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## Southern Black Women: Their Lived Realities

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Southern Black Women: Their Lived Realities

by

Robin M. Boylorn

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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poetry, rural communities

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This dissertation is dedicated to  
the women who raised me

lifted me on tired shoulders  
showed me the way  
taught me right from wrong  
and habits of survival and life

who loved me in spite of  
not because of  
my insecurities and inabilities and inaccuracies

To my grandmother who told me once that she was my father  
and was right

To my mother for her beauty and calm waiting  
and her soothing voice  
that only changes when she is angry  
or talking on the telephone

To my aunt who taught me to respect her  
by making me call her mama  
before she bore children of her own

To my other maternal aunt whose memories of my mother as a child  
have bore witness to my own stubbornness  
for being the first storyteller in my life

You taught me how to act  
how to love  
how to cuss  
how to pray  
how to fight  
how to mend  
how to breathe

You taught me  
how to be myself without apology  
and love what I see

Thank you.

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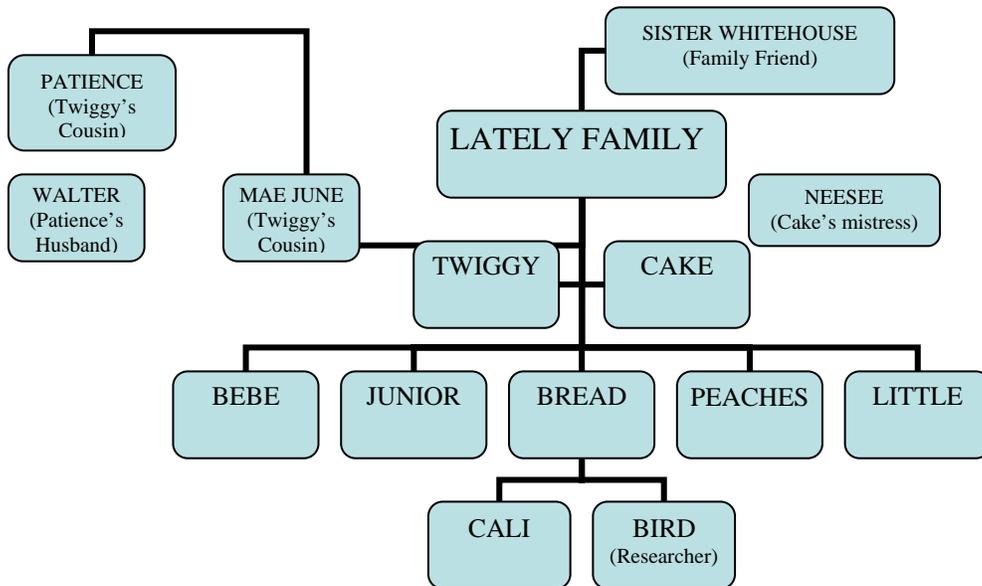
## List of Characters

Bebe	pseudonym, Twiggy's oldest daughter, Bread's sister, Bird's aunt
Bird	pseudonym/nickname for author when she is "home" in the country, writer and researcher who returns to rural community to conduct research for her dissertation, Twiggy's granddaughter, Bread's youngest daughter
Bread	pseudonym, Twiggy's daughter and Bird and Cali's mother, single parent,
Butter	pseudonym, Bread's best friend in childhood
Cake	pseudonym, hauls pulpwood for a living, married to Twiggy
Cali	pseudonym, Bread's oldest daughter and Bird's sister
Junior	pseudonym, Twiggy's oldest son, Bread's brother, Bird's uncle
Lionel	pseudonym, Bread's husband, Bird's father
Little	pseudonym, Twiggy's youngest son, Bread's brother, Bird's uncle
Mae June	composite character, Twiggy's first cousin and the town gossip
Neesee	composite character, Cake's girlfriend <sup>1</sup>
Patience	composite character, rural black woman, Twiggy's distant relative
Peaches	pseudonym, Twiggy's youngest daughter, Bread's sister, Bird's aunt
Twiggy:	pseudonym, rural black woman, mother of five children, married to Cake, Bird's maternal grandmother, the matriarch of the Lately family
Uli	Cali's biological father
Whitehouse	composite character, rural black woman, friend of Twiggy

The "Lately Family" chart below shows the main characters in relation to one another.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> mistress




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<sup>2</sup> The main characters are contextualized further in the Appendix, through poetic biographies.

