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HOW A HUNDRED YEARS OF HISTORY TRACKED ME DOWN

It is the fall of 2007 as I write this essay. I just finished writing a book. But my father couldn’t read or write. The distance between us spans the hundred years of black history that I study.

Writing that statement makes me catch my breath, pained by the sharpness of the contrasts between our lives. My parents, the elderly couple who raised me, were born in the era of Plessy v. Ferguson, the U.S. Supreme Court decision that sanctioned Jim Crow. They farmed in the rural South, moved to New York with the Great Migration, and worked in the service sector well past a reasonable retirement age. The living history of slavery, passed on to them by their elders, passed directly to me because of the lack of a generation between us, along with the inherited history of Jim Crow. My parents measured their lives by looking backward to judge how far from slavery they had come. I accepted their hope but claimed membership in the generation that looked forward.

I was born the year of Brown v. Board of Education, the landmark Supreme Court case that pried open educational doors that had been closed to them. Willing to take on the risks of being among “the first, the only, and the few,” I benefited educationally from the Great Society and affirmative action. But as one of the desegregation generation, I confronted some of the same race and gender challenges that my parents had known and some new ones that they could not understand. Indeed, as I achieved the aspirations my parents had for me, the distance between us widened. Their strategies for survival, experienced under segregation, grated against the ones I crafted to survive desegregation.

My generation occupied the space between American optimism and American cynicism. I started school in the dawning age of Kennedy’s presidency. We rode the zeitgeist of direct action and black power and then graduated from high school during the fall of Richard Nixon and from college during Jimmy Carter’s Great Malaise. My generation knew greatness and great oratory through Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Bobby Seale, and Bobby Kennedy, as well as Shirley Chisholm, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Angela Davis, and Flo Kennedy, whose ideas we debated and on whose leadership we depended. We
also knew death at too young an age, having lost so many brothers and friends
to a war abroad and so many national figures to the war at home.

A half step behind the activists of the 1960s, we were not on the front lines of
creating change, but we were its inheritors. We were the third upwelling of
modern civil rights activism. In college, Gil Scott Heron and Stevie Wonder
hurled our anthems through the windows of Afro-House like rocks thrown at
fraternity row (whose former residents, by the way, are now my colleagues).
The year I graduated from college, Alex Haley won the Pulitzer for Roots and
Robert Chambliss was convicted for his role in the bombing of Sixteenth Street
Baptist Church in Birmingham. Shirley Chisholm had made her run for presi-
dent, and the Supreme Court had issued the Bakke decision. Compelled—
actually chosen—to transport black freedom, black power, and black feminism
to the other side of Brown, “the first, the only, and the few” learned to move in
circles that always had excluded blacks and women. We could get there only by
looking forward.

Only through my work—teaching and research in history—have I come to
understand how race and gender shaped not only my family’s dynamics but
also the dynamics of my encounters in the alien world of whiteness. But many
other lessons have come from engaging this link between academic history and
a personal past.

My People

My people are from the Piedmont region of the Carolinas. My mother,
actually my foster mother, was born Louana Alberta Woods in 1892 and was
raised by her grandmother, who had been a slave. She was one of the many
young women from Camden, Kershaw County, South Carolina, who moved to
the North and found employment as household laborers. Her mother, Minnie,
worked for a prominent white family and traveled north with them as their
housekeeper every summer. In the early 1910s, Grandma Minnie brought along
one of her daughters, my Aunt Grace, to work as a child nurse, and one year
they decided to stay. My mother moved north to New York City not long after,
and her best friend, Grace Alexander McGirt, came along. They later sent for
Grace’s sister, Molly, and her nieces, Emma and Hattie. My mother’s sister, Aunt
Maude (called Doc), also had moved north by 1920. Independent and fierce, all
of these women saved their money, bought property, and drove big cars. My
mother drove a cavernous two-tone blue Chrysler with an automatic transmis-
sion; Grace drove a two-tone yellow Buick.

It was into this circle of extended kin that I was born. My birth mother,
Charlotte, also from Camden, was Emma’s best friend. Charlotte’s job for the railroad kept her away all week. One weekend when the Camden women gathered at Grace’s house, Charlotte brought me along. After a long discussion, the women decided to send me to Albany to be raised by Louana, who had moved from New York City to Albany during the 1940s. She had found work at the munitions plant and the army depot, where she had met my father, James Brown (called Brownie). Dad was originally from Salisbury, North Carolina; I don’t know much more than that. He did time in a federal prison, although only my mother knew why, a secret she kept until his death in 1970. My mother continued to work, even after I arrived, but now she worked at night as a hotel maid. Dad worked in the evenings as a janitor and during the day as a trashman. He hauled refuse from the downtown restaurants, department stores, and banks and from the homes of their owners. He brought home whatever he thought might be useful, and in the building across the street from our house, my mother opened up a secondhand store, where she offered clothes, coats, dishes, and advice to neighbors down on their luck.

