She was completely confused by some of the food that we had because it was that traditional soul food that she was just not used to. Yeah they have a turkey at Thanksgiving and we have a turkey at Thanksgiving but the side

dishes and some of the stuff like that is completely different and she was very confused by that, as she had known me for years and she kind of got to really know how we were different. And things like music even – I remember being very, very little and listening and falling asleep in the back of car with my parents listening to oldie stations and songs that would come on and in my head – it would be a commercial somewhere and I would get down to it and they would be like, ‘what are you talking about?’ I would said, ‘I am sorry I liked this song because it is something I identify with.’

Due to the expression of African American culture, through food and music, there were times were Nikki felt alienated from her peers, both black and white. Similarly, she did not feel included with black students because of the way she spoke and because she had many friends who were white.

It was a confusing time for Nikki. She often tried to connect to the other African American kids, because she did not have the opportunity in earlier years. This was the time she learned of her ability to connect to people, even those who she seemingly had no connection with. Nikki used traditional African American cultural markers, like movies many African American people who have seen, to connect to the other black kids.

Things that you might not even notice or just things that are part of your history or like movies – like certain movies or certain kinds of topics that are discussed in African American homes that are not talked about in non-African American homes. Like viewpoints and things – that I now see as more than normal – I would in some way discuss it with somebody else and they would kind of be confused by it. Then have another conversation with another black person and they would understand in a whole other way and it was like, ‘alright, cool’. I did not feel like having to explain myself like

have to take five steps back and explain this and then have to move forward. So it is kind of situations like that.

She continued to explain the toll this dual position took on her growing up:

So that made me solidify these common areas were with other African American people. It made it seem like, ‘okay, that is definitely a connection that I do have.’ I don’t know – I am in this weird place where I am absolutely proud of my heritage – but I still kind of feel like I am in this limbo place because there are struggles that I have on either side. I am just me and I am totally okay being me but I don’t fit anywhere because of – I guess the history that I had. So I am not exactly sure but I am happy with the person that I am.

Nikki was able to come to a place, at 25, where she became happy with the various sides of her identity, even if her peers were uncomfortable with her cultural differences. Her family “had a huge influence on learning to love whatever God made [her] to be.”

It was a very lonely feeling, though, because the her white peers did not understand the aspects of her identity that were strongly connected to African American culture and her black peers did not understand the parts of her identity that were influenced by having grown up surrounded by European American culture.

Yeah, I mean, because there were definitely years in my adolescence and younger ages where I felt very alone. I am an only child and my parents love me dearly but one of the things that both they and I have personally expressed is as I got older we wished that maybe we had chosen a different part of town to live in – just where I would have had more diversity in general. There are a lot of snobby ritzy people in the area that I grew up in and a lot of people that looked down in general on people of color because they work for them. They nanny their children or clean their house or you know are their employee

in some way or another and it was one of those things that, when you are a child and a young adult – I don't think these people were intentionally racist but when you see certain things... They also have a tendency to rarely see people of color or they are a person that is a lower socio-economic status, or maybe educational status and maybe they make prejudices in their own head and when I break that mold that creates questions – I am very smart, I am very well spoke and I can have conversation with anybody. It was very awkward as a child because I felt that I had to always kind of prove myself because I am just the same as you. I have the same opportunities. I have the same feelings and everything else. As I got older and started to find other people that had things in common with me that I may have never been exposed to as a younger person it made it easier to see that I am not so different.

What Nikki is describing is a feeling of loneliness she had because she did not fit into other people's stereotypes of who she should be and how she should act, based on her skin color or where she lived. She did not fit in with her black peers, because of the cultural influence of socioeconomic status she experience living in an affluent, predominately white area. Nikki also did not fit in with her white peers, because of her skin color and the assumptions made about who she was and ways she should act. It was difficult for Nikki to think about a specific story because "it was just [her] general experience growing up". She was often misunderstood.

Things that were on a basic level, things that their parents had said to them that my parents also said to me. I remember growing up and saying – or ways that they conducted themselves or things they would talk about or things they would be interested in and I was like, 'oh well I remember these things and I have these things inside me too' Some

people were very confused by it and others were more accepting because those were interests that they had too.

In the face of this difficulty and confusion around who Nikki should be and how she should act, directed at her by her peers, she had a connection to her family where she could be whoever she was without fear of being accepted. In fact, Nikki was encouraged to explore her identity and was taught to acknowledge, and be proud of, her African American culture.

### **Close Family**

Nikki's ability to combat the loneliness she felt with her peers was founded in the closeness of her family. As discussed by her mother, Nikki's parents made a conscious choice to expose her to both sides of her family in order to be close to them. The geographical closeness of her father's side of the family allowed Nikki to establish closer relationships with his side, but she discussed how she continues to be influenced by both sides of the family:

We are close and that is probably the thing that saved my sanity. We are a very, very close family. Unfortunately it is more one side of my family than the other side. It is not that I am not close to both sides, but because of where I grew up regionally I had more access to my dad's side of the family than I did my mom's. I know I can call my mom's family at any time and talk to them about anything and set up a trip and this, that, and whatever. I know I can do that but a lot more of my memories experiences were with members of my dad's side of the family. That is where a good bit of closeness and me figuring out a lot more of my lineage and my history and the things that my family instills in me a lot more. I think that tend to come more from that side more so than my mom's. This does not mean that I don't have things that come from my mom's side of the family. But I definitely see that there is more pull from one side than the other.

Nikki is physically closer to her dad's family and was able to experience them more. Further, she has had more of an opportunity to talk to older generations on her dad's side of the family so she might be able to learn more of her heritage from that side. She discussed being closer, in a sense, to her mother because of the similarities in personality she has with her father.

I was daddy's girl growing up but he and I are more personality like so we butted heads. So I believe the person that I get along with most and I am very, very close to in that way is my mom. But I am a daddy's girl and I know he loves me but nobody makes me as happy or as angry as that man does. My mom will tell you when we have this group interview – and my entire family knows this. We are too much alike and we spend too much time together and it is stressful. We love each other but it gets stressful.

Her connectedness to her dad and the sheer number of male cousins Nikki has always had influenced her preference for being around boys. It also influenced her choices in friends, which were normally male friends. She talked further about this:

When I was really younger we spent a lot more time together, me and my male cousins, and I would be like, 'yeah I can play tackle football and ya'll can be rough and tumble with me. I remember one of my older cousins teaching me how to box by taping pillows to my hands and him teaching me how to fight and defend myself 'because you are a girl, but you are not really a girl' Growing up when I was younger I never really got along well with girls. Girls were always very cattie and mean and very clique-y. I did not understand it and I was not like that – I was very friendly and outgoing. I was like, 'I can be friends with you if you want to be friends with me.' And I don't know I guess the girls – a lot of the girls – a good number of the girls – in my area were like that and I think it was them feeding off of each other in some ways – that is how cliques form – it is always

us and them. And I was always not in the mood for that and guys were not like that and I actually ended up playing a lot with boys in school. I would play kickball and soccer, basketball because I was a lot more active as a kid than I am now. I would spend a lot of time with guys. I think until maybe like 8th grade I only had two or three friends that were girls and it used to make my parents very nervous and they would be like, 'why does she hang out with boys so much?' I understood that they were not caddy and they could be mad at you and get in a fight and it was over the next day. And I was interest in kind of similar things. About high school was when I became kind of girly and my mom goes, 'you are never gonna find a husband if you don't' act like a girl, put make-up on.' I mean, she created this monster – I tell her that.

As Nikki learned to become comfortable expressing her African American culture throughout middle and high school, she was also learning how to express herself as a girl/woman. Her females peers often fit the stereotype of mean girls she did not want to be around, so she resorted to boys because she had more in common with them – she grew up around boys in her family. Again, her family contributed to making her feel comfortable in her peer groups.

The closeness in her family also taught her about roles. She was able to look to her parents to see what men and women in the family were supposed to do. Since she was the only child, and there were more boys than girls in the family, it seemed all the children learned to do each role – gender roles were more non-traditional in her family.

We have a very equalitarian family – as far as I know for the most part. Nobody is married in my generation but in terms of like my aunts and uncles – every partner relationship, both partners are working and they both contribute equally to the home. Like in my home, in particular, because my mom works so far from the house, my dad

tends to be kind of “house mom”. Even when I was growing up and I was little my dad’s job was closer to our house so if I got sick he would come and get me from day care and take me to gymnastics or dance or something. He would make sure I had a bath before I went to bed and we had dinner ready so we could have dinner together when my mom got home. So I know that all of the men, at least out of my dad’s siblings, all of them can cook, all of them can sew, all of them can iron, all of them can do laundry. All of them can do any of the same things a woman can do and my mom knows how to change her own oil and change her own tire and those are things that they taught me. Also, my mom was like you are not going to have a car unless you know how to check your oil, put gas in it, know how to change your tire in case you get a flat tire. So they definitely were not very big on gender roles too much because we have some very strong women and opinionated women in our family and we have some very, very strong-willed men also. Granted I am the kid out of these relationships but I don’t really see too much gender roles very much. I mean, obviously I know they are male and they are female and this is the head of their family, you know, but whatever. It is not like some other families that I have seen where obviously this is husband, this is wife, this is bread-winning man, this is stay-at-home mom because that is also the community that I grew up in. There were a lot of stay-at-home moms, like ‘I go play tennis and go to the spa all day mom’s and then I pick up the kids and take them to soccer and cheerleading’ and whatever. I grew up with a lot of those moms, but it is not – it has never really been the case too much in my family. I know they have always encouraged their children, granted on one side of the fence more than others, but all of my aunts and uncles are college educated and work hard and make very good money and expect the same from their children. They have

never forced any of their kids to go down a certain path or another and I am actually – all of us that I can think of have gone to college or are in college. I am sure that if there was the one that said ‘I would actually rather go to music school or art school’ or that kind of situation, that would be just as encouraged because it is at least getting higher education to better yourself.

Education has been a value in Nikki’s close-knit family and continues to be taken seriously by her generation as well.

A lot of us are in traditional colleges and traditional settings. They have always encouraged us to do anything that we wanted. Whether it was travel – I know a lot of my cousin’s have done a lot of study abroad in school, particularly one of my cousin’s has spent a lot of time in Africa, which he loves. And another cousin has spent a significant amount of time in Europe. Whether it is arts or math and sciences, I am sure one of their kids really, really liked cars and wanted to be a mechanic they would still encourage that. It is not like the women have to do this and the men have to do this.

This stance helped Nikki become free to learn about herself and her desires for her life. The adults in her family also taught her to do the best she could at whatever it is she chose to do.

It was always that they just encouraged us to find what we like and what we were interested in and do the best that we can at anything that we try and go from there. So that is kind of the best thing that I can say about that.

The closeness of her family also allowed Nikki to have role models, within her family, who “showed [her] what being a black woman is all about”. Her grandaunt, Gwendolyn’s mother, who happened to be her step-great-grandmother was someone she gravitated towards,

while she was alive. During the interview, she remembered the loss of her great-grandmother and the impact it had on her:

I know it was July 4th because I was working that day and I had gone to see her the day before. I said, 'I was going to come see you the next day', but she wanted me to go – she could still talk but she was obviously not doing very well. We were going to see fireworks and I told her, 'I am going to come see you the next day' – I had already scheduled off work and everything. My mom came – I was closing out my last table and my mom came in and I saw her face and I just lost it. I knew something. I knew and I - we went straight to her house and we had known. She had just left the hospital and it was literally just a few hours like she was waiting to come home. She did not want to die in the hospital. They came home and sat her up in the living room and it was only maybe a few hours and she was gone.

There were many losses for Nikki's family on both sides. She never got to meet her mother's parents and her father's parents also died when she was very young. So, her great-grandmother, by marriage, was the only grandparent she was able to experience in her lifetime.

She was my great-grandmother really, I guess, by marriage. That was the only grandparent that I ever had exposure to because when I was born literally within a year and a half, surrounding my age of two – literally a few months before and a few months after – people just started dropping like flies in my family. That is part of the reason why I am an only child because death would kind of coincide around births and there was this weird like urban legend in my family going like, 'every time we keep having a kid we lose somebody and there is only so much room in our family. Every time we have a child we lose somebody'. My dad kind of psyched himself out for a minute and was like, 'I

don't want to have anymore kids because I don't want to keep losing people'. I guess when they were ready I was like 5 or 6 or something and my mom had some issues with her thyroid and had to have iodine radiation. I remember having to be like separated from her for like two weeks. She was in a room over here and I couldn't go in there and see her, and it was very weird because I did not understand what was going on. But she did not have clearance to like – it was not healthy for her to try to have a kid for so many years after that and then, by the time she was okay, I was like 8 or 9 and they were like yeah we are not spacing them out that far.

There was a lot of loss that influenced individual family members' decisions for years. It's an interesting story about how Nikki came to be an only child, but “after losing so many people close to you, it seems rational to just count your blessings.”

Nikki still knew a good bit about the family members who had passed on before she was born, or those she was too young to remember. She attributed this to “the living family members holding on to their memories.”

But there are very few older members of the family left and, unfortunately, they are starting to fade, which saddens me deeply. I was too young for the other ones. I can't put their face in my head unless its them in a picture. My grandmother, I can – she is the only one. My dad's mom – my mom's mom and dad's mom both passed away from breast cancer. Then, I guess, my mom's dad was colon cancer and then my dad's dad was kind of an alcoholic, so I think it was mainly liver problems with him – was his issue which is part of the reason my grandmother left him. She decided to raise 5 kids on her own and worked like crazy hours because she was not going to raise her kids like that. That is why my dad does not drink. My entire life I have never seen my dad with an alcoholic

beverage ever. That is just a cultural thing that he has learned – he saw what it did to his mother and his family and everything. He has always been my straight edge dad right there. My mom may have a glass of wine or a margarita or something. That is really it – and she doesn't do it largely out of respect for him. She is not going to drink because of him and be uncomfortable like that, but she has also just never been like that way. So my family is definitely very calm in that way. When it is those family reunions and things they are not the ones getting down and crazy. It is the rest of us that make up for it.

Even though there was significant loss, the family continues to stay close and spend a good bit of time together. Many of Nikki's fondest memories include times when her family was gathering.

### **Gathering As a Family**

There are two different types of gatherings Nikki looks forward to with her family: those with just her nuclear family and then those with the extended family. The structure of who is involved in Nikki's nuclear family are relaxed, based less on titles, but more so time spent together. She gives the example of her paternal uncle, who is very much so part of her nuclear family, since he lives with her parents.

Since I am the only child, it is literally me, my mom and my dad. However my dad's brother is living with us right now so he is – he has been living with us for a few years and it is awesome because he is like the big brother I never had, even though he is still my uncle, because we both still act like children. I feel like he is their second child, because when we get together we act very brotherly and sisterly – like we'll have dead arm contests and farting and spitting – and my mom is like, 'oh God!' He is a part of our nook now. He has been scooped in to our tri-family nook and my mom's cousin is a truck driver and he stays with us when he is in town. He is not there very often but he is still

part of our little family so if we are all home at the same time we will absolutely hang out – we will have movie nights upstairs and hang out and watch some movies and cook dinner. My uncle is the best cook and he loves to cook, every once in a while he does like it if someone will give him a break.

With each gathering, everyone comes together no matter the occasion and jump into actions, cooking and hanging out together without missing a beat. Nikki likes what traditional family gatherings have come to be in her family.