## Southern Black Women: Their Lived Realities

Robin M. Boylorn

### ABSTRACT

Focusing on the lived experiences of ten rural black women in a familial community in central North Carolina, this project documents the mundane and extraordinary events of their lives and how they create meaningful lives through storytelling. Theoretically grounded in black feminist thought, intersectionality theory and muted group theory the investigation calls for the use of storytelling and poetry to understand how rural black women experience, live, and communicate their lives. Merging the experiences of participants with the researcher, the study also considers the ethical implications of being an insider-outsider and offers suggestions for engaging in creative scholarship. The author uses a combination of various qualitative methods, including ethnography, participant observation, interactive interviewing and autoethnography, to better understand her experiences as a rural black woman. The author combines archival research about the community, personal reflections, field notes and interview transcripts, translating the data into stories about rural black women's lives. The study shows how the stories rural black women share, the secrets they hold, and the activities of their daily lives offer a window for understanding concrete lived experiences as communication experiences.

Introduction:

A Suffocating Story: The Making of an Autoethnographic Dissertation

*brown-skinned*

*country girl*

*with poetic passions*

*bare feet on red mud roots*

*& intellectual ambitions*

Holding my breath was a kind of rehearsed rebellion. Strange, black, beedy-eyed and bony as a rail, my body, like the family land, was flat and unfertile. Not yet bearing fruit or bringing forth the possibility of life, I was stuck between being too young and too grown. I was younger than thirteen when I started breathing in without breathing out, waiting to see how long it would take for me to suffocate on my life—ordinary days that repeated like a tape on rewind. I often sat on the steps of our trailer, my face resting in my hands, watching women and waiting to see what words would be spoken between them. The weather and whether or not so-and-so was doing right at home, and whether or not white people were acting a fool on the job, and whether or not their children had good sense, and whether or not there was enough money for bills and groceries, and whether or not the preacher preached a good word on Sunday, and whether or not they felt like grinning over crying—all this usually dictated their moods and their words.

My older sister Cali and I would play bare-footed outside in our underclothes until our underarms were wet with sweat and we could smell the musk rising off our bodies. Instructions to go and take a bath would come to us in the whispered words of grown women who would look disgusted at our filthiness and tell us we smelled like dogs. But Cali's beauty somehow saved her from being too terrible because she would always inspire a smile from the women, her pouty lips centering an almost perfect face. When I pushed out my thick lips it did not make a difference and I would get the full force of scorn. With suspicious eyes and smirked lips the women, either my mother or one of her sisters, would shake their head at what they called my "womanish" ways. Being womanish meant I looked at them in their eyes without looking away and mocked the way they talked and walked, moving my body and hands like a full grown woman. As I got older my mother would call the same way of behaving "sass."

On this particular day I am invisible to them and they are laughing. From where I sit I cannot make out what they are saying. Their smiles are open-mouthed, gap-toothed and gummy, reaching from one side of their faces to the other, their heads pushed back and their eyes sealed shut. I like to see them like this. On days when there are no smiles, no laughter, it is hard to breathe.

There was no air.

The third trailer my mother's family owned was the color of fog on summer days, dingy with putrid green outlines around the windows. The trailer was tiny and the doors were always open and the windows were always lifted because there was no air conditioner, only boxed fans that sat in corners collecting lint and breaking the silence,

sounding broken. I sat on the door, bare legs dangling over its edge, my feet feeling the rough exterior of homemade steps made of cheap concrete, lopsided and ragged.

Halfway in and halfway out of the house, I waited for a cool breeze to pass by and give me chill bumps, a delicious distraction and temporary relief from the unforgiving North Carolina summer heat.

Flies snuck in on the shoulders of company (who came and went frequently during the day) and found their way back out through the broken screen on the front door that would not close all the way or lock. I couldn't remember if the screen door ever locked, but it remained linked to the front door like shoulders, offering an illusion of sophistication to our battered house. No one minded the door anyway, pulling it open and turning the door knob without knocking. The center block steps were steep and dangerous—often taking adults by surprise when they forgot to watch their feet when they walked. I watched closely, secretly hoping to see one of them stumble, as I had a hundred times running—a hundred times falling. The scabs and scars on my knees and legs were evidence.