Our neighborhood was questionable and always in transition but interesting enough for a curious child to find a lot of entertainment. We lived on Market Street, on the shady side of the downtown business district. In the back room of my mother’s store, men in dark suits and unbuttoned collars ran a horse-betting parlor. The local cops hung out in the Irish bar next door to the store. There was a nightclub around the corner and a gay bar up the street, and the “ladies” walked the corner at the end of our block. A fruit and vegetable warehouse took up the whole corner on the other end of the street, and I joined other neighborhood kids in stealing watermelons from there. Shops, restaurants, churches, and schools dotted the area, and we knew all of the merchants. Sal owned the corner store; Abrams, the liquor store; and Ainspan, the drugstore. We bought my father’s work clothes from Rosen’s, the uniform store around the corner. African Americans and ethnics usually greeted each other on the street and at the farmers’ market, and they often stopped to talk. But they rarely visited each others’ homes. Ours was a working-class district, multicultural and ecumenical in terms of its residents but not its institutions. The Italians went to St. Anthony’s church and school, the Irish attended St. Patrick’s, and the black Catholics went to St. John’s. The other whites went to the Methodist church up the street. We belonged to Walls Temple AME Zion Church, and I went to the public school five blocks away.

My parents had little education—my mother attended South Carolina schools as far as sixth grade, and my father went to school hardly at all—so it was my responsibility to achieve, excel, and accomplish, especially when the racial bar-
riers started to fall. Education was first and foremost in my mother’s plans for me, including a political education. On Saturdays and Sundays, she sat on the stoop with my father and read the paper out loud, not just to him and me but also to gathering neighbors, some of whom could not read either. She stayed on top of the news, with the Today Show blaring in the morning and the Huntley-Brinkley Report in the evening. I always knew about national events, about Cuba and Castro and the Bay of Pigs, the civil rights demonstrations in the South, Sputnik and NASA. There was always talk in the kitchen about the possibility of war and whether the racial climate would really change.

My mother also had an entrepreneurial spirit. The local Democratic machine paid her five dollars for every voter she got to the polls. She ran a rooming house, so she could recruit a number of voters and earn extra cash in November. Renting to single men who needed a place but not much space, she played mother to two generations of men who lived on the third and fourth floors of our house. Uncle Larry moved in every time his wife threw him out. Manny lived there from the time he came to the United States from Puerto Rico until he got married. George Washington—to whom I sang Happy Birthday every year on February 22 before he chased me down the stairs—lived on the fourth floor until he died of tuberculosis. Doc came to stay with us while she was dying of cancer. I was around old people so much that I came to accept death as inevitable.

I was like most old people’s children, wise and staid, a cautious listener, and a careful observer. Womanish is the perfect description for me at age seven, possessing too much knowledge, too much attitude, and too much mouth. Black people from down South, from the country, just out of the military, or just passing by the house, whether staying or going, provided a steady stream of visitors for me to interrogate, and I was nosy. With so many teasing adults around, though, I had to hone sharp defenses against being teased or tickled, developing the quick one-liner and quick reflexes. We owned a large dining room table with big lions’ feet as legs around which an assortment of black folk sat on weekends and holidays. I would sit under the table on the feet and listen to the adults talk and laugh. Uncle Larry always told the story about me driving the car: one Sunday morning, I got into my mother’s Chrysler with the keys (and the dog), turned on the engine, and put the car in reverse. I was four and lucky to live to see five.

The other stories were about the South, about a teacher who looked like Maggie from the comic strip “Maggie and Jiggs”; about pilot snakes, catfish, and a weed the old folks smoked called Life Everlasting (marijuana); about jackleg preachers and trifling ministers; about friendship, mutuality, and mean
white folks. They also told stories about coming north: meeting someone from home at a club in Harlem, the last time they heard Billie Holiday sing, and fooling the employment agency into thinking they were Indians in order to get jobs. My aunt told a story about Adam Clayton Powell getting blacks in New York City to go to the utility company office and pay their bills in pennies to force the company to hire black clerks. Once someone told a story about the time Uncle Bruce asked a white shoe salesman in Camden why he didn’t call his aunt Mrs. Woods. His friends spirited him out of town that night on the southbound train, figuring the mob would think he’d head north. After these kinds of stories, the bitter ones, they would laugh one last laugh and follow it with deep sighs and shaking heads full of memories they could not tell out loud.