My uncle and my dad are the cooks in the house. My mom is the lady that cooks for special holidays. She will cook for Thanksgiving, Easter and Christmas and that is her time. Everyday stuff – the guys got it down. We hang out and just do stupid things together more so now that I am an adult, because I don't really get to come home very often so it is just for a day or a weekend. This next week of Thanksgiving is probably gonna be the first family vacation that we have taken in a number of years simply because we get so busy with mom having to travel for work and me having school and dad's doing business and this, that or whatever. It has gotten a bit harder, but when I was younger that is one of the things that got me and my cousins so close is because we would take even family trips of me and my cousins and my aunts and uncles and go and get a condo in the mountains and go and play. Or my parents would just take little trips with me. Like I remember going to Hershey Park when we were in New Jersey or going to Sesame Place.

The family grew close on these trips, because it was just Nikki, her mom, and dad. As the only child, her parents “spent a lot of time and attention on [her].” Nikki continued to remember trips she went on with her parents:

I remember going to dinosaur land and going to little random trips and stuff like that that they would – I think they were obviously trying to have family vacations and stuff. They would say, ‘she does not have a sibling to play with all the time, so we are going to have to entertain her on random weekends.’ So that is what we kind of do. A lot of times – we really like movies – we will put a movie on the big screen and just sit on the couch and pull them on, make some popcorn and hang out and watch movies.

It was not always just her nuclear family – often Nikki and her parents get together with the extended family on holidays or special occasions. She discussed what these gatherings are like:

When we do larger family functions – every once in a while we will have family reunions and stuff and even when we have a death in the family, and everybody is getting together as a family – we are a big family that likes to celebrate life. As weird as it sounds we will make a good time and a party out of anything. We know that we do not get together as often as we would like because we are kind of scattered – even if it is us coming together for a sad time, we enjoy having the family together. So we will have a good time with it and there will be pictures coming out, there will stories coming out, and that is, as I have gotten older – you know, when you are younger it’s, ‘okay the old people are going to go do their thing and us kids are going to go do our thing.’ But as I have gotten older I am still in that limbo area where I can play with the young kids and still sit around and start hearing about things that the family has done that I maybe had never known. We talk a lot, we are big dancing family, we are a big theatrical family. I don’t know if Aunt Gwendolyn told you but her brother has been a professional singer for a number of years.

Nikki told a story of the last time her extended family got together:

Well the last time that we got together, because my Aunt passed away, we were at one of our cousin's houses – somebody's cousin's house – I don't know how we fit – we are a big hodge podge. We had a little impromptu dance off where we put on my uncle's – it had to be an O'Jay CD – and we had the dances down. My two cousins – they are not twins, but you would not be able to tell them apart it is so creepy, creepy, creepy – and they had my Uncle in the middle and they had the doo whop dance down. And so it was good and so there is definitely a lot of story telling and a lot of dancing and singing and there is a lot of food. Everybody makes a plate of some kind or you know we have a couple of them that just like to kind of “control freak” them and are like, ‘no, I got all of it’ – and that is how our family is. Our family is very close even if we have not seen each other for a long time. That is kind of what we do. We spend time catching up – even when I come home to my small nuclear unit – we may do movies, go out to eat, handle errands or this and that and whatever, but there is at least one or two good in-depth conversations that happen somewhere about something. Whether it is something political going on or a program we saw on Sports World or something going on with life or life decisions – we are definitely a family that will talk to each other about any number of things, seek advice, get opinions – like we encourage bouncing things off of each other too. Whether it is major life decisions or not, we definitely are not closeted like that.

Nikki has learned to be comfortable in her skin because of the type of family she has. “There are so many characters that I feel comfortable being a character myself,” she reflected. Though the whole family is close, Nikki discussed her closeness to her Aunt Gwendolyn and their “kindred spirits”.

Aunt Gwendolyn has a free spirit and I love her so much. She is one of my biggest support systems and one of the reasons that we are so close. Thank God she moved to Georgia. Part of the reason that she moved to Georgia was her mother, and work, and there were a number of things that contributed to that, but they were – we were down here first and when I knew they were coming down here, I was like, ‘yeah! Cool!’ That was really before I knew her on that level. Like, she was always my aunt and I knew her and I loved her. I used to – like if something was going on with my parents and they were going out of town or they had an event to come to, I would come over to her house. Her husband, my uncle is my movie buddy. He loves movies so much – love hanging out with him so much. They had a dog, Sir Duke – he was a show dog. I was not able to have a dog so they said he was my honorary pet, so if I ever wanted to come over and play with Duke – yeah, Sir Duke is no longer with us – he is – I loved him. I did a whole project on him for Show-N-Tell. She let me bring him into school and I was like so excited. I was like, ‘yep –yep – my dog is a show dog. Portuguese show dog – Get it!’ My uncle likes spicy foods and we are always like, ‘who has the hot sauce? Who has the hot sauce? Who has the hot sauce?’ She will get down and dance with you for anything. She has an infectious laugh. I love my family! I am so blessed. You cannot have a boring time around her – you just cant! Like if you are – you are a corpse.

Even being with Nikki reminded me very much of her Aunt Gwendolyn, who I also interviewed for this project. It was interesting to hear Nikki talk about how close they were and how similar they are, because I noticed these same things between the two of them. Nikki “credits Aunt Gwendolyn for helping [her] feel comfortable in her own skin, because [she] is able to look at her and see herself.” Also, Nikki is able to look up to her Aunt Gwendolyn, along with her

mother and other women in her family, because of their ability to be self-sufficient. She “learned how to rely on [her]self by watching her mom and Aunt in action.”

### **Everyone Was Self-sufficient**

From both sides of her family, Nikki learned to rely on herself and learn to be self-sufficient. As she discussed some of the qualities of her family she learned to integrate into her identity, self-sufficiency stood out to her as the most valuable lesson. Nikki talked about learning that, “no matter what other people told you you can do, you should be able to set your own bar and rely on yourself first, always.” She discussed this further:

Everybody was self-sufficient – that was something that was definitely encouraged on either side of the family. My mom’s side of the family, my grandmother worked in a secretary’s office but she was also college educated and I think both of my grandparents on that side of the family were college educated. All of her siblings went to college and graduated as well and are working as well. My mom’s siblings are the complete opposite of my dad’s siblings – both of my parents are one of five though.

Regardless of level of education, Nikki had many role models for self-sufficiency on either side of the family. Even outside of education and professions both her parents taught her she had to do everything – change her tires, sew her buttons, etc.

If you have a button problem, just sew it. Do it yourself – you can sit there and take an hour to watch television; you can fix your clothes. It is not that hard. And I think that everybody in our family can cook, can probably sew if it absolutely came down to it and they had to sew, maybe not like make a designer dress, but could fix something, - they at least know how to thread a needle. Oh my gosh! I had to teach my roommate that the other day and I was like, ‘shame – shame on you.’ I have like a little travel sewing kit

that my parents gave me to take to college because they were like, ‘no, you can fix your own stuff’. I had to show my friend how to do something the other day and I felt so bad. The larger lesson Nikki’s parents were working to teach her was to trust and believe in herself – that she could do whatever was needed in any situation. As Nikki gets older, she is learning how valuable this lesson is, because she has been in situations where, she may not have learned exactly how to get out of it or deal with it, but she knows she can trust in her abilities to figure it out. Nikki called it “sustainability” and talked about it in detail:

I think sustainability is one of those things that you never know what you are going to face and you never know what necessarily if you are going to have the same liberties as the predominately white part of society so you have to know how to take care of yourself. You need to know how to be able to do these things so you don’t have to reach out unless you absolutely have to. I think that is something that has definitely been instilled in me and parts of family that are not necessarily related but are also of minority races as well.

Her parent’s friends are part of the village who taught her this lesson, because they had to learn it along the way as African Americans.

So definitely self-sufficiency would be the biggest thing because, I don’t know about everybody else’s families, but I know in terms of the people that were not exactly related to us, but people that like my parents met in college (that are basically like aunts and uncles, but are not) who taught me the same lessons.

In this way, the lesson of becoming self-sufficient goes beyond just learning to do things yourself, but also incorporates many lessons black parents must teach their children – that people may not be willing to help you out and you have to help yourself. Nikki learned “not to have to extend too far outward unless you have to. That may be the only person that you have.”

Many of Nikki's family members on both sides are formally educated and attended college at some point in their lives. Though an unspoken rule, going to college after high school was a rule, just the same. Nikki identified education, life being self-sufficient, as a value she learned in her family.

### **The Value of Education**

Both of Nikki's parents attended Florida A&M University, where they met and were married. Most of Nikki's aunts and uncles, on both sides, attended the same university. Through family, she learned the value of formal education, but it was through various life experiences she had at a young age that she learned the value of informal education. She now is combining them both to decide how she would like to proceed professionally after graduation. Nikki told her story about her formal and informal education to this point:

In terms of education I always did really, really good in school. High school I had kind of –there was a tough time in our family where I had some serious medical issues, and some serious emotional issues and some things going on where I actually had to leave school for a little while and it threw me off. I actually ended up finishing a year after my class and it broke my heart so badly because I actually went to another school trying to make up my time but it did not really pay off, because I was not actually at 100% to do that. I did graduate high school but there was a very dark period for me and my family for a good couple of years – I think between 15 and 17. But during that time, I was seeking help from a therapist, which is part of the reason I learned how therapy could be very helpful for people and it can help you learn stuff about yourself that you didn't know. It can be a very helpful tool to a person, a family, to a number of things, a number of people and things. I finally graduated and was very, very excited about that. My Aunt

Gwendolyn went [to graduation] and her mother went with us – she was still with us – and she was able to go and it was a very happy day for us. I got into the University of Georgia and I have decided to do a degree in Psychology and a minor in Child and Family Development, but I actually changed my minor into a second major and now I am going to graduate with two degrees.

Both Nikki and her parents learned about the value of therapy while she went through this difficult period in her life. Nikki said, “This experience contributed most to the education [she] received about who [she] is and about [her] resilience.” It was only natural for Nikki to “turn the positive into a negative and learn to help other children, because family taught her to use life experiences in that way.” She continued to discuss how she is turning her trauma around:

A Child and Family Development and Psychology degree, so part of that came with my love for children and part of that came from me having experienced some very difficult things and knowing there were people that were able to help me and being able to reach out to me as a young adult. I was like 15 – 17 so I was a teenager, I wasn't a child but there were still people that were able to help me through a number of things and I appreciated their assistance. There were a number of issues going on with me and the dynamics within our family was changing and there was family therapy that was definitely helpful. So me having seen how that can be beneficial and seeing how somebody can put their life back on the rails and move forward and get back to the path that they were on and even if that path has changed directions a little bit you can still be successful and that is something that I thought was very important because a number of children and adolescents don't have that.

She wants to turn her experience around and be that person who teaches traumatized youth they can look within themselves to change their situation.

That kind of person in their corner and [Social Work] is a field that I know the caseloads are ridiculous – there are not enough people to help the people that do need help. I would love to be on that train so that is what I am working towards in my college professional career so my end game kind of is to do some counseling and definitely spending some time in my earlier years in a residential facility for mental and behavioral –like a residential facility for youth – not adults – but for youths. So I definitely want to work there because there are a number of things you will end up facing – some kids, you know, have drug problems, eating disorders, or anger issues, or you know bipolar issues, assault issues, a number of different things that they need help and guidance with and I would love to be able to help them do that. Some people believe all these kids are trouble and there is no helping them – not me, because people used to look at me like that.

Nikki feels “the values [her] family taught [her] continue to be the difference in getting through such a hard time in life, because they taught [her] that, no matter what [she] can find it in [her]self to turn it around, starting with the help of professionals, of course.”

### **Family Summary**

The family interview with these women was really just a continuation of the familiarity that came with each individual interview. Similar to how their family gatherings were described, the women sat around the table and got to work pointing out the details of their family genogram. After her individual interview, Toni called her maternal Aunt Maya to invite her to call into the family interview. She offered another intergenerational perspective that linked Nikki to both her father and mother’s sides of the family.

Analyses of the family and individual interviews uncovered three themes: individual exploration towards self-sufficiency and self-pride, healthy family connectedness, and egalitarian gender roles across generations. A deeper look at these themes uncovered the process each generation was involved in to develop the overall identity of each individual woman, with emphasis on their African American female culture.

Gwendolyn, Toni, and Nikki all discussed being proud of being black women and using the other women in their family to come to this sense of pride. Gwendolyn and Toni grew up during the same era of the mid to late Civil Rights Movement, but did so in the northern part of the United States. Nikki was born during the 80's when the racial climate in the United States was assumed to be different (than it had been for her mother and aunt), but was in the South. They each developed their African American woman identities in different parts of the United States, but learned in similar ways how to establish positive senses of themselves. They were each encouraged to explore their identities and be proud of who they are – they were encouraged to see themselves as beautiful and special. Maya's input during the family interview verified the family's overall emphasis on developing individual members into women proud of who they are and with high self-esteem. She specifically noted, “[her] mother would very overtly tell [her] she was beautiful, no matter what other people in the world tried to make [her] believe.” Each of them also described being taught, mainly by their mothers, that self-esteem best comes when you learn to get ahead in life on your own. Gwendolyn's mother specifically laid the foundation that she “could do anything she put her mind to” and encouraged her “to explore the world and see what it has to offer.” This instilled in Gwendolyn the notion that experiencing different things would allow her the opportunity to learn what she could do – and it did. It was interesting to see

all the women discuss being taught to be self-sufficient, while also learning the importance of family connection – that family (along with yourself) is all you really have in this world.

Family gatherings were normal for the women in this family. Even as Maya entered the conversation, during the family interview, she discussed the same emphasis her parents put on closeness in family. Though she represented a different side of the family than Gwendolyn, she made it just as clear that it was expected that individual members often be involved in traditional family gatherings. It seems the best way parents and grandparents of both families passed down the importance of close family relationship was by encouraging a positive self image, while expecting family involvement. Nikki, for example, remembered that her parents often “hosted family gatherings at their home – Christmas parties, birthday parties, you name it.” Even if it was just nuclear family gatherings – like it was for Toni – they were often not a choice, but expected. None of the women said they minded being with family, because “it was just what we did. It was always fun. Even if we gathered for someone’s funeral, it was good to see family.” The attachment between these women serves as evidence that closeness in family was an integral part of their socialization. For Nikki, “family was a way to be protected from the world’s evils.” Gwendolyn nodded in agreement when Nikki made this statement and added, “yeah, it seemed easier to deal with someone calling me a ‘nigger’ when I was around family.” It seemed they were describing family as a protective factor against oppression, whether it was “at work, at school, or just in everyday life”. For these women, family was “how [they] learned to be black women”. Part of learning *how* was to know the role women played in their family.

Along with learning to be self-sufficient, it was clear that both the men and women of the family were expected to play the same roles and have the same responsibilities in the family. Both Toni and Gwendolyn learned the value of having egalitarian gender roles and

responsibilities in their family; therefore, they both sought husbands who learned the same. Along with their husbands they established families/households with the same value. Nikki described “having to learn how to do any and everything in order to take care of [her]self.” In looking at potential relationships, she has the same expectation that “a man will also know how to cook (like her father) and know that [she] can change a tire too (like her mother!)” Maya even talked about having to do all the same chores her sister and brother had to do. She also watched her mother go to work and take care of the house, even though she was married. Maya reflected,

In my day it was rare to see a woman, who was not poor, go outside of the home to work when she had a husband that also worked. Therefore, I learned that I had to always keep a job and make sure my husband wasn't the only one bringing in money.

This overt lesson seemed to serve as a reminder for these women that learning how to do things, regardless of if it was “the woman’s job” or not, increased reliance on self and decreased the chances of having to rely on someone else.

Across the three generations represented in this family each of the individual women held a job and were formally educated. Being both educated and keeping a job were two ways they learned to be self-sufficient. This never changed the value of family to serve as support when encouragement was needed, or when the women experienced oppression in their social environment. The women seemed to be describing a healthy balance of individual and collective development centered on the lesson that “you can do whatever you put your mind to. It doesn't matter that you are a woman or that you are black, but that you build the ability yourself.”