There was no air.

The rooms in the trailer were so small they forced obedience and tolerance and familiarity with each other—sight, smell, and touch were second nature, and we could see without hearing, smell without touching, and touch without meaning to because there was no air and no room to move around. You had to touch, oftentimes shoulder to shoulder and leg to leg when you were sitting. There was no air, no room to breathe, no privacy.

A garden grew off to the side of the house, next to a ditch, big enough to plant two rows of vegetables—mostly tomatoes and cucumbers, but Cali and I would sneak

watermelon seeds in the ground to see if they would grow if we watered them. The watermelon seeds wouldn't grow, but it didn't distract me from digging my hands into the earth until dirt was so deep in my fingernails it would take me days to make them clean. The other trees, honeysuckle and pine, would fill the air with a sweet and sour aroma that sank into our skin and lingered like the cheap perfume, Jean Nate, my mother bought from the Avon lady. Patches of wild grass, onions, mushrooms, and dandelions grew amidst clay red mud and thick tree stumps. Climbing trees was a reasonable pastime before afternoon cartoons came on and I would sometimes forget my fear of bugs as I climbed the tree branches, supporting my limber body like strong and wide arms. There seemed to be more oxygen in the trees.

Our yard was the biggest of any of our neighbors' and ditches and dirt piles served as landmarks of where our land started and stopped. The land was tainted with broken glass, plastic soda bottles, trash bags, broken plates, abandoned toys, old shoes, animal bones dragged in by stray dogs, tree limbs and tree stumps. My uncle's green thunderbird with no tires, no hope, sat defeated on cement bricks, surrounded by other junk from our lineage's childhood. You could see nearly everything from the back door stoop: my aunt's white Cutlass, my grandmother's brown sugar cougar, a rusted white swing set that became embedded in the tree bark that had once served as shade, and our neighbor's flower garden. A cigar tree grew between ours and our neighbor's yard. The fruit from the tree looked like long brown beans or cigars. I would often sit under the tree and practice smoking cigarettes which I suspected I would do when I was full grown. I taught myself how to hold the fake cigarette securely between two fingers and blow out fake smoke in exhaled breaths. Nothing, at the time, made me feel more grown up.

Cali and I were the only children in the trailer where we lived with our grandmother and mother and aunt and uncle, all three siblings. We were three generations of the same blood in one house, not uncommon in our community.

There was no air.

My sister and I often were grateful that our room, the one we shared with our mother, had its own bathroom. We would sit at our mother's feet as she smoked cigarettes and sat on the commode, taking turns telling her what had happened in our lives that day. We told her about turning around in circles in the yard until we were drunk with dizziness and then riding bikes up and down the dirt road. We told her about the ticks we had pulled from the creases in our arms and how we had watched our grandmother, Twiggy, squeeze them and set them on fire. We talked about eating biscuits full of butter, dipped in molasses, until our stomachs swelled. And if we had bothered each other enough, from not having a place or opportunity to escape each other's company, we would tell on each other, detailing a previously kept secret that would inspire the greatest punishment.

Our mother, beautiful in the way that mothers are, sat with us in the dark, the only light coming from the end of her cigarette burning a brilliant bright orange that glowed as she sucked in. Trapped in the tiny space, we captured her entire and undivided attention because we were temporarily closed off from everybody else in the house. Those moments were like magic.

There was no air.

We were crowding in on each other, but we didn't know the difference. When the street light came on and you could hear stray dogs bark in the distance, we would fall

asleep on both sides of our mother's body, daring her to turn towards a daughter, proving (as we feared and suspected) that she loved the other best. I was often the more needy and jealous child, the dark-skinned version of my mother, attention-starved and liking the way her hot breath smelled when she breathed on me, suffocating me with each inhale.

There was no air.

In the morning, the smell of bacon, ham, or sausage would lure us from bed, our mother long-gone to work in the city, and the house quiet except for the sound of pots and pans stealing the silence while our grandmother cooked. Soon the "stories" would be on TV and we would be made to either "hush and be quiet" or "go outside," to escape our grandmother's fury and our aunt's harsh words as she tried to sleep through the morning before leaving for her second shift job answering phones at the hospital. My grandmother was a hospital custodian and in the afternoon she and my aunt would ride together to their night shift job. But they took care of us during the day while our mother worked. Grandma was like a father to us, making us do what our mother didn't enforce and chasing us with switches when we misbehaved. She loved us without ever saying those words.