As a kid, I wore these stories like armor. From them, I learned how to find humor in almost anything, to hold my own in an argument, and to get along with anyone, skills that developed beyond my conscious mind. Even more unconsciously, I learned history, culture, literature, anthropology, and antiquing. The not-so-subtle lessons were about manners and morals, about behaving like those in the respectable class. There were other lessons about “don’t,” the most important of which were “Don’t make me have to tell you twice,” “Don’t make me come in there,” and “Don’t forget who you’re talking to.”

**Transition**

The world of black ways gave way when urban renewal ripped through the streets and houses of the neighborhood. All the businesses closed. All my friends moved away, and eventually all the visitors stopped coming around. The area became hazardous, covered with empty lots strewn with bricks, glass, and pipes and empty buildings occupied by rats and rabid dogs. My mother, a stubborn soul, refused to let go of her house, so we stayed on Market Street until the city tore down every building in the neighborhood except ours and the two that were attached to ours on either side. Those were scary months of waiting and hearing my parents fight about something they could do little about. Eventually my father moved out. Unwilling to move to the projects, my mother used the last of their money to buy a house on Hudson Avenue in a white working-class neighborhood that did not welcome us. Our lawyer, who was white, bought the house and then turned it over to my mother. So the new neighbors were very surprised when we appeared. This was a new racial zone. One by one, the houses transformed from white homes to black until the only whites left were the ones who could not afford to move, though they were the majority. Eventually, the white kids stopped breaking our windows and throw-
ing trash on our porch, and although black and white kids played (and fought) together on the street, we did not enter each others’ houses.

The new neighborhood meant a new school, bright and clean and well ordered. The elders expected that I would step up to opportunity when it appeared, step in assertively, and pull everyone else in behind me. Of course, however rough it would be for me as the only black student in the class, my road of racial progress would be less treacherous than theirs had been. I wasn’t so sure of that, however, the first day of fourth grade when I walked into my new school and an all-white classroom without a parent, the only black person in the room, knowing even then that the white parents there perceived my parents as less caring, less involved, and less committed to education. Not surprisingly, that first year was a struggle. After much debate and testing, I earned my place among students in the gifted class, but only one other black kid had been in their classrooms, and they were not too pleased about this one either. The first week, Miss Long warned me that she knew all about “you people” and that she would not tolerate the kind of deportment “you people” exhibited at “those schools” “you people” came from. Each year, I was pulled out of the alphabetized order of the class to sit at the left hand of the teacher, under excessive control, not because I behaved badly (I knew better) but because the teachers assumed I would if I was let loose on the other kids.

Suspicious of my academic abilities whenever my grades were good, teachers always challenged me. One set of homework problems done well was followed by another harder set and then another until Miss Long could say, “See, I knew you couldn’t do it.” Obstacles had been removed, but this did not mean race no longer mattered. Academic performance became a way for me to prove my equality, my belligerence, and my refusal to be intimidated. A steady performance made me safe in school. Outside school, I learned to bear racial insult, harassment, and assaults. I had to figure out when it was worth the punishment to fight back (and sometimes it was). Not trusting how my parents would react, I kept those altercations secret unless they left me with a bald patch on my head or a bruise on the side of my face.

Staying in the advanced class meant bearing the weight of race—not just the demand to prove my own capabilities but also the inability to look to my parents for academic support. I had to struggle through math, science, and English without very much help at home. Worse, as far as I was concerned, was bearing the cost of school. My mother did the best she could to keep a growing girl in clothes, but projects, trips, and supplies also cost money, and I grew tired of hearing that one pencil and one piece of chalk had to last all year. My parents had worked as children, and my mother, the more demanding of the two, had
no concept of labor laws. I was willing to mow lawns, shovel snow, and babysit, but she got me jobs cleaning white people’s houses on Saturdays. This I really resented, not just because I didn’t want to give up my Saturdays but also because it was work I did not want to do. How could I tell someone who had spent her life doing that work that I was too good for it? So I didn’t, and instead I perfected the silent seethe.

I was benefiting from newly opened doors, but that entryway became a divider. And over time, the fissure grew. Through Great Society programs, I participated in a wide range of activities that disadvantaged students rarely had access to. I attended the ballet, the symphony, and the theater, and I took classes in writing and elocution. Too immature to figure out how to switch languages between home and school, I sensed my family’s growing resentment. I was becoming something they didn’t know, understand, or tolerate, and they had become something I didn’t want to be.