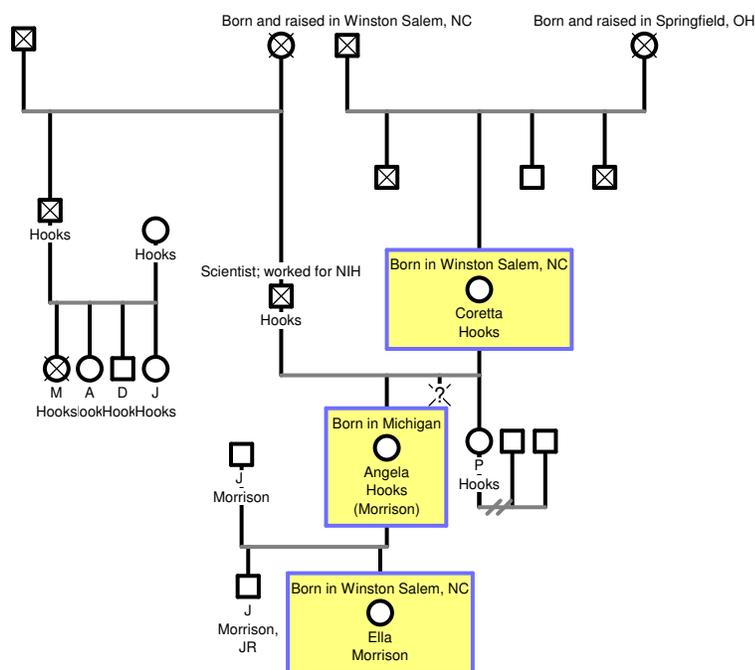
### Family Three

The third, and final, family I interviewed for this project consisted of Coretta Hooks, Angela Morrison, and Ella Morrison. Coretta Hooks, the matriarch of the family, is a 75 year-old retired secretary, who received her Bachelor's degree, and currently resides with her daughter in Winston Salem, North Carolina. Coretta is a widower with two daughters. She is battling COPD and often has to have extensive hospital stays. Her daughter is 53 year-old Angela Morrison, who is a physical therapist and PhD student. She is married with two children; a son and a daughter. Ella Morrison is the 26 year-old granddaughter of Coretta and daughter of Toni, who also resides with her mother in Winston Salem, North Carolina. She is a certified nurse assistant and is employed by the local hospital. All three women were college educated in North Carolina.

There was a clear link between all three of the women from the beginning. I was able to interview the women individually and as a family in the same day (at their request), so I could clearly see some similarities between them quickly. First, they naturally took care of one another, with the focus of care being on the elder woman of the family, Coretta. Both Angela and Ella made sure to hear her desires first before making moves. When the three women started telling their narratives it was clear that service and care were values held important within their family. All three women were reserved during their interviews, but started to talk more once the three of them got together. They described a relatively small family that was close-knit, honest with one another, and took caring for one another very seriously. This family, just like family two, experienced a lot of loss and prided themselves in taking care of each sick family member until they passed – it was an unspoken promise to do so.

What follow is the genogram created with each individual woman – that was then discussed further in the family interview. After the genogram are the narratives for each

individual woman, closed out by the family narrative with themes generated across their three interviews.



**Figure 4.3**  
*Family Three Genogram (Created in GenoPro)*

### **Coretta Hooks: I Identify Myself As**

As soon as I met the third family in this study, I knew who the matriarch and leader of the family was. It was not just her distinguish gray hair or the fact that she clearly was the eldest of the three, but that when she spoke everyone had no choice but to stop and listen. Coretta was honest and stated strongly whatever came to mind to say. In fact, she prided herself on speaking up “to say what needed to be said.” I enjoyed meeting with her and hearing the many stories she told about how she came to be the woman she prided herself to be. Coretta began by describing how she identifies herself.

Coretta started out by stating, “I am an African American lady and I believe in God.” Her belief in God was (and still is) a large part of her identity. It was through church Coretta learned of her identity as a black child. She discussed this further:

When I was growing up and – I wouldn’t say *made* to go to church or Sunday School – but through my Sunday School teacher and my parents, I knew that as a group I was an African American black child – a negro – and I went to church and Sunday school and church and vacation bible school – we used to be in church all day.

Coretta was surrounded by black people when she attended church with her family, so she naturally learned that being black, or a “negro” in her time, was who she was. “Being a child of God” was something she learned through constant connection with church and family. There were members of her family that were very strong in the church and taught her of the importance of being a Christian. Coretta talked about this further during her interview:

You know – I think you get that inner feeling, you don’t just – I can’t really explain it. I think that you get that feeling that someone is holding your hand, which is God. I just definitely believe that and you do unto others as you have them do unto you. Like my –

others called her Granny, but I call her Cornella – she would say ‘you do undo others as you would have them do unto you. You don’t look to be repaid.’ Like I told my niece that I raised, I don’t look for you to take care of me for the rest of my life, I am taking care of you out of love. Not that I am looking for repayment, I am taking care of you out of love. She knows that because I tell her too. I am not taking care of you for you to take care of me later on. I take care of you because I love you and you deserve that. Somebody loves me and that is why I am sitting here talking to you and I know who that is...I know how that is. I am thankful for that. I am thankful.

Coretta attributed her natural tendency to care for others to her identity as a Christian. Her family socialized her more to be a Christian who was good to others without the expectation of anything in return, than they did to withstand oppression. For Coretta’s family, “if the children had a good foundation in God, they could handle what people said to them.” From her own grandmother and mother, Coretta learned first to identify as a caring and loving person – these were aspects of her identity that she continues to use when describing herself. Coretta also naturally began to discuss her family life as a “huge part of who [she] is.”

### **Family Life**

Coretta described her household as a “strict” one where she “was most concerned with being obedient.” She stated,

I know this sounds funny or strange, but I was not trying to learn how to be a black woman from anyone or trying to emulate anyone, I was just trying to obey. I was taught to obey so I was not trying to be anyone except for myself and to learn how to obey.

Both her father and mother were strict and expected Coretta to help take care of her brother, who had Down Syndrome. As the youngest living child (she had an older brother who died after three

days), it was Coretta's role to help with her younger brothers. In describing her family life at home, Coretta remembered, "My mother never worked and my dad was very, very strict. We were always at home. We did not do anything special. We were at home." There was not much connection to any other part of the family, so it was always just Coretta, her brothers, and her parents.

Her mother moved from Springfield, Ohio to Winston Salem, North Carolina. When I asked her if she knew the story of her mother moving, she remembered:

My mom grew up in Springfield, Ohio and a cousin, the match-maker, brought her to Winston Salem to meet my dad. He was from Statesville and his business brought him to Winston Salem.

So, Coretta's mother moved from the northern state of Ohio to the South. She wanted Coretta to be educated in the North, though, and sent her back to Springfield, Ohio for high school. "She wanted me to get a better education and with all that was going on with black people down here, she thought it would be better – and it was."

Coretta was never really close to her mother, "most likely because [her] mother was older when she had children and I was there to help with my younger brother." She was determined to make sure she was close to her daughters, because she realized when she was younger how important it was for a daughter to be close to her mother. "I have daily contact with my daughters," she beamed. She continued:

God was in my footsteps. I look back and I am a living testimony because he will take care of you. They cooperated – especially my girls. They cooperated. I tried to teach them they needed to still be obedient, but could have a close relationship with their mother. They had to do chores, but I was not as strict on them.

She decided it was important for her to offer a different home life for her daughters than she got when she was younger.

There were still lessons she learned that she made sure to pass on to her children. Mainly, Coretta wanted her daughters to be caring and loving to everybody – that, “no matter what happened, it was important to show they were good people and smart.” It was also important she teach her children to be connected to the small family they have. Coretta talked about the relationships with her small family:

My brother’s children – we stay in touch. That is it. Other than my girls I cannot think of other family, other than my niece and her family, to stay in touch with. We have this – their first cousin, my brother’s child. My girls are close to him, but we don’t just talk every week, but we are close.

Her small family and limited interaction taught Coretta, by default, to be independent. It was not necessarily a lesson she said she learned from her parents, but something she learned by her circumstances. Education was valued in Coretta’s family and she was able to be college educated at North Carolina Central.

### **Education**

Since Coretta’s mother was adamant about her receiving a good education by moving to Springfield, Ohio with a cousin, it was clear to Coretta that she should take her education seriously. She told the story of her move to Ohio:

I was born right in Winston Salem, North Carolina and my mother wanted me to graduate from the same high school that she graduated from so I spent the last two years of my high school in Springfield, Ohio and graduated from the same high school that she graduated from and lived with cousin’s there.

She continued:

She just wanted me to graduate from the same high school that she graduated from and knew I could do it because we had cousins there I could stay with. After I graduated from high school I came back to North Carolina and went to college in North Carolina.

Schools were not integrated in the South in 1937 and Coretta remembered that schools in Ohio were “more open to integration, therefore [she] could focus on [her] studies.” Focus on her studies she did and she graduated from high school and went on to college. It was rare for African American women to get a college education in the 1950’s, but it seemed “like the next thing to do” for Coretta.

I went to North Carolina Central and studied – they call it commercial education in my day – the only thing that you could get a decent job in was being a teacher so I studied commercial education because I learned when I was in Ohio that I liked that business world. When I came back to North Carolina, it was strange because I come to college and the first two years in college was the same stuff I had in my last two years of high school – that shows you the difference of being up north and coming back down south. The same stuff that I – the same as far as one subject –the same stuff I had in high school they were teaching it in college. That just shows you how we are not forward thinking in the south as they were in the north. But then it got better as I moved along in college.

Coretta appreciated her mother’s foresight once she got to college and realized the differences in the education.

After college there continued to be movement back and forth from North Carolina to Ohio for Coretta. She met her husband at North Carolina Central, but went back to Ohio to get married. When she was in high school there she worked for an air force base over the summers,

so after she graduated from college and got married, she went back to work there while her husband was in the Air Force. Coretta talked about the next step in her journey:

We moved to Michigan because my husband was in the Air Force and so I joined him there in Michigan and then worked for the Air Force base there in Michigan until he got out of service – we are talking about four years. I had my oldest daughter while in Michigan and then I lost a child. After that, I went to Washington, DC because my husband got a job at the National Institute of Health. So he got a job and of course I went on and found a job at the Department of State – when you are a secretary and do shorthand it was not hard at that time to find a job. So I worked for the Department of State while he was at the National Institute of Health and I stayed there until my father passed back here in Winston Salem. I knew that I had to come back here and help my mom with my brother, who had Down Syndrome, so I took Angela – no, while I was in Department of State I had my baby girl, Audrey. So I just have two girls – I had Audrey while I was in Washington, DC and when my father died I came back to Winston Salem, North Carolina with my two girls. My husband stayed there to work. This was in 1964 and they were not hiring folks, but I applied for a job at R.J. Reynolds, which is a cigarette company.

With Coretta's education came many job opportunities for her, as her husband moved around the country for better opportunities. The many job changes showed Coretta just how much the world was changing, in terms of race and racism in the country.

### **Changing World**

Throughout her interview Coretta often discussed the many differences between the North and the South, with specific emphasis on race relations. She gave an example of this:

Other than integration, Ohio was more open. To think open in what way – eating establishments – and of course when I came home, there is a difference in where you could eat.

Being able to eat at her choice of restaurant when she was in Ohio compared to the feeling of starting to get jobs as a secretary, when blacks were not normally in the office. Coretta talked more about this:

R. J. Reynolds Tobacco company and I was one of the first blacks, I was not the first, I was one of the first blacks that worked in the office. When they said you worked for Reynolds, they said, “what plant?” and I said I do not work at a plant, I work for the office. They associated black people with the plants and I did not work in the plants, so I was one of the office first to get a job in the office among the first I would say I was probably the sixth black person to get a job in the office.

She continued to discuss what it was like to work in the office:

They were cooperative and friendly, I guess they had to be. That was the 1964 Civil Rights Movement where you had to do right or you were reported. So it wasn't bad, I was a secretary and I worked in personnel and really I just did not think I was any different and I was treated fairly. So, it worked out fine for me.

Coretta learned early on in her life not to worry about what was going on around her, unless it concerned her, but to first be obedient, caring and get the job done. This philosophy did not change when it came to her jobs – Coretta was not concerned with racism, because that was not her experience. During the interview, she was very adamant about this, explaining:

I did not relate to what was going on in the largely United States. I related to get my job done correctly and represent the blacks. There was no other way than to do it, because I

had to, I was in the Department of State in Washington DC, they don't make a difference there and to come here, I just associated with the same situation. I did not try to act like it was different. I just act like I was supposed to do my job and get it done.

This philosophy carried Coretta through many jobs successfully. While her husband was still working in Washington, DC, Coretta worked for R. J. Reynolds and took care of her two daughters, while helping her mother care for her brother. She expressed feeling relieved when her husband came home to North Carolina.

My husband eventually moved and found a job in North Carolina so he moved back and found a job and went to work for Reynolds. He came back he would start working for Reynolds so we became a family again. He moved back from NIA and found a job at R.J. Reynolds so that was wonderful for him to come back and help me because I had everything on myself.

Coretta's husband being in a different state for work was just one of the many types of losses and difficulties she encountered throughout her life. There was a pattern of loss throughout her narrative that showed how she learned to grieve and what grief even meant to her.

### **Grief and Loss**

One of the more striking aspects of Coretta's story was the amount of loss she had endured. She was living in North Carolina with her mother, brother, and two children before her husband got a job and came back from Washington, DC. Coretta took care of her mother until moving her to a nursing home before she passed away. While caring for her mother until her death, she was also caring for her brother. He then passed away in 1976. Coretta then took in three children, who were her husband's brother's children. Their parents were unable to care for

them, so Coretta felt it was her duty to care for them rather than have them go into foster care. She cared for these children into their adulthood

While giving these details, Coretta began to think about her mother and how close they became before she passed away. While talking she suddenly stopped to go back:

Because I forgot to tell you about Granny. Granny passed – let me double back in a minute. I'll tell you about my niece first. Zora's [one of her nieces she raised] sister passed and that was an experience for Zora and for us because she was in Atlanta. We would go down – she had to go to hospice – and we would go down and visit her – all of us, my daughters too. That was an experience for Zora to to be that close to death and there was nothing you can do. That was a very touchy for Zora. So we lost her at 32 – her sister was 32.

She went back to talk about losing her mother (whom she called “Granny”):

We had to have her in a nursing home. I was trying to take care of her and keep her clean. I did her laundry and visited her everyday because you have to be careful – those people try to take advantage of you. They think that you don't show your face. I was there every day. I had to be. So she did so much for me and my family – my brother, my children and his children.

Coretta's face was solemn while she discussed losing her mother and niece. She was speaking slowly, as if she was trying to make sense of it. She continued slowly:

And the Lord just – the Lord took her away, I think, safely in His arms while she was asleep because she was not sick, she was just at the nursing home. So we lost her and now I see myself with my girls, I thought – we called her Nella – I see myself as Nella, or the way that I treated her and they treat me. Nella cooked for me, she washed for me she

would wash the kids - she would wash them. She was just wonderful and I see myself (the way I used to take care of her) in my girls. It is strange how things make a turn around.