There was no air.

So I exhaled and dreamed of my escape from being the third generation of women in my family who somehow got buried in the ordinary way we lived. I had aspirations of something more, something bigger, but I couldn't wrap my arms or my head around what I had never seen. I internalized my thoughts because what the grown ups heard was improbable nonsense and the impossible ramblings of a child with too much mouth and

too much ambition. They feared my passions would be like theirs, needs turned addictions, turned loss.

While I dreamed, I also was growing up and coming to understand the interconnectedness of our lives as women, relying on each other because all we had was each other. And God. I often wondered what life would have been like if God were a woman—would things be somehow better or easier for women? Less heartache? Less pain? The women turned to loving God, and the older they got the more frantic and obsessive that love became. They went to church almost every night of the week because God would meet them there and make a way out of no way and fill them up with the Holy Ghost and promise less heartache, more joy, less pain, more peace, less loss, more love in the sweet by and by. So we put all of our dreams in our outstretched hands and lifted them in prayer and praise on Sunday mornings waiting for the by and by and sometimes failing at patience and giving our love away at no cost to others but everything to us.

Cake-batter-colored men were a beautiful distraction while waiting on God. I had grown up finding men to be unfaithful and unreliable—yet irresistible. Being loved and left seemed an inevitable fate for rural, black women. I had never witnessed logical or unconditional reciprocated love. None of the women were married in a way that made sense. They did not live with or love their husbands. They often only shared children and last names and sometimes not both, or either.

There was no air.

*“You can’t make no money being no writer!”*

Ours was the house everyone came to, our yard big enough for outdoor reunions when out of town family and uninvited neighbors gathered together to pat each other’s shoulders, smile wide smiles that showed off their teeth and gums, and listen to each other tell lies and brag. My favorite memories are of pig pickins. The smell of pork cooking slow on the burner seemed to calm everyone’s nerves and ease everyone’s spirits. We would stay up all night, the children going in and out of the house listening to grown folks talk, and catching light bugs in long throat glass Coca-Cola bottles. Cigarette smoke glowed in the dark and old school music grooved in the background while I dragged my tired body around to fight off the sleep, mimicking my cousin Weezie’s dance steps to show that I had rhythm, my bottom lip tucked beneath the top one, my brow slightly wrinkled while I concentrated, my hands on what would be my hips when I was grown and my butt sashaying from one side to the other until my body memorized the routine.

Shake it to the east

Shake it to the west

Shake it to the one

That you love the best

Hey, hey!!

Cause I shake the best

Hey, hey!!

It wasn’t the noise but the movement that warranted the attention of adults. The grown men were in a corner passing joints and whispering while the women sat at the

table laughing, lying, and playing spades. They held glasses half full of liquor mixed with brown soda. Almost all of their fingernails were red, and their lips were smothered with shades of burgundy from shared lipstick that had been wiped off accidentally or left on the rim of their glasses. The men could not be bothered but the women paused their conversation long enough to watch me move, watching, frowning, shaking their heads. I must have been nine years old.

“Bread, you gonna have something on your hands with that one,” they told my mother. “Hot as popcorn. Look at how she shakes her little ass.”

After this my mother gave me the “stop acting grown” look and I went to the steps to observe Weezie’s slick moves from the sidelines. Ten years older than me, Weezie was my hero. But the women in the family, my mother included, could already tell (even though her waist was not yet spreading) that she was pregnant. I needed another role model.

My summertime memories of home are filled with company and camaraderie. The house and yard would be full of aunts, uncles, cousins and roguish neighbors who would stop by and laugh out loud remembering stories I couldn’t remember and playing spades outside in the dark next to a light bulb plugged in to an extension cord. Someone would light some newspaper on fire to keep the mosquitoes away and my mother was chosen to keep score because she had the neatest handwriting. I remember it like it was yesterday, the way beautiful black women with raspy voices were in charge of everything and everybody. The men and the children listened to them (even if they didn’t always mind) and respected them (at least in their company). Black women were the center of my world, both then and now. Their healing hands and wise words showed me

everything I wanted to be when I grew up, like them but different. When I was growing up all the grown black women I knew were mothers, wives, and workers. I wanted to be a writer.