As the educational divide played out at home, I occupied a space between black and white at school. Even when the class divided between boys and girls, I remained an outsider to my female cohort. Most black students conveyed hostility toward me by tagging my academic achievement as “acting white.” The white boys mostly were mean, especially junior high adolescents seeking easy targets. All but a few curious white students avoided me. For the most part, neither my classmates nor their parents were acquainted with any African Americans other than the ones who worked in their homes. I did not know how to react when I arrived at a classmate’s house to find one of my mother’s friends working as the housekeeper for the family. Other family friends staffed the school cafeteria and tended the locker rooms. This meant, of course, that there was little I could get away with since each of them reported my activities to my mother. I made new friends the week Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated when the white kids seeking safety walked with me to the bus stop for the first time.

By 1969, ninth grade, the tide of love and brotherhood had turned enough for me to collect a range of acquaintances, black, Asian, Jewish, and international. The daily task of school was less difficult, yet I was all the more discontent. My father spent that year and most of the next in and out of the hospital, and I went to visit him every day. He died in the summer of 1970. I felt relieved, guilty, because his passing freed me to get more involved in school activities. Clubs and sports kept me away from home and from my own sadness. They filled the gaping hole between where I came from and where I wanted to go.

When Dad died, I started thinking about my own life. Adolescent angst and
self-possession were not privileges that my mother had known, and she did not understand. Nor was she one to soften the blow. It had been my hidden aspiration to go to Howard University. I failed to heed, or did not understand, her warning that I was not like those Howard people; I didn’t have good hair or good clothes. I took these comments as criticisms until I got the chance to visit the D.C. campus. When someone asked what my people did, I answered honestly that my mother was a kitchen worker and my father had passed away, only to watch faces fall and backs turn as the Howard students met my enthusiasm with contempt. Their response conveyed that no black college would welcome me, a message reinforced when the admissions person warned me that Howard did not have a lot of money to give out in scholarships. Financial aid was a necessity for me, as it was for most black students, but my mother, like most black parents, was reluctant to reveal the personal information required for the application. When I finally got her to cooperate, I was shocked at how little we lived on and promised myself that I’d never ask her to pay for anything again. As soon as I turned sixteen, I got a job at McDonald’s. One of the first women and one of the first blacks hired, in order to keep the job, I had to learn to put up with a lot (and to give it back) and to do the work better than everyone else.

The gifted program led to advanced classes in high school, so I stayed with the cohort I’d known in elementary school. I knew very few people who had attended college, only my cousin who was a teacher, one of my high school teachers, and the daughter of one of my mother’s friends. And I knew little about applying to college, except for the names of the schools that my classmates talked about. Once the sats, rankings, and National Merit scores came out, the college-recruitment process began, and my classmates’ tolerance turned into hostility. Through minority-student recruitment programs, I received a lot of personal attention from admissions people at the schools my classmates were applying to. Tufts University was the backup for those who aimed for the Ivies and the reach school for those applying to liberal arts colleges, so it was on everyone’s list. In the end, I was one of only two students from my high school who got accepted at Tufts that year. Most of my teachers were pleased and encouraging; they had written my letters of recommendation. One of the few who were not supportive remarked, “You don’t deserve it; you don’t work hard enough, and you’re not that smart. You only got in because you’re black.” So despite having applied to many other schools, I selected Tufts out of spite, increased my hours at McDonald’s, and worked full-time through the spring of my senior year and overtime in the summer.

I was in love with the idea of college, but I found the reality disappointing. Tufts was unlike any place I had ever known, comprised of wealthy students
from all over the country and all over the world, which made it all the more distant from my mother’s dining room table. Many had attended New England prep schools I had never heard of, such as Choate, Northfield–Mt. Hermon, and Deerfield. Nor did I know that black people could have so much money. Light-skinned, fine-haired, and well-dressed, most of the black students drove nice cars and wore expensive clothes. A poor kid with bad skin and a wardrobe of jeans and T-shirts, I didn’t fit in with the crowd, but I could compete in the classroom. Still, I could not relieve my restlessness until I found courses in black history, black literature, and black politics. These introduced me to issues and writers that I didn’t know much about: Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and John Hope Franklin in history, and Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Gwendolyn Brooks, the only black woman writer I read, in literature. These courses were taught by black faculty, but they were the only courses black faculty taught and the only black-focused courses offered. Once I took them, there was no place to go to quench my thirst for more.

These courses, along with a summer internship with the Massachusetts legislature’s black caucus, heightened my racial consciousness and brought me out as a black person. I found words for my frustration and discontent and became active in local civil rights issues, which in Boston centered on busing and electing a black councilperson. Outside of the institutional setting of the college, I started to focus on who I was and what I cared about but kept those matters separate from my education. By my senior year, Tufts had recruited more black students like me, disadvantaged and eager, and I felt less isolated in some ways. Of the three black faculty members I had known, only one remained at the university until I graduated, and she seemed miserable.