After a life of taking care of other, including her brother, mother, two nieces, nephew, her own children, and her husband until his death in 1996, Coretta is in a situation where she is in need of care from others. She talked about being diagnosed with COPD and the changes in her life since then:

I have come with a sickness COPD, which comes from smoking. Since 2007, I am on oxygen 24/7 – I thought I would get used to it. With Reynolds I was smoking and kept on smoking, but I have COPD, and that is why I had flare-ups and have to have my oxygen. I say if it wasn't that, it would be something else. Thank the Lord that I am able to get out and about with it – with my oxygen. So other than the sickness I have not been restrained yet, but I find that activity makes me short of breath, but I keep on going to see and take my breath and take my rest. I've been able to travel to Chicago and see Zora and her son when he was born. So it is restrictive in that I can't be jumping up and down. I can't play softball anymore, which I enjoy.

Coretta's thought process was clear as she discussed how she made sense of her illness. After a life of service to others – and after a full life in general – she feels like it is just a natural cycle. She never displayed a feeling of sadness about her illness or the severity of the life changes she's experienced since being diagnosed – she seemed to take it as a part of life.

It was also an expectation that Coretta would move in with her oldest daughter, Angela, who cares for her. Care is a value that has been transmitted across the generations in this family of women – they believe it becomes their duty to care for those who need it, without question.

Angela, Coretta's daughter, expressed this as I spoke to her. She also discussed learning how to deal with oppression by focusing on the love and protection she received at home with family.

### **Angela Morrison: I Learned Who I Am**

Coretta's oldest daughter, Angela, is a 52-year-old physical therapist living in Winston Salem, North Carolina. She was born in Michigan and moved around with her family until they settled in North Carolina. Angela is also a full time student, getting her PhD in Physical Therapy. She has two children; a son and a daughter. She is married and lives with her husband, daughter, and mother in their home.

During her interview, Angela expressed a strong connection to her mother and grandmother, which influenced her closeness to her own children. When given the chance to discuss her identity, Angela spoke about herself in the context of her religion and spiritual connection to God. She started by saying, "I am a black woman who believes in God." She went on to discuss how she came to this representation of how she identifies herself:

Growing up around women - my mother, grandmothers, and other relatives on both sides - helped me learn to identify myself in that way. I learned to relate to whatever issues that were happening over the life span as maybe whatever God's plans are for you.

Angela was very sure about her spirituality and discussed it as "pretty much the only thing she remembers being outright taught to be as a kid." There were many more discussions about religion and God in her household growing up than there were about race, "probably because they knew that when they teach about God they are teaching their children how to make it through anything."

Angela was clear that she “will always be a black woman and that will never change.” Aside from that, though, she feels her identity is “much deeper – deeply rooted in God.” She gave an example of having to first be spiritual before anything else:

Just basically the job, you have to #1 think spiritually before you act and #2 you will always be black – or black and a woman, so, you know either way you look at that I had to be professional and keep God in everything.

Her job is another important aspect of how Angela describes her identity. As a physical therapist the way she relates to her patients has a lot to do with who she, because it takes a tremendous amount of caring and patience. Angela has been successful at her job and has moved up throughout the years – this is an accomplishment she is proud of and discussed with a smile.

I started at a trauma hospital and stayed there for about 11 years. Then I got a job as a director for, I think, 6 years. The hospitals – during that time, little hospitals merged with big hospitals and so jobs were redesigned and I ended up – I am still at the same hospital that I have been at for 22 years. It is just a small acute hospital.

Angela presented her identity as all of these things without separating any of them out. “It has to be a combination,” she explained. “There can’t be just one thing you focus on about who you are. Other people can focus on one thing and make it all about that one thing, but I won’t.”

Even though Angela’s preference was to present herself as a combination of identities to showcase her complexity, she felt she was always reminded that her skin color was the most prominent aspect of who she was that many others would focus on. To her dismay, this experience followed her throughout her life.

## **Always Reminded**

For Angela, the difficult part of learning her identity is a combination of things that is centered on her being a Christian was that other people did not always see it that way. In her social and professional environments she often stood out black or a women (or both). She discussed times when this happened.

One, coming in as a student being treated as a technician instead of a professional when you are supposed to be treated as a peer. Another instance after starting work in a county of North Carolina, they had to let them know I was a woman of color. I was a black woman and sometimes I would be called a ‘colored person’, I have been called the ‘n word’, but you still have to treat that particular individual with respect, so you really have to suppress some of your other feelings.

In her professional life, Angela described being “reduced to [her] color or sex often” and that “there was really nothing anyone could do about it.” There are not many black women physical therapists and very little who have a PhD – therefore the Angela’s professional experience is such that she is often reminded that she is not the majority.

Growing up in North Carolina for most of her childhood and teenage years also taught Angela what it was like to be black in the south. Further, she discussed the socio-economic difference that many black people in the South were subject to during the time she was raised. Angela discussed this in detail.

I experienced oppression in high school, but it was not necessarily color. It was more socio-economical. Because when I got into high school, that is when they really started integrating and I was really active in a lot of stuff that was integrated. I did not feel it there about my color. In high school they would have high school clubs and if you were

not part of a certain group or certain area blah-blah-blah, you were not able to join a certain club.

Being both black and having lower economic status influenced the treatment Angela and her family's community got in society.

Even though North Carolina was starting to integrate while I was in high school, you really felt it in the response time or how they responded to things that happened in the black neighborhood.

She remembered particular instances that were a true testament to the social times in which Angela grew up.

I can remember where they were doing a lot of burning and the store across the street caught on fire questionably and I know that my dad slept in our room with a gun thinking that something was going to break out. Our room was on the front end of the house. It was kind of weird and kind of scary to grow up and experience that.

Still in Winston Salem, as a mother, Angela knows there is still racism and still difficulty for her black children. Though times are different and a lot has changed, there are still some things that remain the same. Angela gave an example of this.

There has been a lot of changes in Winston Salem, but we have a long way to go. It depends on the type of clothing store. If you go to more of the stores that are on the upper end and you walk, they sort of levitate to you or you feel like you are being watched.

Angela felt it necessary to prepare her children for the experiences they would have as black, non-wealthy children. She was in the medical field all her life, so she had a perspective that most parents did not.

The reason why I taught them to watch trauma was to respect life and know the dangers out there, you know, to see the – you know the movies show the glory of drugs but they don't show the reality of the drugs itself or the guns or the knives. It's so easy to get caught up in what other people say about you or feel the need to defend yourself, but it's not worth your life. Live your life and be a good person and the rest will take care of itself.

The profound perspective Angela had taught her children that it was never worth it to end up in the hospital over someone else's ignorance about who they were. She “wanted her children to learn all of who they were without other people's input.” Angela's life and struggles served as an example for her children, because she decided early on that she was going to describe her self for herself. There were many lessons along the way, though, that taught Angela how to deal with the world around her while establishing herself.

### **Learning How to Deal**

One of the first things Angela mentioned as she discussed her experiences with racism, sexism, and discrimination based on her family's socioeconomic status was how her mother taught her to get through it all. She said, “My mom taught me to smile and be very pleasant in order to deal with difficult racist or sexist situations.” It often easier said than done, especially as a new physical therapist working with patients that may not have wanted her help based on her race or sex. Angela used her mother's lesson to learn how to deal with this too. She reflected on what she learned.

I felt that I am here to help you more so than you are here to help me and if I can walk away helping you, great. If I cannot, because what you are feeling towards me, that is not my issue.

Angela learned that it really was not about her, but about the hatred others were taught by their own parents. Over time with this lesson and with the help on her job's end, Angela's professional experiences have gotten better.

A lot of the companies are doing more diversity training and that helps. That helps. They are looking at diversity. They are looking at – a lot more third party people are looking at how selection goes or how things are investigated. But over all we have a long way to go because there are some people that still think the old way.

The years of experience Angela had with the ways others can treat you helped her start to pass on lessons to her children that would help them along their way. She made it a priority to teach her children to be better than that, because she wanted them to be in control of who they became. She explained, "I have just made [my children] more aware of their actions and how people perceive them and just to be careful. Be careful and positive and be sure of themselves."

The best way Angela learned to be sure of herself to battle the negativity from others was to focus on education. Going to college was never an option, because that was how her mother learned to be independent. Ultimately, the way Angela learned to deal with oppression around her was to become bigger and better than it through education. She went on to discuss this.

That is one thing that I can say over the generations that the positives are making sure that the women are educated and can take care of themselves. That is one thing that I did pass down from my mom.

She started to remember what her mother specifically taught her:

I had to learn that is because both parents said, especially my mom, famous words, you need to make sure you get an education so you can take care of yourself. You don't need

a man to take care of you. You need to take care of yourself. That is one thing that they cannot take away from you is your education.

This is why Angela continues to stop at nothing to achieve her educational goals. She has always wanted to define her own identity and who she is before other people, particularly people that wanted to make assumptions about her based on her race or sex. She reflected, “Completing my Master’s, with two children and being married and dealing with old folks – mom and dad – was about completion of education and defining myself.” Angela’s reflection on these lessons from her mother uncovered many aspects of her childhood she thought continued to influence her as an adult and influenced the way she raised her children. Since she often lived with family, Angela feels it is necessary to have family input and connection at all times.

### **It Take a Village**

An integral part of Angela’s foundation is her connection to family and to her community. When I asked how these connections became so important, she talked about the fact that she often had many family members involved in her care.

We stayed with my grandmother and her son, who had Downs Syndrome and was mentally retarded. We also had a cousin that was sort of like a grandmother, so to speak, to help take care of us all. My grandmother, she had kids when she was lot older and she was not able to get around as much as most grandmothers. So I mean we had a multitude of people get involved, you know because it takes a village. It was always my cousin’s mother, another cousin and my mom and my grandmother – it was kind of all together.

My sister and I are 5 years apart.

She also attributed her connection to family to living with her grandmother.

Most of my childhood we lived with family. My earliest childhood was in Michigan and Washington, DC. My grandmother and uncle lived in the same house and I lived there until I got married.

Being surrounded by family helped Angela learn about who she was, because she was able to see so many reflections of her. Her mother and father had such a profound influence on her identity and, as they always had, encouraged Angela to make sure she learned to be proud of herself for her accomplishments.

My parents taught me to be proud of my educational accomplishments, which encouraged me to go on and I am working on a PhD in Physical Therapy now. We also tried to instill that in my children.

There were many players, or a village, that raised Angela to be the woman she is. She could remember specific attributes of family members that she often saw in herself. For example, her mother's candor is something she makes sure to emulate for her own children. She said, "I never hide anything from my children. That is the one thing I could always trust – I knew my mom would be brutally honest." There were many other tidbits of people that Angela held on to over her life to incorporate into herself. She smiled as she thought about different family members. It was clear that family and family time was very important to Angela.

### **Family Time**

Angela's family was small and, just as her mother discussed, she did not remember many family gatherings of much of the extended family. She remembered family gatherings to be "Lots of food. Gathering around table. Fun – My family on my mom's side is not a very large family - it's not really large at all." Nonetheless, family time was positive and enjoyable.

Family time in the household Angela grew up in became an indication of individual roles within the family.

When my daddy was alive he did a lot of cooking, along with my mom and my Granny.

But then as we all got older everybody brought something. A menu would be fixed and then everybody brought part of that menu so everybody is not in the kitchen very long.

Everybody takes a part in it.

Angela reflected on the progression of family time in her household. She stated, “we are a very close family – close knit.” She continued, “We always stayed in contact with family. We always grew up at someone’s house or they were cooking or we would spend the night here. It was always communication.” This open communication continues to positively influence Angela’s family, as members are added and are lost.

She continued by discussing what family gatherings are like today. She added. “We rotate out holidays – we try to do that. Most of the family still is in North Carolina, so we kind of rotate that out. It is still close because family even in Chicago knows what is going on in North Carolina.” When Angela graduated with her master’s she wanted to continue the tradition of having family time, but having it in their traditional way. She talked about that family gathering.

I am all about family. What we ended up doing when I graduated – we had a cook out and had it catered so everybody came – both sides of the family – to celebrate. They did not have to bring me any gifts, just to celebrate. That is what I did, because not everybody could go to Indianapolis, so I felt it was more meaningful to me to have family around to celebrated.

As a daughter and as a mother, Angela finds it her role in the family to continue the value of family. It is her generation that is starting to take on the responsibility to gathering the family and she takes that role on with pride.

Angela discussed many of the things she made sure to pass on to her children. Many of these things were conscious decisions from the unconscious lessons she learned from her mother. Next, I spoke to Angela's daughter, Ella, to get a sense for how she observed her identity and how her mother and grandmother influenced it.

### **Ella Morrison: I Was the Only One**

The youngest of the three women, Ella, was the final participant I interviewed for this study. Her interview was after her grandmother and mother's and she was fairly more comfortable discussing her identity with me. Ella is a 26-year-old single woman living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She is a certified nurse's assistant with the goal of going to medical school one day. Ella received her bachelor's degree from East Carolina University and works at a near-by hospital. She is the youngest of two children and is very close to her older brother.

Ella's grandparents and parents worked to become part of the middle class, so she grew up with many advantages. One of these was to attend a private catholic school. This experience greatly contributed to her identity development and gave her a radically different experience of North Carolina than her mother and grandmother had at her age. In fact, there were many changes in the South that contributed to Ella's experiences growing up – these became the topics of her conversation about herself and about how she came to know herself as an African American woman.

Ella started out by describing herself using terms very similar to the ones her grandmother and mother used earlier. She said, “ I identify myself as a African American woman. In spirituality, I believe in God and a higher power but I mostly identify with being an African American woman.” She got these notions of who she was by the world around her. She went on to say, “I learned about my identity from the community and obviously my parents and how I was raised. I knew that I was not any other race and, you know, just based off of my skin complexion as well as the family’s as well.” Her family was not the only place where Ella learned of her identity as an African American female. She went on to described her experiences in private school and how that influenced her identity development:

I went to a private catholic school and there were not really black people in the school – there was like one other black boy in the school and they thought they should pair us up because we were black. And I remember I was just kind taken aback from that, we are in kindergarten first off and was not even thinking about that. That is when I became aware – and also at church as well – that I am black. I went to a black church and I went to a white catholic school from preschool to eight grade.

From a young age, it became obvious to Ella that she was black or at least different than the majority of the other students. These were her formidable years and contributed greatly to how Ella thought of herself and how she was to act.

One of the major difficulties Ella faced was the difference between how she was and how others expected her to be. At church, the other kids expected her act or speak a certain way because of her race, but because of things like her personality and the fact that she went to private school, she did not meet the expectations for how African Americans should speak, look, or act. She gave an example of such a difficulty:

I think it was difficult for me in terms of like I did not really have that many times at school but I can remember at church they thought the way I talked, the way I carried myself, the way – you know, because I went to a private school there was just kind of an idea of the way that I was. I was quiet and they assumed that since I was quiet I did not speak up. I had a speech impediment and so I did not talk much because I was afraid I would mess up my words, so, I found more, I guess, between the two worlds – and people would say that I thought I was better because I went to a private school and that was not the case – the assumptions about me that were not true, so I found more people telling me I was black more when I was at church than maybe when I was at school. There was just – I am trying to think. Yeah at school it was just- I knew I was the only one and they would ask me some questions and it was black girls that wanted to touch my hair and it was them coming like it was not real hair (my hair was long when I was little). I got more of that when I was at church or like summer camps that I went to. Yeah, school was not as bad at all really.

It was unfortunate for Ella, as she thought back on these situations, that it was other black children that attempted to make her feel different, because she might now have sounded or acted like them. She already felt different at school as one of few black children, but she also was made to feel different at church where the other children looked like her.

These instances contributed greatly to how Ella grew up to see herself and how she interacted with others, particularly other black people. In the 1980's, when she was growing up, it seemed that there was a lot less community around race “if you didn't meet the stereotypes” then there were in Ella's mother and grandmother's day. Ella never knew what the racial differences were among people and often found herself wondering why differences were created.