The first time the womanfolk heard of my dream I was discouraged and chastised. “What you want to be a writer for?” they wanted to know. “You can’t make no money being no writer.” It never occurred to them, like it never occurred to me, that I could leave Sweetwater to pursue my dream. “You need a skill that will get you a good job,” they said, meaning well. Good jobs were usually in the city—nearly an hour from Sweetwater-- where most women went for their full-time jobs. The only jobs in the community were industrial plants (utility, polyester fiber, fiberwood, plywood) and the nuclear power plant. Then there was the post office, the health center, or one of the two stores. Some women did hair on the side out of their homes, but that was only a few nights a week and on the weekends. The industrial plants promised a decent living and insurance benefits, all the makings of a “good job.” I was told that if I got through school, I could probably get a decent job outside of Sweetwater but it would still require me to work with my hands. Good jobs let you sit down most of the day instead of having to stand up, answering phones, filing paper, or doing what it seemed black women had always done, clean up after white folks. To them being a writer was a pipe dream. I understood why writing did not impress them, these women who rarely read books (those who could read) because they rarely found themselves in what they read. They understood from their lives that it was what they did with their hands, not their minds or hearts, that mattered. Thinking would not put food on the table. Writing would not keep the lights on.

*Waiting to Exhale: Leaving and Coming Back*

I left home when I was seventeen years old, looking so much like my mama at that point that people had started to call me her name, not in the way they did when I was little, but by accident, because they truly mistook my face, my figure, and my silhouette for hers. The probability and possibility of becoming my mother in that space scared me. I wanted to be like her but somewhere else, doing something else, being someone else. I had grown up around peers who resented my ambition and school smarts, reminding me and telling me that I was no better, no different from them. They told me I was not good enough, pretty enough, smart enough—to leave. And I wallowed in self-pity, taking its filth with me to the city where I would become educated, big-headed, better than I was and better than they could be. Or at least that was their fear when I was seventeen years old.

At eighteen I returned home on weekends and holidays. School was not far and the lure of the familiar drew me back like the arms of a man I once loved. I felt safe in those surroundings yet I hid in the belly of the trailer on most days when I was there, the smell of it familiar, the texture of the hollow walls familiar, the gaps in the overworn carpet familiar, the dingy ceilings and smoke stained windows familiar, the broken down cars and broken glass embedded in dirt in between the stumps of tall trees, familiar. I sought familiarity and stayed within it, not wanting to leave until Sunday morning came, when church was required like every breath, followed by a long car ride back to the city with my mother behind the steering wheel.

I left North Carolina to start working on a Ph.D. when I was 24 years old, after working two years in a cubicle that stifled my creativity during the day and working on

my Master's degree at night. I was chasing dreams and running away from ghosts—people who thought of me as nothing but a dreamer, people who told me I would never amount to anything. I didn't know nothing about who I was, where I came from, and what I inherited, as a rural black woman. It took my leaving to see what was beautiful and meaningful and substantial about who I was, where I had lived and who the women around me were. I had to leave it to embrace it, to love it, to miss it—because when I was there I resented my country-ass way of being and speaking and knowing. I overlooked the gift of it all—the heritage, the healing powers, the roots, the stories, the legacies.

When I was 27 I decided to go back and find them.

This know-nothingness that surrounds me about where I come from and what it means to me inspires a project that takes me back, like the song that says, “to where I first believed.” In miracles. Dreams. Tragedies. I learned what I thought I already knew about myself in a place where I didn't think I could ever go back to. Hating it was like hating myself and escaping it is as impossible as escaping myself.

*Meaning Making & Making Meaning*

In college, when I first read a short story by Alice Walker,

a novel by Toni Morrison,

a memoir by bell hooks,

a poem by Maya Angelou

my heart sank into a swell in my belly.

There on the page they were fictionalizing, memorializing, rationalizing my story, my pain and my rescue. I wrapped my arms around myself because it felt like my secrets and

shame had been exposed. How did they know? How could they tell? How had I gone all my life without reading my life in theirs? When I brought up the names to my mother she was not acquainted with black women writers or stories about growing up in the south, poor, black and a woman. These were not the poets, the authors, the stories she was taught in school. Perhaps if she would have been told, school would have made more sense, stories would have been more resonant. Instead, she recalled her studies of white male presidents and wars with countries so absent from her reality they could have been in outer space. I wondered, as she remembered, how my study of literature had somehow left out the stories of black women. I realized that through my mother's mis-education and my higher education we had somehow missed the story of our lives being told back to us in these women's splendid voices. So I began to read, consuming every story I could find that centered around a rural, black female experience.