**Passing On**

While most students faced the tough decisions of senior year, mine came quite easily. I had thought briefly about graduate school and had hoped to stay in the Boston area, but my mother, very aged by then, had become frail. If I considered, however briefly, not coming home, my relatives were happy to remind me of my obligations. She had taken me in as family, and now it was my turn to care for her. The generational divide created more resentment on both sides. I had never known that my family thought I had done the wrong thing by going off to college instead of staying and helping at home. We all agreed that my place was at home now, but they would not tolerate my putting my mother into a nursing home. Black people didn’t leave the care of their elders to someone else; parents were not supposed to be palmed off on other people.
Stepping up to my adult role, I took the best-paying job I could find—I returned to McDonald’s, this time in management and field operations and again as one of the first women and one of the first African Americans to work at the corporate level. Well-paying but very hard work, it provided the income I needed to support myself and my mother, whom I lost to Alzheimer’s over those years. After she died in 1982 at the age of ninety, I quit my job at Mickey D’s. For a while, I bummed around, despondent and dejected, wasting years. I took a job as a retail manager, then as a driver for Ryder Truck Rentals. I became a bartender and a bouncer and a hard-partying lesbian, overwhelmed by hopelessness.

The fog began to lift when I found a position in college admissions recruiting minority students and then accepted a job as the director of a program that recruited and admitted disadvantaged students at a small upstate New York liberal arts college that resembled Tufts. With the program staff, I created mentoring, counseling, and academic-support programs, each of which improved the students’ academic performance but did not enhance their sense of belonging. Enlivened by increasing the number of minority students enrolled, the program itself provided a strong community base, attracting a range of people, including blacks, Latinos, and townies but also gays and lesbians and the politically active. My students’ experiences reflected the sense of anomie that had possessed me in college. They too were overwhelmed by the cultural change but felt isolated from home and increasingly unwilling to return to a place that signified limitations. It became my job to play mother, sister, aunt, cousin, and confessor to every student of color on campus (and every student who knew a student of color or who had never known a person of color but wanted to) and every gay student as well. Gay students’ struggles with sexuality encouraged me to come out as a lesbian—to be visible and, to the surprise of many, functional, and, to my own surprise, relieved.

But administrators can do only so much to support students trying on new identities, particularly since so few administrators of color understand the transformation that occurs among the economically disadvantaged who enroll in college. They can offer support but not the kind of intellectual engagement students of color want or need. It is hard to feel a part of a community when you have no representatives at its core. These students were learning what I learned but could not articulate: that education pulled them further from their roots, even as they worked to fulfill family aspirations. And in the way it was populated, college provided more evidence of constraints than of opportunities.

The hierarchy of higher education reflects the hierarchy of race that the civil rights movement was supposed to have toppled. It was our collective observa-
tion that those of us who had desegregated colleges in the 1960s and 1970s had done little more than that. Three decades after *Brown*, African Americans worked mostly in service jobs at the institution, some in administration, but none (or very few) could be found among faculty. This troubled me on behalf of my students. What does it mean for students of color to not see themselves represented among the institution’s primary intellectual achievers? And what does it say to white students? Without people of color—or many women—among the professoriat, I wondered, can students of color view academia and intellectual pursuits as viable realms of achievement? More important, if faculty hold—or believe they should hold—intellectual authority and control over the curriculum, doesn’t the absence of black and Latino professors reiterate a racial hierarchy of power and influence and thus undermine the assumption of education as an equalizer? Or at least nullify the equal educational opportunity implied by admission to the college?

These questions transcended matters of culture or specific scholarly disciplines, for not all black and Latino faculty teach black and Latino subjects. Rather, the wide-angle lens on the landscape of higher education revealed the breadth of the problem. What my students and I saw and experienced was that the dynamics of educational achievement remained within the domain of mostly white males. Where can students of color get intellectual validation that does not require them to so fully assimilate that they lose the best of themselves, their families, and their cultures? It occurred to me that through grade school and high school we had learned to compete, to keep up, but not to surpass; to stand alongside but not in front; to fit in but not to reshape.

The answers kept coming back to the presence or absence of black faculty as fully participating members of the academic community. Through meetings, panels, and discussions ad nauseum centered on what became known as “the black faculty issue,” the students and I raised challenging questions that the faculty had to grapple with, if for no other reason than the fact that we refused to back down. Arguing for diversity for diversity’s sake failed to shake traditional hiring practices. When equality equates with sameness, it defeats innovation. We turned our attention to the relationship between intellectualism and race as it played out in our everyday college lives and beyond.