She was raised to love everyone, so she was “unsure how [she] was supposed to feel differently or treat others differently because of the color of their skin.”

### **Lessons Beyond Race**

After she talked about the major influences on her African American identity development, Ella discussed her views on the difficulties she faced amongst other black children. She reflected on the confusion she felt at being isolated at church, where it should be another community.

I did not see what the difference was. I thought we were all friends and could all get along. I mean when you go to church it is supposed to be a sanctuary and when you go to church and people are getting kind of isolated because you are different not based on skin color. It was the way I talked or the way my family was. So, it is strange when it comes from a church, which is supposed to be another family.

The values Ella learned were those that did not necessarily have a color attached to them. She was taught to be herself and to learn exactly who she is, outside of her race and outside of what others expected her to be. She remembered one particular lesson from her grandparents:

I was taught to be strong-willed, to be intelligent and to carry myself well and to treat others right. I think that my mom, and even my grandmother, taught me to speak to people, regardless of who they are or anything they've done speak to people and to continue to smile and just speak to them. I can remember times walking into the house and my grandmother and grandfather, if I did not speak, they were like, 'stop right there, walk back outside and come back in like you have some sense and come in here and speak to us. You are not going to walk in the house and not speak. Go back do it again

because you are not going to come into this house and not speak. You were raised better than that!’

She continued by describing how she has been influenced by these lessons in her life now:

When people don’t speak now, I see it like rude. Now it is kind of the norm. I am not going to walk by you and not speak. It’s kind of the norm for people to do that now, but those are things that were passed down to me – education about having respect for other people. Also, having respect for yourself and others and treating people right and being strong willed in your decisions and making a choice from the heart. I think that is a big one. Don’t judge people based on appearances and what their background is or if they are mentally handicapped. You just never know what that person’s personal battle is. So that is one of the things that they taught me.

Being a part of her family proved to show Ella the foundational values she kept with her for her life. “I don’t think these were not lessons I learned because I came from a black family”, she said. She continued to discuss what she was taught:

Intelligence – that was a big thing. Another thing was to have a certain strength about you, to learn from situations, to carry yourself well, speak well as a woman and to be steadfast in your decisions because it is so easily – I guess previously men would try to dominate your opinions. So I guess also to be strong woman – I mean my dad told me that as well. My dad actually told me how to cook more than my mom. It was, you know my dad, was don’t depend on a man for anything because at the end of the day you have to depend on yourself. So I guess, instilling, I guess, the inner strength and independence – intelligence, independence, and strength.

These values served as a strong foundation for Ella's identity development throughout the different stages of her life until this point. Even when there were times she experienced racism, Ella was protected by the lessons her parents and grandparents taught her about how she should carry herself and treat others. She remembered a story about a time she experienced racism:

I can remember when I was in high school, I went to Claire's jewelry shop and a friend and I and another friend that was in from France were watching her get her nose pierced. This lady was following me around and I was like, 'why is she following me and my friend around.' So my friend decided that she did not want to get her nose pierced (because of the lady) and she decided we were going to leave the store. The lady stopped in front of me and said, 'empty out your pockets' and I was like, 'I don't have any pockets.' What I was wearing did not have any pockets on it and she was like, 'Well, empty your pockets right now.' We did what she asked because we were not guilty of anything and we left the store. I told my mom about it and yeah – it was more my dad and he was like, 'If we don't get an apology from the lady, if we don't get something going on, you will hear from our lawyer.' The lady called the house and tried to apologize and – yeah, but that was probably my first experience of racism. I would not say there has been a lot of times of racism or sexism. Though, I get it from patients that are about my grandmothers age or older, but that is just a generational kind of situation. But in terms of people from my generation? No.

This experience taught Ella there were people who see a difference in her, based on her skin color, even though her family taught her there were parts of her identity more important than that. She continued to think of times her race was highlighted:

I am trying to think of some other times. When I was at that private catholic school I asked why they did not celebrate Martin Luther King Day. There was no education about it, it was just another day at the school, and I was just like you know, I was trying to figure out why they did not try to put out more education or help people figure out the significance about what the holiday is. People at school did not understand the significance behind it. I asked the principal in my exit 8th grade interview and she said, ‘Well not a lot of black people can afford to go to private school. Not a lot of minorities can afford to go to this school.’ I just looked at her and said, “Wow!” I was just done. I could not believe that someone actually said that to me. Especially since she had not seen the people in my church – I mean with the cars they drive and the things they do. People in my church are doctors and lawyers and corporate business people so for her to say that was just kind of like wow – I did not know the ignorance ran that deep. I was asking her why there was not more diversity at the school and that was her answer.

It seems Ella’s school administrator made some assumptions about the socioeconomic levels black families achieve. She generally made a statement that black and minorities could not afford the school, so this was a reason why they would not celebrate and educate about a national holiday. As Ella told these stories she shook her head in disbelief. She explained that, “in her family, it was never an issue what color someone was and [she] was taught to love others no matter who they were. So, it’s shocking that others make assumptions because of how I look.”

Other people often made assumptions about Ella and her family’s socioeconomic status because of their race. Many parents of Ella’s friends kept her friends from coming for sleepovers because of assumptions they made about the type of neighborhood her family would live in because they were black.

I did not really notice it because when you are that young you don't try to notice it but when I grew up, I thought, 'wow, I did not have that many friends at my house.' Then when they did finally come over they realized it was not a bad neighborhood but that was not until maybe about middle school, but elementary school I did not have any. I did not have school friends come over to the house. That was really not a bad thing because they were nose-y and some were dirty. I did not mind, but I guess they thought I lived in a dangerous neighborhood or they were scared for their children. I was staying over at their house more than they were staying over at mine.

As an adult Ella thought back on these memories and shook her head in disbelief. She was still so shocked "that people could come to such conclusions just based on the color of someone's skin." The experiences did not stop there, but one thing I noticed while Ella talked about these things is that she never really became upset about this treatment in the moment, while she was growing up. She attributed this to her "parents teaching her that racism is someone else's problem and [she] should not change who she is because of someone else's hatred."

Ella's high school was more diverse, with a larger population of black students than the school she attended for elementary and middle school. She remembered another instance that occurred in high school that was centered on race.

Everyone was getting accepted into college and this one girl said that another girl, who was black, got accepted into [University of North] Carolina. Apparently one of the girls that I was friends with said the only reason why she got in was because she was black. So, a lot of people were really upset and it ended up dividing our class big time. I mean at senior day black people sat here and white people sat there. It was just that shocking. I mean I did not grow up with them but a lot of them had gone to the same elementary and

middle schools because it was a small town. When that happened they just started looking at each other differently and I stopped talking to this one girl because I had confirmation from people in the class and her that this actually did happen. She ended up taking me out of class one day and said, 'Ella, I am so sorry. I did not want this to happen.' She was like boohooing and crying and it was embarrassing because we were in high school. I just thought it was unfortunate. I knew the other girl as well, but you cannot just say it was her race that got her into UNC. You don't know that she was working just as hard if not harder than you. She was taking AP classes, you are not taking AP classes and she is doing well in there. So for you to just sit there and take that – I guess – honor away from her getting into a great university is just wrong. When I explained this to her I guess I was just making things cool but I did not think we needed to hang out that much anymore. It was hard because I was the vice president of the senior class and she was president and we had to work together and make speeches together. So, we had to get past it because it was the end of the year. But, I figured we should not keep in touch. I figured she would have to learn and grow from it on her own.

Even during this experience at school, Ella was able to think beyond the race of the friend that was accepted to UNC and attempted to teach that same lesson to her former friend (who made the comment). For her, it was important that the girl's hard work to get into UNC be highlighted, versus allow it to be marred by the comment about her race having anything to do with it. Ella's attempts to speak to her former friend about her negative comments were because of another lesson she learned at home. She gave an example of one of these lessons.

A good lesson that my parents and grandparents taught me was that if you are standing there while the wrong is happening, you are in the wrong too. So I think in terms – like

my mom used to get on people for saying ‘you are a retard’. I did not understand that until later on and I tell people ‘don’t say retarded’. It is so inappropriate and it was not a big wrong but the term itself and what it relates to is not appropriate I guess.

This lesson became one that guided Ella while she was in high school, during this incident, but it also continues to lead her in her professional life. She knows to do right by her patients and to allow that to guide her decisions in life.

Her family’s lessons and values have always won out over the pressure of racism in her life. Even though she experienced various instances of blatant racism, “it did not ever make a difference in who [she] was.” Her family has always been close – there is an intergenerational tradition of closeness, both emotionally and physically. Ella’s mother, Angela, had the experience of living with her grandmother when her mother moved in to help take care of Angela’s uncle. Ella is now getting a similar experience living with her own grandmother, who moved in with her family after being diagnosed with COPD. She helps to take care of her grandmother and has learned that’s what family does for one another.

### **We Are Close**

Ella is a part of a fairly small family, but it is clear they are very close and take it on themselves to care for one another. Ella particularly loves family gatherings. She described them with excitement:

We get together at the holidays. We used to get together for birthdays when we were little. When we got older it was birthday cards and dinners. But family dinners – I remember growing up it was an organized team event almost because you had one person working on the meat, one person working on the dessert, one person – like everyone had their own thing. The kids – they just wanted us out of the way. We would say, ‘Can we

taste?’ They would say, ‘No, wait for dinner.’ They wanted us out the kitchen, out of the way. But when we got older they started teaching us this is how we set up and break up things. As a team, we can put together a nice dinner. We have everyone bring their own dishes and then sometimes we fix things together at the house. The kids were in charge of setting up the table but that was it. We did the clean up together and then there was a lot of laughter, a lot of good pictures, a lot of napping.

Ella and her older brother were often the only children in the family. They were close to one another and looked out for each other. Really, the whole family looked out for each other and had a good time when they came together.

Ella moved home after college and is helping to take care of her grandmother. This move proved to bring her and the family even closer

I think that we are very close. I think that as we have gotten older. I think we have gotten closer. That is also since I have been back home, I have gotten closer with my family, especially my grandmother – because she was closer to my brother while we were growing up because she loved sports and I did not care and he repeated every hours or every two hours and I just fell asleep. So I think now that I was here after her first big hospitalization – or one of her big hospitalizations – she came to stay at my parents house. That is when I kind of moved back from school and took care of her and cooked for her and put some fighting weight on her. I also got closer with my parents and stuff. I think when I went to school it gave them a chance to miss me – I don’t think they missed me when I went to high school but I think when I went to college, you know – I went to East Carolina as well – that gave them a chance to be like, ‘okay she is far away.’ I am just glad they did not change the locks and they let me back.

Taking care of her grandmother is “sort of a tradition” that was passed to Ella by her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. It was never an expectation for her to come home after college to care for her grandmother, but she took it “almost as a pleasure to care for her like she cared for others.” Ella takes pride in this. She described her role in caring for her grandmother:

I am the 3rd one now on the contact list and I am all up in the hospital – I work in the hospital and she usually comes to my floor. I am always like, ‘okay, what room are you in, who are you nurses?’ I am all up in there and I am on the email list of doctor’s visits. So I think over the last couple of years, my grandmother and I have really bonded. But I found us pretty tight. My brother and I are also pretty tight because it has always just been us two. So, yeah, we are all pretty tight.

The closeness of Ella and her family continues to grow as she gets older and “appreciates their place in [her] life more.” During our time together, Ella continued to reflect on the importance of her family in her life and the lessons that continue to help her as an adult. Most importantly, she learned to love herself and to be her own biggest supporter.

### **There is More to Me: Strength Within**

There were no specific traditional gender roles that Ella could remember in her family. As she mentioned early, Ella’s father actually taught her to cook. She discussed her role in the family in detail.

I am the baby, so yeah I mean – I would say me and my brother would both be out there doing the grass, but only when I was much older. My dad would have me picking out the weeds of the natural areas. He would say, ‘that is what you will be doing while me and your brother will be cutting the grass.’ That would be my task in the family. But I did not really start cutting grass until maybe like 14. Yeah, there were some different things. My

dad never took me fishing and I understand why – it is not a place for a girl. When I got older I was like thank gosh he did not make me do that. I mean, my brother played soccer and I played soccer. I played basketball and he played basketball. The only thing that was different was I did dance (ballet) and that is more of the feminine role, but I think they treated us equally. The only difference was he got more sports games for videogames and I got like Animaniacs and different things like that – so I mean that was just more of my personal request.

The only major difference in treatment between Ella and her brother were attributed more to her being the youngest than her being a girl. They both were taught the same values and lessons about their identity development. Ella's family was big on many things.

Due to the diversity of skin complexions in African American families, there is a lot of research that speaks to another added aspect of identity development that occurs around skin color. Ella's family members have different skin complexions, which made her parents have to have intentional conversations about self-image and skin color. There were times the outside world forced those lessons upon the family by their reactions and questions around the differences in the tone of each person's skin. Ella remembered such a time while she was in college.

I do remember it was strange in college that my mom came to visit because this girl decided to burn her roommate's comforter and it was like – she was crazy igniting the whole room and it covered the ninth floor. I lived on the 10th floor and my mother wasn't just going to come to hang around, she came to help me wash my clothes and make sure there was not too much soot. While she was there, this girl was like, 'who was that woman that was with you?' I said, 'that was my mom.' There was a pause – like this

long pause. She said, ‘well, I don’t understand. She is different complexion than you – this was not from white people, this was from black people. I was just – I never looked at my mom and thought she was a different complexion than me. I never realized it until I looked at my mom – she was my mom. My mom was a little hurt as well because how can you say that I am not her daughter because of skin complexion?’

Ella’s mother is a lighter skin tone than she is, because her father is a darker skin tone. While she was growing up, there was a lot of discuss within black communities about which skin tones were “better” or “prettier”. This made an impact on Ella’s self-esteem, which gave her parents an added component to their socialization and impact on her identity development. She talked about this further.

Growing up I felt more self-hatred. I’ve had more difficulties from people within my race than I have had from people of different races. I know that sounds horrible, but that has been more of my experiences – or maybe the ones that stayed with me. They’ve mostly been from church people and people within the African American community. Everyone in the family has different complexion and my dad has hazel eyes. Our family is just a mix, just different shades of brown and colors of eyes – some have brown and hazel and green. I think people don’t – or are not as educated in terms of genetics or inheritance but

I look like my dad. I tell people I look a lot like my dad, but I am still my mom’s child.

The lack of education within African American communities about the possibilities of diversity in skin and eye color really does have an affect on person identity development, because of many of the divisive tactics used to make some think they are not as good. In African American communities these has seemed to lie within skin complexion or hair type. Ella experienced this among her black peers and this “really had an affect on the way [she] viewed [her] ethnicity.”

Both Ella's mom and dad had a positive influence on the way she viewed herself and counteracted the negativity from the outside world. She has fond memories of some of the ways her parents did this.

My dad, he always calls me his pretty little baby. My dad instilled that. My mom – now my family members are blunt. They would say, 'Girl you have gotten big.' That is something the older generation set, but they instill a strong sense of self and it got stronger as I got older. I did not identify – there is more to me than my skin color. There is more to me than exterior parts and stuff like that. They instilled something stronger within.

Being able to see that strength from within served as a protective factor for the superficial focus on her surface, or skin color, by others. One aspect of her identity that helps Ella remember she is much more than her skin color is her educational achievement and her professional goals.

### **Importance of Education**

Ella comes from a long line of people who were formally educated and achieved college educations. Against all odds, both her grandparents were college educated, along with both her parents. Her brother went to college and it was not an option for her to attend. The importance of education was instilled in Ella as early as elementary school, when her parents put her in private school. They felt it was important enough to make the financial investment to get their children into better schools. Their investment and emphasis on the best education did not stop Ella from wanting to go to public schools. She talked about begging her parents to go to public schools.