Those stories were few but varied. Alice Walker's (1973, 1983) fiction and poetry was amazingly resonant to me. Maya Angelou's (1993, 2004) descriptions of the south, startlingly familiar; bell hooks' (1996, 1997) memory unlocked my own; and Toni Morrison's (1970) *The Bluest Eye* immediately became and remains my favorite novel, haunting and speaking to me in equal parts. It was the first time my rural black girl reality was echoed back to me with honesty and clarity.

*(Re)defining Rural Black Womanhood*

Black women tell stories about their lives that are different from the stories that other people tell about them (Bobo, 1991). Black women focus on strength and resilience and find ways of reframing and re-contextualizing their experiences so that they recognize the tragedies of their lives but do not identify their lives as tragedies. As Audre

Lorde (1984) points out, “It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment” (p. 45). The lives of rural black women in particular have been “lost, overlooked, distorted or misrepresented” (Walker, 1983, p. 13) in contemporary scholarship leading to an erasure of their experience.

For generations black women have overlooked themselves as they have been overlooked, accepting the versions of their lives and realities that were offered back to them. Many of those representations are negative, resting at their feet the blame of everything from the emasculation of black men (Wallace, 1978/1999) to the destruction of black families (Franklin, 2000). For some women, however, including the women in my home community, the publicized demonizations of black women and black families were no different from the assaults of racism that they endured everyday. Black women did not need to read Moynihan’s report<sup>1</sup> (nor are they familiar with it) to understand their status on the totem pole. They were busy living their lives and making ends meet, feeding their children and keeping food on the table--even if and when it meant relying on government support or standing in WIC<sup>2</sup> lines.

I was unaware of the stereotypes<sup>3</sup> of black women that boxed me in as

*“deviant*

*defiant*

*immoral*

*sinful*

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s highly controversial government report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, commonly known as the Moynihan Report, argued that black matriarchy is a root cause in the problems of black civil society. As breadwinners and female heads of their households, black women were accused by Moynihan of emasculating black men and failing to properly supervise their children (Moynihan, 1965). Though the report was also critical of black men it placed the blame of the crisis of the black family at the feet of black women.

<sup>2</sup> The WIC program--Women, Infants and Children--is a supplemental nutrition program that provides food stamps for low income pregnant women, new mothers, and children under the age of five.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Hill Collins refers to negative images and representations of African American women as “controlling images” (1999; 2000).

*mammy*                      *jezebel*                      *sapphire*  
*matriarch*                      *welfare queen*                      *liar*                      *ugly--”*

everything but beautiful (Collins, 1990, 2000). Growing up, I didn't realize that stereotypes existed, because I didn't know what a stereotype was. But I did and do know women who could fit the definitions as well as those who defied them (see Boylorn, 2008). I imagined myself destined to be somewhere between holy and reprobate, broke-as-hell and getting by, foolish and judgmental, ignorant and educated, big-boned and po' (referring to frame, not economic standing), good and bad. All of the women I knew were somewhere in between. On a daily basis, these women, country women, seemed to challenge and reinforce stereotypes.

*Countrywomen (A Poem)*

*church-going and home-staying women*

*practicing witchcraft and*

*eating herbs to make them beautiful*

*and bearable*

*enough on the inside*

*to make up for the outside*

*self-sacrificing*

*women loving women*

*with their whole selves*

*but not romantically*

*or urgently*

*or desperately*  
*or jealously*  
*like husbands*  
*who loved them for a little while*  
*staying long enough to leave a seed*  
*that would linger in their lives*  
*like his scent*  
*the smell of sweat and need*  
*stinking like rotting garbage*  
*on closed in porches*

*beauty was not an option*  
*or luxury*  
*they could afford*  
*using hair grease for lipstick*  
*homemade lye soap*  
*and cocoa butter*  
*on rough skin*  
*left everything soft*  
*except their knees*  
*elbows and ankles*