The circular problem of supply and demand threatened to defeat any initiatives: there were few black Ph.D.’s, and moving the same faculty members from place to place (or raiding the historically black institutions) did nothing to increase the quantity available. Without a professoriat of color, students rarely viewed such positions as viable careers. How, furthermore, could we encourage
students who were pressured, like I was, with family obligations to continue in school for three more years?

I found a number of women on campus who supported the cause and who facilitated my connection with other faculty. But it was my students who finally asked me, “Why don’t you go to grad school?” To be honest, the question caught me off guard. I knew one black person with a Ph.D. but no others who had even studied for a doctorate. When I asked her what one needed to get a Ph.D., she answered, “You need to be crazy.” My students presented me the same challenges that I had presented them. Their pestering (and my time on campus) did rekindle a small part of my disappointing love affair with academia as an undergraduate. So with support from my campus allies, I gave graduate school serious thought.

Still, I had reservations about returning to school after a dozen years out. You just don’t up and apply for grad school like it was this morning’s great idea. The students wisely pointed out that I could take undergraduate courses as refreshers. Rolling toward forty, however, I thought a lot about my age, about having a tenure party and a retirement party at the same time. It was my 105-year-old Aunt Grace, who was always the hardest on me, who dismissed my reservations about returning to school. “So what if you don’t finish until you’re fifty,” she said. “You’ll be fifty years old with a Ph.D. or fifty years old without a Ph.D.; either way, you’re going to be fifty.” You can’t argue with old people; it’s like arguing with a drunk—they’re always right. And you cannot talk to black people who grew up in the Jim Crow South about feeling inferior. Nor can you talk to them about having to climb the racial mountain because they have already climbed it. I certainly could not talk to Aunt Grace about my reluctance to bear the harshness of crossing one more race obstacle.

Ironies

Lest I suffer the embarrassment of not getting in, I told only a few people that I had decided to go to grad school. I decided that if I got in, I would also be prepared to flunk out; in fact, I made flunking out the default position and assumed that my job would still be there when I came back. Then there was the question of which program would be worthy of making me give up my home and my community. This question was the easiest to answer because I got accepted at only one place.

Graduate school at Duke University in the early 1990s was just the opposite of what I had expected. Given the faculty picture at most institutions, I assumed
that Duke would be the same or, as a southern school, worse and that the faculty would be hostile toward black students or the study of black history. Instead, Duke (as I call the experience, the program, and the place) was a place of renewal and sustenance. The graduate program in history was the hardest thing I ever did, but it was also the best thing I ever did. For the first time in my educational history, perhaps my adult life, I did not feel intellectually or socially isolated. Nine African American students enrolled in the graduate program’s first-year class (more than I had ever known among any previous cohort), and we joined a group already enrolled in the two previous classes. Moreover, it was a place that had a history of graduating black scholars, thus a difficult path had been smoothed. There were more black professors in the department than I’d had as teachers in all my years of schooling. I discovered the life of the mind, which is where I lived most of the time anyway. Being a student felt like re-decorating my interior life. I felt a joy I had not known before in being among a legion of students of color, women, gays, and women my age. But there was more. Much as I had found at the college where I had worked, I met allies and supporters among the white faculty, men and women who believed in taking action toward change. And I met my partner, Annie, at Duke; we have lived together now for some fifteen years.

My graduate cohort worked together as graduate assistants and research coordinators on a project called “Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South.” The project included an academic conference, a summer institute for faculty, a graduate class, an undergraduate curriculum, and a field research component that focused on collecting oral history interviews. As the conference organizer, I met, to my great delight, African American faculty. They gave me a sense of pride, confidence, and comfort. Even more important, it was inspiring for me to meet African American women scholars who gave papers, chaired sessions, and spoke up in breakout groups. I realized that I was in the presence of people who had written books, and I was in awe. This was an achievement I never thought I’d meet.

Finding Home

For the “Behind the Veil” project, I crisscrossed the South in the company of other explorers, sharing a journey that began on an intellectual level but cut deep into a place that I had long forgotten. Everywhere the stories of elderly southerners echoed the ones I had heard sitting beneath my mother’s dining room table, but I listened with the ear of a historian, not that of a child. They told stories about hard work, community, and mean white people; about
teachers they recalled as inspiring, the churches they had attended, the jokes they had played. These were people whose voices were rarely heard, and since my college years, I had almost forgotten them. I engaged their cadences, so much slower than my New York pace, the softness of their southern accents contrasting with my upstate twang. Through these interviews, I found a place I had lost. The further I delved into the study of African American and women's history, however, the closer I came to reclaiming my personal history. And as much as I struggled with theory, it did give me a way to read a connection that I didn't immediately understand. The people I met through the project gave me a sense of pride as well as stories that countered the assumptions that white people held. The work made me feel capable in a way I'd never known. I developed the indefinable skills needed to record their histories, read their sources, and forge respectful analyses.