I went from preschool to eighth grade in private school, although I begged my parents in fifth grade to put me in public schools. My mom said, 'you only have three more years. You can make it through.' I said, 'OK.' Then the next year I asked and she said, 'you

only have two more years.’ I said, ‘OK, fine.’ I gave up after that. I went to Tiny Tots before school, which is like a pre-preschool thing. It was run by these ladies from my church and they were the ones that told my mother, because of my speech, I might need to go to a speech therapist so I would not be held back as a black child, because my speech. I went to speech therapy. I went to Tiny Tots and I went to preschool. I always used to ask my parents when I would go to school and they would say, as a black child, at that time – with my brother being especially hyper, they put him in a remedial class – they would probably put me there as well because I was quiet and reserved. So, that is where I went. After that, I started elementary school at a Catholic school and stay there until the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. For high school, I went to a nearby public school. I did well and took honors class – I probably should have taken more AP classes. Then I went off to ECU and two days after I graduated I did a summer program for future doctors at the medical school. I did not really get a chance to have a break and in that program you take medical school level courses taught by all the senior professors and you take like doctor and clinical type of practices – just like the first year medical student would take. Now I am back home and work as a CNA and I’m trying to get some clinical bedside hours in. That is where my education has brought me so far.

At this point in her life, Ella is working in the healthcare field as she works the next step, which is medical school. She attributes her interest in the medical field to her mother’s work as a physical therapist. Also, her mother often showed her shows on television with a medical component. She discussed her mother’s influence on the world she does.

I was definitely inspired by my mother. I used to volunteer – or she would make us volunteer when we were younger. I would say that my parents have instilled the sense of

community service into me and my brother and taught us that giving back to the community was important. Whether it be tutoring or mentoring or anything like that, we were always helping others. I would go to the hospital and see how she was with patients and helping them walk, helping them to heal. It is such a powerful thing to see and I think the human spirit is pretty amazing. That is what kind of got me on helping in the medicine and then the science part I got from my grandfather because he used to show us – he had all these books around. It is amazing that I am well-adjusted because he had these books with the STDs and certain experiments he was doing – true story. So he would have all these books, like science books and he would show me certain books. He was a scientist and I guess I had a love of science and genetics and I loved it. My mom showing me the trauma shows and we watched that kind of stuff. I was looking at it while people were passing out in anatomy classes and I am looking at it like, ‘oh, that is the small intestine...’ So, I know I can be a doctor – it combine everything I saw with science and physical therapy. Doctors have more control – I want to have more control. It sounds kind of crazy, but I think that is the best way I can help people.

Just like her mother and grandfather, Ella would like to dedicate her life to helping people. Her grandmother, who learned to care for family members from a young age, also influenced her. Her grandmother, Coretta, dedicated her life to caring for others and passed that value to her daughter, who then passed it to Ella.

Ella’s family had a profound impact on her life, teaching her to be the woman she has become today. She learned to be more than what others tried to make her, to be a strong-willed woman whose love and care of others spoke for itself. Ella learned to be proud of her African American identity, but to define it for herself. She also learned to strive to care for others in her

work and continues to meet her goals towards becoming a medical doctor, with the great influence and support of her parents and grandmother.

### **Family Summary**

The family interview with Coretta, Angela, and Ella was directly after I interviewed them individually. By the time we all sat down together, the three women were eager to get started to discuss their family together. Angela said, “We rarely talk to other people, outside of our family, about the family. It was awkward, but good to think about what makes us tick.” As Ella helped her grandmother get situated in the room, Coretta discussed, “being a little more comfortable talking now” and “wanted to see the family tree to give more detail.” We discussed the family tree in more detail, as I began to discuss the similarities and differences between them.

There were three themes that stood out during the three women’s individual interviews, which were then discussed in further detail during the family interview. The first theme, learning to care for others, was apparent both by talking to the women and by witnessing their interactions. At this point, it was clear that Coretta was the focus of Angela and Ella’s care and attention to make sure her COPD symptoms were managed. It seemed, though, that this was just part of the cycle, as Coretta had her time of caring for many of the family members. The second theme across the interviews was the women’s focus on education. They each discussed going to college as the natural next step after high school – it was not an option, but the expected next step in their development. Lastly, the three women discussed the third theme of race relations in the South. Both Coretta and Ella were born and raised in the South, while Angela was born in the North, but moved to the South during her childhood. Even though all three were born and raised in three different generations, they each discussed strained race relations. There were differences, though, in the types of relations they encountered.

It was clear from the beginning that care of one another was an important theme amongst this family of women. Coretta learned early on, as the oldest, that it was her job to care for others – it was her role in the family. Throughout her life she cared for her younger brothers (one of which was mentally challenged), mother (during her sickness), children, husband (during his sickness), nieces and nephews. Coretta passed on the importance of caring for others, particularly family, to her two daughters. Angela, her oldest, went into a helping profession and took her mother in when she was diagnosed with an illness. Lastly, Ella also went into a help profession, is helping to care for her grandmother, and would like to commit her life to becoming a medical doctor. By watching one another the women are motivated to help one another and dedicate their lives to helping others.

Education seemed to be important for most of the women I interviewed for this study. All three of these women talked about going to college as “just what you do next.” Coretta started college in the 1950’s, which was rare. Even she mention that, “had it not been for her mother’s foresight in sending her back to Ohio to finish high school, she would not have been prepared for college courses had she stayed in North Carolina.” Angela inherited this focus on formal education and has achieved a master’s degree and is working on a PhD. For her, “education has always been what gives you options. [She] learned this from [her] mother.” Angela also taught her own children “education will open all doors” and especially taught her daughter that, with a formal education, “you will never have to worry about relying on your future husband.” Ella was always appreciative of this lesson, because it taught her to rely on herself first. So, today, as Ella decides what is next in her life, she feels the next step must tie back to education somehow so that she may “learn to stand on [her] own two feet.”

Lastly, Coretta, Angela, and Ella discussed the racial climate of North Carolina throughout their interviews. Their focus was mostly on the protective factors of family and how their family taught them to be much more than others expected them to be. Angela talked about the “slow movement” she saw in North Carolina, as she “still experiences racial tension almost daily.” She felt the climate around her was “not indicative of the growth the United States would like to believe they’ve had.” Coretta seconded this idea by saying, “Things used to be bad with people outwardly being racist, but it’s just as bad to be followed around a store or assumed to be a criminal without committing a crime.” She described being “disappointed” but the many stories she sees on the news about blatant acts of racism in the community and state. Ella, on the other hand, reported more stereotyping and discrimination amongst black people than with any other race. She said,

My difficulty has always been with other African American people thinking I should act one way or have one specific culture. The culture of my family is different, though. We were taught to present ourselves as the intelligent people we are and to be ourselves.

Many other black people don’t think my ‘self’ is black ‘enough’.

The social dynamics of race were discussed amongst the women and, though they had different experiences based on their generation, they all agreed that their family was what protected them from the outside world. For all three, they were taught from a young age to combat these oppressions with love and care, without becoming the stereotype or letting it get to you.

This family of women presented their family as a small, intimate family with big hearts and a lot of love amongst members. Their geographic location, in the South, affects their social world on a daily basis and influence the way other interact with the color of their skin. For the

three of them, though, it's not about the color of their skin, it's about who they are as people and “whether or not [they] leave the world better than when [they] came in.”

This concludes the narrative analysis section of this project – these narratives were constructed using the words of the women during their individual interviews. The family summaries included their words during the family interviews. Also, the family summaries included the themes generated across the individual narratives. The next chapter is the analysis of narratives section, which describes the themes across the three families. This analysis was conducted to generate themes across the three families, both individually and collectively.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES

By analyzing data across the individual narratives and family interviews, themes emerged that showed similarities between women within the generations and across the three families of women. I use the theoretical framework of black feminist thought and symbolic interactionism to give background on the stories these women shared of their experiences, how they made meaning of these experiences, and the role the other women in their lives played. There are various tables to give a visual depiction of the themes and the connections in my data.

In the previous chapter, the nine women interviewed for this study were introduced and their narratives were displayed, as they presented their stories in their interview. I first presented them as individual women within the context of their family. Now, it is important to connect them to the other women of the other families. These themes emerged across the families and uncovered many connections between women of the same generation, from the same geographic location, or who had similar life experiences. This chapter serves as a display of the findings across the nine narratives and three families, along with a discussion of these findings within the context of the interdisciplinary literature.

The four themes discussed in this chapter are: 1) self-valuation and construction of identity; 2) always the best; 3) migration and movement; and 4) more than color of skin. Table 5.1 gives a visual representation of these themes and the prevalence of them across the individual narratives. On the top row, the themes are represented and on the left side the women are represented, categorized by their age group/generation. In the following chapter, many of the

quotes made during the family interviews are displayed in discussion with the interdisciplinary literature supporting the themes. Table 5.1 introduces these themes and shows their prevalence among the nine women and across the three generations.

Table 5.1

*Visual Representation of Analysis of Narratives Across Three Families/Generations*

	<b>Self-valuation/Strong Black Woman ID</b>	<b>Success means being the best</b>	<b>Patterns of Migration and Movement</b>	<b>Identifying as more than Color of Skin</b>
<b>Generation #1</b> Ages 52-75				
<b>Emma Nelson</b>	X	X	X	
<b>Gwendolyn Clarke</b>	X	X	X	X
<b>Coretta Hooks</b>	X		X	X
<b>Generation #2</b> Ages 49-53				
<b>Renée Brooks</b>	X	X	X	
<b>Toni Walker</b>	X	X	X	X
<b>Angela Morrison</b>	X	X	X	X
<b>Generation #3</b> Ages 25-29				
<b>Faith Lorde</b>	X	X	X	
<b>Nikki Walker</b>	X	X	X	X
<b>Ella Morrison</b>	X	X	X	X

### **Self-Valuation and Construction of Identity**

The experience that connected the women most was that of learning to be independent and strong during the process of constructing their identities; to value themselves more than anyone else could. These lessons were consciously passed down through the generations through words, but also indirectly learned by younger generations watching the actions of the older ones. Each of the women made some mention of learning to be independent and being self-reliant. At the same time, there was also an overwhelming value of family and closeness to family that created a development process that was expected to be both individual and collective at the same time. This balance of reliance on self, with the support of family, allowed many of the women to branch out on their own in order to learn they could do things on their own at young ages.

Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 2000) outlines the importance of “the meaning of self-definition and self-valuation” (Collins, 1986, p. S16). Instead of using the social world’s negative definitions and depictions of black women, this theme describes a more empowering stance where black women learn to define themselves in their own words (Collins, 1986) and by their own actions. Also, at the same time, we see the importance of black women infusing a feeling of self-value into other black women (and into themselves), because there is an overwhelming trend in society to de-value or objectify black women (Andersen, 1993; Collins, 1986; Stephens & Rouse-Arnett, 2003).

The three oldest generations of the family described in their own way the lessons of identity they made sure to pass on to their children and grandchildren/grandniece. These lessons mainly came from their experiences as African American women, growing up in eras where major parts of their identity (their ethnicity, race, or gender) were not valued in the United States. For decades African American scholars have speculated on the process of identity development

that is influenced by being a racial, ethnic, and/or gender minority in the United States (Billingsley, 1968, 1992; Parham, 1989, 1999). This literature contributes to the notion that African American women have a unique identity development process in order to incorporate the oppression and discrimination that will inevitably become a part their lived experiences. This study supports that notion, as the women discussed some of the ways their families had to compensate for the negativity they faced in their everyday lives – negativity that, if left unaddressed, would have impacted their self esteem.

Renée Brooks talked about what it was like to see her mother climb the ladder of success, despite racism and sexism. Renée also had to battle this oppression, but felt more prepared because she “saw her mother survive it.” She discussed “learning *how* to be an African American woman by watching [her] mother, grandmother and other women within the family.” The values they held were self-determination, hard work, and learning to do your job better than anyone else. These were important because, “often as the only black woman, it was always necessary to set themselves apart.” Gwendolyn Clarke learned early on that “white people did not see the real value in black women, unless we showed them our value.” She went on to discuss the ways she taught her niece, Nikki Walker, the importance of “staying rooted in family and God in order to combat the difficulties in the world.” Gwendolyn believed family could give younger generations a foundation to grow upon and learn about themselves. Toni’s parents made sure she became educated so that she may make her own decisions in her life and be self-sufficient. This was a value she passed on to her daughter. Nikki knows she can always go to her family when she needs to and is encouraged to remain close, but is also encouraged to develop into a woman who can do things on her own. Whether it’s to change her own tire or pay her own bills, Nikki’s

family instilled in her the value of independence above all else, except for family. Family, again, was the exception.

Stevenson & Arrington's (2009) research supported this notion that family interaction and connected do significantly influence the development of positive self regard. They found that families who discussed the positive aspects of African American culture influenced the cultural legacy appreciation, pride, and ability to combat discrimination on a regular basis (Stevenson & Arrington, 2009). This study was conducted with adolescent participants, but it showcases the importance of families' connections to the experiences of individual members. One of the direct or conscious decisions older generations made among the women in this study were to be connected to the experiences of their descendants in order to instill the deep sense of pride and value in themselves, rather than expect the world around them to do it. This seems to be a miraculous feat, simply because of the eras these women developed in. The oldest generations were experiencing segregation and the effects of slavery, while the middle generation was desegregation and constant struggles for equality, and the youngest generations continues to experience micro-aggressions and daily discrimination. Through all of this, self-valuation remained important and a significant feature of the development of these women's African American woman-ness.

African American women within families do consciously empower younger generations to find value in their identities themselves, rather than go to others or find it outside of themselves. This can be a very empowering process that allows for younger generations to be socialized into having healthy images of themselves. At the same time, some literature suggests this value can create a system where African American women do not learn how to be vulnerable and accept help from others, creating this "strong black woman" persona. At the extreme,

African American women are not taught it's okay to rely on someone else, even in partnership, for strength but that it must always come from within (or from family), even during times of difficulty (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, Thomas & King, 2007). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) suggests that, out of necessity, black women have taken on, as aspects of their identity, the pressure of being strong because they have had to strive for excellence “under far from favorable social conditions” (p. 20). Scholars like bell hooks (2000) also discuss the strain black women find themselves under because they must define their identities themselves and place value in themselves, without validations from the world around them. The women in this study did not discuss the pressure of being a “strong black woman”, but I often asked myself if this was because it was an unconscious, expected aspect of their identity they witnessed in their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. The women of this study may not have experienced being labeled as a strong black woman, but most of them did discuss the feeling that they could not be weak or mess up – they had to be the best to achieve.

### **Always the Best**

The mentality that most strength/ability must come from within also creates the mindset that, in order to succeed, you must do it alone and additionally be the best – that success comes by being flawless and without mistakes. All of the women in this study felt they were “successful” at some point in their lives and have reached – or are currently reaching – their individual goals. When I asked the women what values were passed down that helped them ultimately reach their goals successfully, the majority of them responded that they felt they needed to reach them on their own, without help from others, along with having to learn to be at the top or the best at what they do.

Renée Brooks serves as an example of this theme. She is incredibly successful in her field and has reached upper management in a company where she started at the most entry-level position. Though she credited a few people for offering help, she often mentioned she felt she needed to be the best and could not make any mistakes. In fact, Renée remembered her mother's words throughout her journey: "You must always be the best at what you do – don't let them see weakness." Similarly, for Coretta Hooks and her daughter, Angela Morrison, it was important to be the best because they felt that, as black women, they were not going to be afforded the same opportunities to make mistakes. So, they "had to get it right the first time." Angela described this as a lesson her mother taught her early on that she also passed on to her daughter.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) describes this as the performance aspect of strength, while Collins (2000) and hooks (2000) describe the notion of being the best as necessary because of the lack of power African American/black women have in the United States. Faith Lorde describe her power to be in the amount of education she had to prove to others she was the best at what she did. Coretta Hooks talked about being the only black woman in many arenas and the pressure to "do [her] job and do it better than anyone else in there, because [she] had to represent." Gwendolyn Clarke expressed a similar sentiment.