*late night loving found them*

*smacking knees and lips  
and rubbing rough heeled feet  
with calluses and corns  
against stiff sheets  
recycled from family members  
who could finally  
afford them new*

*you never throw away  
anything that still has use*

*this was true  
of pots and pans  
shoes  
and men*

*Breathing Again: Being and Becoming a Rural Black Woman*

I am curious about rural black women because I am a rural black woman. However, I am also a country girl who lives in the city, a feminist, a Christian, a scholar, and a future university professor. My competing selves of who I was and who I am becoming merge and separate as I begin the work of writing the lives of rural black women and making sense of where that leaves me. Who have I become as a result of my

departure from the country? Who am I by virtue of going back? Am I (still) the rural black woman I claim to be?

As a former member of the community I studied, I, similar to other black women scholars before me, had to leave the environment in order to value it. Comparing her viewpoint to wearing a shirt, Zora Neale Hurston stated, “I couldn’t see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment” (p. 1). Hurston realized that as a member of her community she was immersed in the culture and unable to “see” it from a perspective of appreciation or critique.

Alice Walker had a similar revelatory experience of the merits of southern, rural life. After growing up in the rural south and leaving, Walker later recognized the wisdom and beauty that was available to her in the south. Walker (1983) writes that the black Southern writer inherits a sense of community. She references what she calls “double vision,” the ability to “see [your] own world and its close community while intimately knowing and understanding the people who make up the larger world that surrounds and suppresses [your] own” (p. 19). This survival strategy and awareness also has been referred to as “shifting” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003) and “double consciousness” (DuBois, 1918), the ability of black folks to see themselves through the eyes of others while being fully aware of themselves as they are. The intimacy and accuracy of this dual knowledge and experience allows the black southern writer to tell stories from a place of shared knowledge and understanding, a story of a community with shared values and knowledge without diminishing the story around it (the story of the “other”). It is this double vision, I believe, that allows me to write about the people I grew up with and

around as I see them, and as I know them, as they are seen by others, in all of their idiosyncrasies.

Country women captured my attention and devotion from the time I could talk and that admiration has stayed with me through adulthood. Despite the fact that I often feared them and feared being just like them, I have always admired, respected and adored them. Their love has reached around corners and stretched through states to find me, making sure I had enough of whatever I needed when I traveled to Florida to pursue a doctoral degree even when their own cupboards were nearly bare. Folded twenty dollar bills slid in my hands from theirs on multiple occasions. Simultaneously, fearing too much education and being proud of what I was becoming, these women warned me not to become an educated fool, repeatedly challenging me to remember my roots while at the same time urging me to grow my wings. Many of them were unable to pursue and/or disinterested in formal education but they learned what they needed to know from life lessons and experience. Some of them were deeply religious, finding a husband if only to have a head to their households. Others, religious but rebellious, lived their lives on their own terms, redefining what it meant to be strong, black, rural women. These women merged together creating a community within a community—pseudo-kin and “other-mothers” who emerged as heroines and healers in my life.

*Family & Friends Day<sup>4</sup> (A Poem)*

*a call from home*

*for reunions, funerals, wedding parties*

*comes infrequently*

*I follow the path of dirt roads*

*leading me to places I once knew by heart*

*and am known by family name*

*mother resemblance*

*and word of my escape*

*which always gets back*

*to women who look out of windows*

*with closed shades & long curtains*

*with their eyes wide open*

*and their mouths murmuring whispers of what they see*

*into a waiting telephone receiver*

*lips on mouth sugar*

*sincere hugs*

*church glances and scolds*

*for not wearing a slip*

*or stockings*

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<sup>4</sup> Family & Friends Day is an annual fundraising event at my home church in North Carolina. The church service takes place on the second Sunday in November and is set aside as a time when current and former members and relatives come together to celebrate and get reacquainted. Each family collects money from their guests to go towards the church building fund.