The topic of the Jim Crow South reconnected me to the past and made me feel like part of my family again. I understood what my parents had not been able to explain. And I have wondered ever since if they were angry or ashamed. And if it really was different on this side of the civil rights era. As I grasped the complexities of Jim Crow, I wondered how they stood the arbitrariness of the system. Where did they get such patience? Jim Crow caused and maintained their poverty and crushed any aspirations they had for themselves, but they found solace and support in their communities and families and avoided confrontations with whites. And although I had grown up in an integrated setting and had to be part of it to get a good education, my parents never trusted white folks, and they would have preferred that I had little to do with them.

I came to understand the intricacies of their network and the meaning of kith and kin. And I realized that black family is and always has been strong even if scattered, linked together by friends reconstructed as relatives. Moreover, I came to appreciate my family members as historical actors—their participation in the drudgery of farming, their excitement about moving north with the Great Migration, and their insistence on voting “even if they ran a dog for dogcatcher.” The study of race, gender, and class gave me a new appreciation for my mother’s role in the neighborhood as an adviser whom everyone consulted before taking action and as a bridge linking different groups of people together. I learned how it was possible that my father attended school but never learned to read or write and why my mother always kept me close by.

It was not my intent to turn my family into an intellectual exercise. That I could access my family’s stories in academic ways made the “Behind the Veil” project all the richer and made it easier to comprehend the stories of interviewees. Through the interviews, I also came to appreciate the reasons for my
parents’ strictness and their stifling protectiveness. It was their way of trying to prevent me from having to endure things that had happened to them or to someone they knew personally. The research also helped me to understand their approach to politics and infrapolitics, the ways they manipulated difficult circumstances to find space for their dignity. Through the research, I became better able to think about my family’s history in terms of who raised whom, how, and why. I felt like I was bringing my family into the academy they had never been able to approach. I heard their voices, reactions, and interpretations when I read documents. I heard them speak to me through oral history; they explained their world to me as I traveled throughout the South.

Finally, through graduate school, I found my own feminist sensibility, which I admit had always been subsumed by race until I discovered Alice Walker’s 1983 book, In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. Its themes resonated with me and refreshed memories of my mother’s front window full of plants and her backyard full of roses. I grow roses now to honor her. In my first week, Anne Firor Scott gave me a copy of Deborah Gray White’s book Ar’n’t I a Woman?, the first book I ever read in black women’s history. It forced me to own the stories of slavery that I had always wished to cast off. Darlene Clark Hine’s book Black Women in White reminded me of my godmother, who was a graduate nurse. At the “Behind the Veil” conference, I heard Elsa Barkley Brown and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham talk about women and mutual aid. Sharon Harley talked about work; Roslyn Terborg-Penn, about voting. These women scholars, and many more, had already engaged in the intellectual warfare that I had anticipated, but I suspect that their graduate years were not as comfortable as mine.

I am well aware that my Duke experience was exceptional and that graduate cohorts like mine come around once in a generation. This became clear when I started going to conferences, where African Americans and especially black women still struggled for visibility. It was clear that much of the scholarship on women excluded women of color and much of the scholarship on African Americans excluded women. And it was still a battle to get African American women’s history taken seriously as a field. Alienation and isolation were the overwhelming circumstances of most black women students and faculty. This I understood as I moved through my graduate-school years.

I’d like to be able to say that the glow has lasted throughout my scholarly career, but, of course, it has not. Some days, I feel like I’m back at McDonald’s. Even as surprising changes unfold, gender and race politics play out everywhere. I was elected the first graduate representative to the Executive Council of the American Historical Association. At a forum to discuss critical graduate
issues, a young white man stood up in the back and said, “You’re making it hard on the rest of us. You black women are getting all the jobs.” Be that as it may (and it was certainly not true), if the few of us on the market got all 700 offers made to historians every year, we still could take only one each. That left the other 695 jobs for others. That was just a taste of what was to come.