Generationally, there was not much difference in the need for this lesson, because it seemed there continued to be this notion that, as an African American woman (then and now) the participants would not be thought of first for job offers or promotions. I noticed that, across the generations, this value developed into an attribute the women associated with their ethnic identities. When they answered questions like, "What are some of the values you associate with being African American?", there was a trend about the value of education and rising to the top of

whatever profession or field they were in. It seemed that, along the way, it was necessary to adapt to discrimination by creating the value of working hard and being the best to achieve.

Participants often mentioned either their families or themselves making sacrifices for better opportunities. Many of these sacrifices and changes came through movement and migration throughout the United States. In all three families, there was a trend of movement for one reason or another – this theme is discussed next.

### **Migration and Movement**

Migration theory is vast and spans many different disciplines. McHugh (2000) interpreted three ethnographic studies that shed light on the connections between migration and culture in North America; he elaborates on two themes relevant to participants' experiences within this study. Specifically, Emma Nelson talked about her family's move from the South to the south side of Chicago, because of the treatment of African Americans. Her uncle was able to become a businessman, owning several businesses, because of this migration. McHugh (2000) describes "migration north and south is a survival strategy for poor black families" (McHugh, 2000, p. 76). He says that migration similar to that of Emma's family were not for just one reason, but gave families more opportunities – opportunities that were limited in the South because of devastating race relations.

There was a trend among participants to migrate north in or around the oldest generation, stay north for the middle, but then to move South for the youngest. All three of the families served as examples of this aspect of this theme. The cultural genograms showed this theme best. For families one and two, the oldest generation (Emma and Gwendolyn) were born and raised in a northern state. In family two Coretta was born in the South but was sent to high school in Ohio, where her mother was born and raised "because of the better opportunities for education." Two

participants representing the middle generation (Renée and Toni) were born and raised in the North and Angela in the South, all where their parents were born. All three participants in the youngest generation group were educated in the South: Faith moved to Georgia from Northern Virginia for college, Nikki was brought to Georgia from New Jersey at a young age by her parents, and Ella was born and raised in North Carolina. McHugh (2000) described the migration back to the South for African Americans “not so much about recapturing an idealized past as it is about forging the future” (McHugh, 2000, p. 77). Stack (1996) develops the argument that African Americans began to move back South in order to carve out spaces and places for themselves to feel more comfortable in the fight for equality.

The movement and change the participants experienced over the three (or more) generations influenced their identity development, as we know place (nation and community) greatly influences various dimensions of self (McHugh, 2000). Gwendoly Clarke serves as an example of this, as she discussed the way her ethnic identity was shaped by coming of age in New York City during the 60’s and 70’s when the black cultural movements were getting started. She talked about having pride in herself and in her African American heritage, dressing in authentic African garb and wearing braids in her hair. “There was love for being black in New York City during that time and [she] learned to love [her]self in New York City.”

The movement of the participants in this study signifies the various moments in history they represent and great influences how they developed their ethnic identities. No matter where they grew up, though, they were still doing so as African American women in the United States. There was an overwhelming sense that the movement these three families experienced was to ensure upward mobility they may have missed out on because of the color of their skin. The women talked of the lesson in the movement: to do whatever you need to do to ensure the

success of your family. Because of the migration and movement passed down through the generations, these nine participants were afforded new educational, professional, and personal opportunities. These values and opportunities molded the narratives of their lives into one much greater than just being black women, but into highly educated activists, managers, helpers, caregivers, and much more.

### **More Than Color of Skin**

I conducted a pilot study before completing this one in order to gather preliminary information about black women and their continued ethnic identity development into adulthood. One of the major themes that came out of that study was the reliance on family to develop a sense of self that moved beyond skin color. Interviewing this new set of participants and witnessing grandmothers, mothers, and daughters share the stories of who they are unveiled a stronger sense that ethnic identity development for these women was much more than their black race. It was about the values that extend back generations, like being kind to others and taking care of family because that's what God placed them on this earth to do.

Ella Morrison, the youngest generation of the third family, discussed the innate quality she possessed of being a caretaker. She said, “[she] first learned it from watching her grandmother take care of everyone and then watching [her] mother take care of her patients.” Ella said she was compelled to go to school to be a nurse's assistant and would like to attend medical school in order to “continue the legacy of care.” Her mother, Angela Morrison, spoke of her “deliberate lesson to [her] children that their family took care of one another” and that she “learned this from [her] mother.” Coretta Hooks, Angela's mother, agreed that her “number one value was to teach her children that they were placed on this earth to care for others and to be nice to others first.” These values took precedence in this family over teaching the younger

generations about what it meant to be black – it was more so about what it meant to be a good, God-fearing person.

Emma Nelson and Coretta Hooks (the grandmothers of families one and three) expressed this as part of the African American culture they were taught as children. They learned of black people caring for their white masters' families just a few generations before them and the innate quality of African American women to be caring. Emma reflected, "we weren't just the help, like what's portrayed on television, our natural caring qualities as black women were exploited." Care and caring for others was viewed as part of the ethnic identity of these two families.

Another trait that attributed to many of the participants' ethnic identity development is the value of family. Discussed earlier, the value of family contributed to the women establishing themselves individually within a society that did not always value them. Boyd-Franklin (2003) and many other scholars discuss the family as a very important aspect of the ethnic identities of African American families. Billingsley (1968, 1992) wrote early on about both the protective factor and cultural influence African American families have on their members. The woman in this study discussed the need for their family to continue to help them process the negative messages they receive about their identities in the social world around them. Also, they discussed using their families as a hub for learning about their ethnic identities and for cultural expression. Family gatherings were described as a cultural staple, with foods, music, and entertainment specific to their ethnicity.

Living in a color-conscious society affected the participants across the generations in similar ways and created the necessity for their families to teach them they were much more than the color of their skin. Faith Lorde, Nikki Walker, and Ella Morrison (the three women of the youngest generation) all had similar stories of facing discrimination in school growing up and

now as adults. All three grew up in predominantly white environments, either attending mostly white schools, living in mostly white communities, or being in honors classes with mostly white peers. Faith and Nikki both told stories about racialized language used often or having to fight against stereotypes, while Ella talked about having to prove her blackness to other white children. The literature suggests these experiences were, in part, due to the fact that both blacks and white continue to have to learn how to experience race and the assumptions made because of it (Burton et al., 2010). Even as adults these three women discussed being “put into boxes” because of assumptions made about their potential and their identity by both white and black peers. Renée Brooks mentioned she continues to help her adult daughter, Faith, with the expectations other have of her by reminding her of “who I taught her to be and the legacy of strong African American roots we have that are so diverse and rich.”

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

I developed this narrative study to highlight the intergenerational processes embedded in the ethnic identity development of women within African American families. Black women's marginalized identities are often overlooked and others tell their narratives for them (Collins, 2000). The process of ethnic identity development for African American women includes a meaning-making process that incorporates filtering values taught by family and messages given by the social environment. Black feminist thought and symbolic interactionism informed this narrative study in order to gather the women's stories about their individual and collective development. As I worked through this study, I was guided by the following research questions: 1) What is the process by which black women, within the same family, arrive at a shared meaning of their ethnic identity?; 2) What is the process by which individual black women, of the same family, construct meaning of their ethnicity, independently of the meaning shared by other women of that family?; 3) How does this shared and individual meaning change across generations?; 4) What are the processes by which these shared and individual meanings are constructed, learned, and taught intergenerationally? The women of this study answered these questions in various ways as they told their narratives. This chapter explores contributions to the literature, the strengths and limitations of this study, and implications for further research and practice.

#### **Contributions to the Literature**

The first contribution this study makes to the literature is the addition of a generational perspective within the family process literature. An intergenerational study with three generations of African American women would be new to the intergenerational (Kemp, 2007; Seponski, 2009) and ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1990, 1992, 1996a, 1996b) literature. This study incorporates the narratives and their influence of three different women within one family. These data are richer because the women are telling their own perspectives, rather than one person speculating or representing the perspective of another. This exploratory study allowed me to have discussions and track the processes of making meaning of identity for these women. By conducting a qualitative study I was able to gather in-depth information from participants. I think this methodological decision paints a more detailed picture to be coupled with the quantitative studies already present in ethnic identity development literature.

Secondly, the literature on ethnic identity development suggests most of it occurs during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, but this study suggests development and learning continues. Throughout the lifespan, black women continue to have experiences personally and professionally that are dictated by their external appearance of race and gender. It is the development of their ethnic identity that seems to provide a sense of pride for the values and inner qualities their families nurtured throughout their lives.

Lastly, there is a growing body of literature that discusses the development processes at the intersection of race and gender for black women, but does not look at the aspects of their ethnicity that also contribute to identity development. I wanted this study to, first, be from the perspective of black women, but to also highlight a deeper identity than race. This deeper identity shows a connection to history and to the generations older than they are.

## Strengths and Limitations

### Methodological

Using narrative methods for this study was a choice I made because of the black feminist thought framework I used. In order to give reverence to black women's stories and display their voices, I kept their stories in tact while constructing their narratives. During my analyses there were clear connections between the women and families. These connections could be seen within the same generations, but also across the three generations.

This method has many strengths, including being able to seamlessly construct individual and family narratives after analyses of data. There were some limitations, though. For one, these findings are not generalizable. The nature of this methodology is such that analysis is in depth and time consuming. Therefore, a project such as this, with time constraints, makes it necessary to keep the number of participants manageable.

Another limitation is the sheer length of time it took to recruit these three families. With this specific of a population (three sets of families with three African American women representing three different generations in the same family), the projected recruitment time for this study was doubled. One of the main reasons for this was my original assumption that, due to my own similar demographics, I would have an easier time recruiting these families. It proved very hard and time consuming to get all nine women to trust me enough to discuss intimate details of their identities. I had to incorporate more contact at the beginning of the study than originally expected. The length and depth of the interviews were affected differently by each woman's ability to trust me from the start. Therefore, some interviews lasted for two full hours, while others lasted for 45 minutes – this affected the depth of information I gathered.

A last limitation of this study was the homogeneity of the sample. I attempted to recruit participants in a variety of diverse locations, but those who agreed to participate were either highly educated or had attained high-level positions in their jobs, which then influenced their similar upper middle class socioeconomic status. Most of the women live in the southern part of the United States. Lastly, all the women come from a very close-knit family, making them particularly interested in spending time talking about their families. These three close-knit families allowed me to make the assumption that these women had positive feelings and affinity for their ethnic identity – adults who themselves would probably be more likely to freely participate in a study discussing their identity. I suspect I would have gotten significantly different data if there were different types of family dynamics or had participants who thought their African American identity was a negative thing.

### **Theoretical**

The theoretical framework of black feminist thought and symbolic interaction gave a great foundation for discussing the shared meaning of individual and family identities of African American women. Exploring this shared meaning by studying the women's own words offered me the ability to actually use their own voices to express their experiences. Further, black feminist thought gives theoretical context to the experiences of black women when they discuss this as their identity, versus just discussing them as black and female.

One limitation with the theoretical lens of Black Feminist Thought is that there is more of an emphasis on race and gender, than the cultural aspects of ethnicity and group membership involved in identity development. Also, much of the theoretical development for African American women focuses more on race, than on ethnicity and culture. Therefore, the theories of African American or black identity development automatically incorporate negative experiences

of race, rather than highlight the positive experiences associated with ethnic identity development.

This limitation in the theory uncovers a concern that came up with the overlapping of the terms race and ethnicity. As the study unfolded, I noticed the use of the terms could not be as neat as I originally hoped. All of the women used the terms black and African American interchangeably. Just as the literature suggests, it is very difficult to maintain the same clean definitions of these terms once you incorporate people's preference in titles – these titles are important to identity. I believe this elusive nature of the terms will continue to pose a problem in recreating studies or doing analyses of findings across multiple studies.

### **Marriage and Family Therapy Clinical Implications**

This study was not conducted with a clinical sample and the findings were not particularly significant to clinical professionals. As a family therapist, though, I often processed the interviews, analyses, and findings through a clinical lens to see what the implications for clinical practice were. There is a growing body of literature that discusses therapeutic interventions and outcomes with African American/Black families (Bean et al., 2002; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005) and African American/Black women (Greene, 1994; Neal & Wilson, 1989). By using cultural genograms in this study I feel that I have married the family science and the family therapy aspects for research and clinical practice. I found there to be implications for the use of cultural genograms in future family therapy clinical research. The focus on storytelling as a cultural value in African American families (Banks-Wallace, 2002; McCabe, 1996; Vaz, 1997) makes creating cultural genograms in therapy with this population a seamless and helpful tool (Bean et al., 2002). As I used the cultural genograms as a photo

elicitation tool during this study I saw the profound influence it had on the depth of narratives I gathered.

A few scholars indicate the importance of using genograms with African American families and the contribution this type of intervention can be (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Franklin, 1999; McCullough-Chavis & Waites, 2004; Watts-Jones, 1997). Further, many scholars discuss the advantages of using cultural genograms in therapy and training to enhance the depth of reflexive data gathered (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; McGoldrick, et al., 2008; Shellenberger et al., 2007). I believe that, in order to conduct culturally responsive family therapy and evaluation (Seponski et al., 2013), family therapists need to utilize an intervention as attentive to culture and ethnicity as a cultural genogram. By completing a cultural genogram and asking questions of one's own cultural and ethnic identity and history therapist will be more informed about their selves as therapists (Hardy & McGoldrick, 2008).

I have learned to incorporate cultural genograms with all of my clients, but I've also learned how to gather their narratives in order to explore the depth of their experiences. Narrative therapy is used by therapists to:

“center people as the experts in their own lives... [in order to help facilitate change by] viewing problems as separate from people and assume people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives” (Morgan, 2000, p. 2).

Narrative therapy is different than qualitative narrative inquiry in practice. The postmodern epistemology of both narrative therapy and this study, though, emphasize the importance of language and meaning making that is driven by clients/participants (Freedman & Combs, 1996). The methodology of this study, with its conceptual framework of black feminist thought and

symbolic interactionism, created a space for the participants to re-member and re-tell their narratives using their language to showcase the way they made sense of their identities. Using narrative therapy lends itself to therapeutic intervention with African American women because of the sensitivity to their social experiences (White & Epston, 1990) and the reverencing of their voices.

## **Conclusions**

### **Future Research**

This study was of an exploratory nature, examining the processes black women go through individually and as a family as they develop their sense of self. I think future research should include a larger sample size than three women and nine women. Having a larger sample size might allow the findings to be generalizable. Another area of future research might include the whole family, rather than one gender. This would open the discussion of gender identity development and some of the different messages girls and boys receive. Also, there may be some differences in the way women and men engage in ethnic socialization with their children and grandchildren. Lastly, future research might include diversity in ethnic groups. I believe we might be able to uncover some specific similarities and differences across ethnic groups when it comes to ethnic identity development. We might be able to answer some questions pertaining to the ways other ethnic groups develop their identities within the United States.

I also believe future research incorporating ethnicity and culture should include an extensive period of reflexive exploration, along with time spent exploring the researcher's own cultural and ethnic identity. The participants in this study wanted to know my own cultural and ethnic background before they would answer intimate questions about theirs. I was able to

appreciate the depth of knowledge I received after sharing my own narratives with the women, because they were more comfortable to open up to me.

### **Final Thoughts**

Ethnic identity development is an essential aspect of overall identity development. Focusing on EID allowed family scholars and family therapists the opportunity to explore deeper foundations of behavior and how we learn to be who we are. I set out to better understand how individual African American women and families of women continue to make sense of their ethnicity across generations. I received much more than answers to my simple research questions – I was able to learn about the lives of nine women and the values that contribute to their ethnic identities. By interviewing these women, I learned of the ways they make meaning of their identities beyond the categories set forth by society. These women showed me how generational values continue to impact identity throughout the lifespan and give meaning to our everyday experiences. I hope the work on generational meaning making processes, with an emphasis on culture and ethnicity, will continue to impact the work family scholars and therapist do.

## EPILOGUE

In the beginning of this dissertation I explained to you how I came to this research study and exhibited the closeness I had to this topic when I started. I actually began the dissertation research project by conducting interviews with my grandmother, mother, and sister to “test” the interview guide and to make sure the procedures would work for the final study. Through that process I understood more about myself than I thought I would. Hearing the women of my family talk about their ethnic identities and the ways they were influenced was like watching myself tell my own story. Throughout the years and experiences of our lives, we had somehow come to a shared meaning of our individual ethnic identities – a shared meaning about the values and legacies that held us together.

Baring witness to the voices and narratives of these nine participants helped prove that African American women are so much more than the color of their skin – they are so much more than even their ethnic identities suggest. Throughout the years of conducting and writing up this study I struggled most with the magnitude of re-presenting the stories these women entrusted to me. I would often sit, paralyzed by the seemingly simple task of gathering their stories into this project.

As I sit here right now, at the end, I still struggle with my position as a researcher, because of the task of re-telling others’ lives. All I can hope for is that I have represented the dynamic characters of these women and that the stories here portray the significance of each and every one of the experiences they shared with me.

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## APPENDIX A

## Email to Participants

Hello!

I am contacting you to tell you about my research study entitled “**Making the invisible visible: A narrative inquiry exploring the intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity among three generations of black women**”, and to ask you to consider being a participant. I am hoping to get the opportunity to interview women, bound within the same family, representing three different generations in order to gather stories about their experiences related to their ethnicity identities.

To participate in this study, I ask that you meet the following criteria: **1) identify as a woman; 2) self-identify as Black/of African descent, being either African American, having immigrated (or a descendant of someone who immigrated) from a Caribbean/West Indian country, or having immigrated (or a descendant of someone who immigrated) from an African country; 3) are over the age of 18; 4) can participate with two other women from your family who represent two different generations other than your own (i.e. you, your mother, and your grandmother), who also meet these criteria; and 5) have no current physical or mental illness that inhibits memory capabilities.** If you or someone you know is interested in participating in my study and meet the above criteria, please contact me at [cpn@uga.edu](mailto:cpn@uga.edu).

If you choose to participate in this study, you will agree to be interviewed once individually and another time during a family interview. I will contact you to set up an initial meeting with the three women of your family to discuss the study. During this meeting I will, first, explain the purpose of my study further and ask all three women to complete an informed consent for research, which gives me permission to interview you. If you all are comfortable agreeing to be a part of my study, I will ask that we schedule individual and family interviews. During both the individual and family interviews, I will be using the discussions to construct a family tree, showcasing the relationships and culture within your family. I am seeking rich, vivid stories of how you all came to think about who you are and what your ethnicity is.

The maximum amount of time that your complete participation will take is five hours (up to two hours for the individual interview and up to three hours for the family interview). I will not disclose any information about your participation or interview with anyone outside of the three members of my dissertation committee. The information that you disclose during these interviews will be kept to the highest level of confidentiality. As a Black woman myself, I understand the pride and respect your family stories hold and will do everything in my power to reverence and represent yours well.

Your family will receive a copy of the family tree that is constructed during the interviews. This would be my humble attempt at thanking you for contributing to the completion of my degree. Your participation would be greatly appreciated and I look forward to hearing from you! If you

have any further questions about the study, requested participation, or questions to be asked, please do not hesitate to contact me at [cpn@uga.edu](mailto:cpn@uga.edu).

Thank you very much for your consideration and attention.

Sincerely,

Carla P. Nancoo, LMSW

Ph.D. Student

Department of Child and Family Development, Marriage and Family Therapy Program

## APPENDIX B

## Invitation to Participate

Greetings!

I would like to invite you to become a part of my research study entitled “**Making the invisible visible: A narrative inquiry exploring the intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity among three generations of black women**”. Your participation would allow me the opportunity to study women, bound within the same family and representing three different generations, as they tell stories and discuss their experiences related to their ethnic identities.

To participate in this study, I ask that you meet the following criteria:

- 1) **identify as a woman**
- 2) **self-identify as Black/of African descent, being either African American; having immigrated (or a descendant of someone who immigrated) from a Caribbean/West Indian country; or having immigrated (or a descendant of someone who immigrated) from an African country**
- 3) **are over the age of 18**
- 4) **can participate with up to two other women from your family who represent different generations than your own (i.e. you, your mother, and/or your grandmother), who also meet these criteria**
- 5) **have no current physical or mental illness that inhibits memory capabilities.**

If you or someone you know is interested in participating in my study and meet the above criteria, please contact me at [cpn@uga.edu](mailto:cpn@uga.edu).

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be:

- 1) **Interviewed once individually**
- 2) **Interviewed a second time with the other woman/women in your family**
- 3) **Asked to tell stories about your individual and family ethnic identity and culture**

Your family will receive a gift of a family tree that is constructed during the interviews. This would be my humble attempt at thanking you for contributing to the completion of my degree. Your participation would be greatly appreciated and I look forward to hearing from you! If you have any further questions about the study, requested participation, or questions to be asked, please do not hesitate to contact me at [cpn@uga.edu](mailto:cpn@uga.edu).

Thank you very much for your consideration and attention.

Sincerely,

Carla P. Nancoo, LMSW

Ph.D. Student

Department of Child and Family Development, Marriage and Family Therapy Program

## APPENDIX C

### Short Message to Recruit Participants

#### Dissertation Study Participants Needed

**Study:** A narrative inquiry exploring the intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity among three generations of black women

**Looking for:** Three women, who self identify as African American/Black, within the same family, who represent three different generations (i.e. daughter, mother, grandmother), over the age of 18, and live in the Atlanta, GA metro area (or who live within reasonable driving distance of Atlanta)

**Time Commitment:** Each woman will be interviewed individually for up to two hours each, discussing their individual and collective family ethnic and cultural identities. There will also be one family interview, including all three women, lasting up to three hours.

If your family (or a family you know) meets these criteria, please feel free to contact me at [cpn@uga.edu](mailto:cpn@uga.edu). I am happy to answer any questions about myself and/or the study.

Thanks in advance!

Carla Nancoo, LMSW  
Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Child and Family Development  
Marriage and Family Therapy Program  
University of Georgia

## APPENDIX D

### Informed Consent

I, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in a research study titled “MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG THREE GENERATIONS OF BLACK WOMEN” conducted by Carla P. Nancoo from the Department of Child and Family Development, Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Georgia (770-375-8560) under the direction of Dr. Lee N. Johnson, Department of Child and Family Development, Marriage and Family Therapy Program, University of Georgia (706-542-4821). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at anytime without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is to explore ethnic identity development as a process experienced by a family system among women of African descent. I understand that I will be participating along with two other women, within my family, who represent two generations other than my own (for example, I may be participating with both my mother and grandmother). If I volunteer to take part in this study, I agree to the following:

- 1) Answer questions individually and with two other female family members about my/our identity, including questions about my/our race, ethnicity, culture, gender, class etc.
- 2) Answer questions individually and with two other female family members about how my family contributed to my own ethnic identity and what the collective ethnic identity of our family is.
- 3) Someone from the study may call me at least two times to make initial contact and to schedule an initial meeting with all three of us present in order to discuss the study further, answering any questions I might have, complete a final copy of this form, and schedule an individual and family interview.
- 4) Participate in a face-to-face audio and video recorded individual interview for up to two (2) hours and a face-to-face audio and video recorded family interview for up to three (3) hours.
- 5) Allow the researcher to contact me for a period of up to six months after the initial meeting to clarify any information/stories or to conduct another individual or family interview, if necessary.
- 6) The transcripts of my/our interviews will be de-identified, given an ID number, and saved in the investigator’s possession indefinitely in a locked box or with an encrypted password for electronic versions.
- 7) The audio and video recordings of my interview will be used for the analysis portion of this study and then kept for ten years in the possession of the investigator. My name will not be attached to any these tapes.
- 8) The link between the ID number and my contact information will be destroyed at the completion of the analysis portion of this study (not to exceed 12 months after initial contact) in order to allow me to review the stories and give feedback on how my/our stories are represented. The ID number will not be attached to my name, but will be attached to my demographic profile, interview transcripts, and video/audio tapes.

The benefits for me are that the **interviews may help uncover my family’s and/or my own resilience. I may have the benefit of acknowledging the positive responses of my family members that have empowered me in the past and still do currently. Lastly, I can benefit from hearing stories of my family, which may or may not have been told before in order to create a lasting display of my family (the genogram).**

No risk is expected, as I will be asked to focus on my experiences of ethnic identity, but I may experience some discomfort or stress if my stories or information includes negative experiences of discrimination or racism. There may also be stories that include family members that may be deceased, ill, or in distress, which may cause me some emotional distress. These risks will be reduced in the following ways: 1) I will have the opportunity to talk through these experiences during the interview; 2) The investigator (Carla P. Nancoo) is a marriage and family therapy



## APPENDIX E

## Demographic Profile Sheet

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Ethnicity (Please be specific. E.g., Trinidadian, Kenyan, African-American, etc.):  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Relationship Status (Circle One): Single    Dating    Married    Separated    Divorced  
Ethnicity of Partner (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. Nationality of your parents (Be specific. E.g., Trinidadian, Kenyan, United States/American, etc.):  
Mother: \_\_\_\_\_      Father: \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. What level of education have you completed?  
Primary School (Grades 1<sup>st</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>)  
Secondary School (Grades 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>)  
High School Diploma  
Bachelor's Degree  
Master's Degree  
Doctoral Degree  
Professional Degree (J.D., M.D., etc.)
  
6. Estimated household income of the family you grew up in:

Less than \$10,000	\$10,001 to \$20,000	\$20,001 to \$30,000
\$30,001 to \$40,000	\$40,001 to \$50,000	\$50,001 to \$60,000
\$60,001 to \$70,000	\$70,001 to \$80,000	\$80,001 to \$90,000
\$90,001 to \$100,000	Over \$100,000	

7. Estimated household income now:

Less than \$10,000	\$10,001 to \$20,000	\$20,001 to \$30,000
\$30,001 to \$40,000	\$40,001 to \$50,000	\$50,001 to \$60,000
\$60,001 to \$70,000	\$70,001 to \$80,000	\$80,001 to \$90,000
\$90,001 to \$100,000	Over \$100,000	

8. What country were you born in? \_\_\_\_\_

9. What city/town and/or state were you born in? \_\_\_\_\_

10. What city/town and state do you live in now? \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F

## Interview Guide

**Individual Interviews**

Each individual woman will have one 1:1 interview for 1.5-2 hours

Study will be described in detail

Informed consents will be explained and signed

Demographic profiles will be disseminated and completed by participants

Basic Demographic Information will be collected for the construction of the cultural genogram. This information will include:

Names of parents, grandparents, siblings, children, spouses, etc.

Ages

Birth/Death years

Marriage years

Further, the following questions will help to fill in information on the genogram and to gather personal stories for me to focus on the narratives told:

Tell me about yourself.

How do you identify yourself ethnically? What ethnic group(s) are you a part of? Religious group(s)? Nationality(ies)? Racial group(s)? Political group(s)?

How did you come to identify yourself in these ways?

Can you tell me a story about...

Can you think of a specific story about when you were aware of yourself as a black woman and tell me about it?

Tell me about your family.

When and why did your family come to the United States? To this state?

To this community? How old were you? How old were your family members?

Do you remember these moves? If so, can you tell me a story about what it was like for you to live...

Tell me about gender roles in your family? What were the boys expected to do?

What were the girls expected to do? What were you, as a woman, expected to?

What would your brother be asked to do and how is that different from what you were asked to do?

Tell me about when and how your family comes together. What is that like? Are there holiday? When do you see them? What are the family roles? Where do you go? How do you communicate? Who's there and who is not there? Who gets included in the family?

Can you give me an example of a time when your family gets together?

What's that like for you?

I wonder if you can tell me about a time that you have felt oppressed or perhaps experienced discrimination as a part of the group that you identify with. What was that like for you?

Tell me about your own education

I wonder if we could talk a little about your educational background. You described yourself as... Do you still describe yourself in that way?

How would you describe your social class in your family when you were growing up? How about now?

Tell me about your career/work.

Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt success/failures in your work?

### **Family Interview #1**

All three women will be present for a family interview for 2-3 hours

Gathering stories about the details of the individual interview in the family context.

Begin with: I've appreciated talking with you all individually and hearing your stories about the family. I wonder if there is a time that stands out for all of you that you could tell me about.

The following prompts will be added in as needed to gather actual stories.

Can you tell me more about that...

You mentioned..., can you tell me a story about that...

Tell me what that was like for you...

Can you give me an example of...

The following questions will be asked to gather information about the family context:

- a. Discussion of individual identities that were talked about in the individual interviews.
  - i. "I know I talked to each of you individually about when you came to this country or community. I wonder if you all can tell me a story about that." (For example, [name of individual] told me that she does not remember coming to this country or community. I wonder if [name of individual] can talk to her about what you told me.
- b. What language do you speak at home? In the community? In your family of origin?
- c. In what ways have you experienced oppression in your ethnicity? Race? Gender? Class?
- d. What experiences have been most stressful for family members in the United States?
- e. Who do you turn to when they need help?
- f. Tell me about gender roles in your family? What were the boys expected to do? What were the girls expected to do? What were you, as a woman, expected to do? What would your brother be asked to do and how is that different from what you were asked to do?
- g. Talk to me about the value of education in the family. (Discussion of social class here)
  - i. I wonder if we could talk a little about your social class background. You described yourself as... Do you still describe yourself in that way?
- h. Talk to me about work ethic in the family.

- i. I wonder if you can tell me a story about successes/failures that the family as experienced in terms of work/career.
- i. How would you describe your family's connectedness?
- j. Who does the caretaking in the family?
- k. What are the religious practices within the family?
- l. What are some political practices within the family?
- m. What other values are important to your family?
- n. Have these values changed in your family over time?
- o. How would you describe the interaction in your family?
- p. Do you still have contact with family members in your country of origin?
- q. Has immigration changed family members' education or social change?
- r. What do you feel about your culture(s)/ethnicity of origin? Do you feel you belong to the dominant U.S. culture?
- s. What are some of the cultural values that have been passed down through your family (i.e. education, religion, etc.)?
- t. Who are some key family members that have entered and exited the family (i.e. possibly through marriage, divorce, death, etc.)? How have these entries and exit influenced the family?

Think of a story (or stories) of a time that your family celebrates traditions specific to your ethnicity and tell me about it.

**Follow-up Family Interview (if needed)**

Further review of patterns and relationships within family

What are some of the cultural values that have been passed down through your family (i.e. education, religion, etc.)?

Who are some key family members that have entered and exited the family (i.e. possibly through marriage, divorce, death, etc.)? How have these entries and exit influenced the family?

Think of a story (or stories) of a time that your family celebrates traditions specific to your ethnicity and tell me about it.