My first job came easily enough. I was hired at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, but it was quite an adjustment. I was one of two black women in a department of five or six faculty members. Except for my research and my engagement with the profession outside of the university, my alienation recalled my college days. Although there were three black faculty in history, the hostilities from other faculty were almost as bad as those I had sometimes known in grade school. The chair hung a noose in his office. I heard a group of senior men telling “colored people” jokes in the hall. Several of them never even spoke to me when we passed in the hall. One demanded that I give up the seminar room where my class met so that he could hold his class there. They might have thought they were enforcing some junior/senior hierarchy, but I interpreted such actions as motivated by issues of race and gender. When I moved from umsl to Washington University, in the same city, they did not wish me luck. Rather, they probably expected that I would never make it to tenure there.

And so here I am, wondering how tenure will play out. Inasmuch as Duke was my coming-out party, Washington University is my life in the open. I am out as a lesbian to my colleagues, my students, and the administration. Since I am an African American woman, my presence at the university takes on a political cast. The crusade for black faculty continues, but I do have colleagues of color who are also in the fray and a coterie of students coming through the pipeline. Undergrads have entered grad programs, and I mentor grad students of my own. The freedom of the university is something that my parents would have never expected. I teach what I want, and my research agenda focuses on African American women without challenges to its credibility. For that, I can thank the sister scholars who have come before me. The students lined up outside my door attest to the popularity of my courses and my dedication to those who enroll. My classes become a forum for race and gender issues in historical context and in the present, heated by invigorating discussions that continue even after class lets out.

Education and the academy have changed dramatically since the 1960s, but they have not been transformed. As an African American woman professor, I am called upon to do much more in the Washington University community than is demanded of my white colleagues, and in this way, the race and gender paradigm is little different than it was in the past. I am not entitled to be
difficult, a tactic that keeps my white tenure cohort out of committee work, or I risk being labeled as detached, noncollegial, and obstinate. Nor can I teach with mediocrity lest I be accused of laziness. Each semester, at least one student evaluation complains that I must have been an affirmative action hire, shorthand for being incapable, unqualified, and incompetent. Others accuse me of racism because the white experience is marginalized, ironically in classes specifically designated as African American studies. In addition to the usual faculty load, I still play mother, sister, aunt, and cousin to too many students of color, as well as gays and lesbians. Diversity programs, women of color conferences, speaker series, and black history celebrations all take pieces of me.

And yet I love my job and can’t think of anything I’d rather be doing. I was born a historian, practiced in the art of interrogation. I’m never happier than when I’m in the classroom. And I know from my own experiences that my visible presence on campus proffers special meaning to students who come to Washington University, even the Republican ones. I am here, for the most part, for students of color, who, like me, feel anxiety about an environment that is so unlike home, students who are searching for something about themselves in the academic arena and seeking a way to sustain the connection between their families and themselves. Just how much has the academy changed?

Postscript

Not until recently did I realize how close black history cuts to my personal life. Through an alumni website, I got a message from Cecelia Jackson, which I promptly ignored since I did not remember the name. I opened the e-mail the third time it announced itself to find a message I did not expect. My sister Cecelia was searching for me. We shared the same birth mother and possibly the same father but had only seen each other once, at a meeting that included my birth mother, Charlotte, and Charlotte’s three sons. Charlotte had passed away by the time I got the message, but Cece was living in Portland, brother Brian was in Washington, Martin was in Atlanta, and Raymond was still in Camden. Our conversations—Cece talking about family and me talking about my research—traced a direct line between us and the past. Apparently, my oldest living relative still holds down the family roots in Camden. Thomas “Daddy Mac” McLester, now ninety-four years old, was the son of Thomas and Elise McLester. Thomas “Daddy Tom” McLester was the son of Hugh McLester and a slave named Ellen, who had been given to Hugh as a gift from his father, Archie. Archie McLester originally had rented Ellen from the Boykin family, as
in Mary Boykin Chesnutt, the Civil War diarist who wrote with disgust about her husband’s mistress and his mixed-raced offspring.

Tracing the story forward revealed even more irony. Through Cece I met my uncle, Jerry Raymond, my birth mother’s brother. I told him about my research, a study of the black community of Durham, North Carolina. When he finished laughing, he told me that he (we) had an aunt who had been a teacher in the segregated Durham public schools; that his uncle (and mine), Rev. Charles McLester, had been the minister at Mt. Vernon AME Zion Church; and that Uncle Charles’s wife, Johnnie McLester (called Johnnie Mac), had been active in a statewide women’s mission society and the YWCA. I had interviewed Johnnie McLester in Durham in 1993, not knowing then that she was my great-aunt. Hers was the first interview I did. Her keen insights into black Durham’s backstage allowed me to see the complexities of the black community. By the time I learned she was my relative, she had passed away. I love this story, nonetheless, because it illuminates so well the importance of family stories in African American history. How do you talk about the rest?

There’s a book in here somewhere.