*and too-fancy shoes  
that I take off before standing  
for prayer, scripture reading, call to worship  
“Can all of the visitors please stand?”  
and I am suspended in air  
somewhere between belonging and visiting  
not knowing where I fit anymore*

*ancient hands  
wrap around my waist and squeeze  
as much to see if I  
put on weight  
as to see if I've been  
eating enough down there in Florida  
still cute as I always was, they say,  
with my mama's face  
& sweet smile  
but they don't know where I got that big butt from  
must be my daddy's side  
who they've never seen  
  
on the way home  
we pass little houses in silence*

*in the same place they have always been  
and I smile  
because in a moment  
years collapse together  
and it is like I never left  
remembering searches in high grass for  
four-leaf clovers  
& good luck  
and holding lightnin' bugs  
between tightly held fists  
at night in the hide-and-go-seek summer  
mosquito bitten legs  
scratched until blood and ash rested on  
too-black knees  
and old scars  
racing to the bathroom  
waiting in line  
to take a sink bath*

### *Summary*

The women of Sweetwater have come alive in me. Their stories have become my stories. My stories have resurrected their memories. Because I am more of a poet than a formal theorist (Lorde, 1984) I relied on their words to make sense of their world and

used poetic narrative to represent their experiences. Black women use language as a coping mechanism and strategy for their lives (Collins, 1990, 2000; Houston & Davis, 2002), which means that the stories they tell and how they tell them are useful resources for understanding black women's communication. I aspired to tell stories that would resonate with readers and allow them to get to know and empathize with the characters. I humanized them, exposed their flaws, relished in their strengths, and told stories to make sense of their lives. I considered and centered their raced, classed, and gendered positionalities.

In Communication Studies and the canonical halls of academe, rural black women's voices rarely have been heard. This project takes an ethnographic approach to help give voice to marginalized black, rural, southern women by enacting research grounded in their and my own experience. In this dissertation I am a storyteller and a character, writing myself in and out of scenes, reflecting on my thoughts as I re-tell the stories that were told to me.

This study is also a personal investigation of who I am becoming through the process of writing these stories. My self-reflexivity, as a rural black woman, accomplishes connection for the readers, investing them in the overarching story as well as my own as a researcher and co-participant. The interviews and corresponding narratives focus on the roles, relationships and self-perception of black women in a southern community referred to as Sweetwater<sup>5</sup>. In like manner, my autoethnographic stories focus on who these women are to me, who I am to them, and how I see myself in comparison.

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the names of all persons and places in this study to protect the privacy and anonymity of participants.

Chapter One introduces rural black women in the south by focusing on how these women are portrayed in available literature. The chapter includes a definition of rurality and a review of literature on black community studies research, black women's studies, and their communication practices and applicable theories for studying the lives of black women.

Chapter Two reviews the method and methodology used in the research, highlighting the challenges, advantages, issues, and ethical dilemmas of researching a community in which you are a cultural member. I explain how I did the research, how I wrote it up (including fictionalization, narrative and poetry), the issues I faced (which will be elaborated in a later chapter), and how/why I included myself in the story.

Chapters Three and Four feature stories of survival and resilience that were told by participants. The first set of stories in Chapter Three establishes a background and history of the characters while the stories in Chapter Four bring me full circle, introducing me as a character and rural black girl coming of age in this complicated environment. The stories are offered thematically, though not necessarily chronologically, which mimics the way they were told. The stories often fold in on themselves—introducing these women as lovers, mothers, daughters, believers (churchgoers), wives, friends, relatives and community members. My goal is to reflect the day-to-day lived experiences of rural, black women, highlighting the mundane and the extraordinary events of their lives to show how they live meaningful lives. I do this by focusing in on their use of language and selection of stories (the life they create through the stories they tell). My story is interspersed throughout the manuscript, taking the

reader from the present to the past and back to the present. I present multiple narratives simultaneously constantly negotiating my role as an insider/outsider.

In Chapter Five I conclude with a detailed discussion of the stories and ethical implications of the study. I focus on what the research findings, collected as narratives, teach us about rural black women, and how I reconciled my competing roles as researcher and co-participant. I write about what stories of rural black women teach us about rural black women in general, and the women of Sweetwater in particular, concentrating on their lives and their community. Finally, I reflect on my personal identity and who I am and who I have become as a result of this research project.

## Chapter One:

### Black Women's Lived Experiences: A Call for a Rural Black Woman's Perspective

#### *Introduction*

Given that this dissertation focuses on how rural black women use their lived experiences, stories, and talk to construct their realities, the literature review concentrates on four areas central to the study of black women in rural communities: the definition of rurality, black community studies research, black women's studies and communication, and finally theories of black women's lives. I begin by defining rural and making an argument for research that expresses how rurality is experienced by rural people.

Next, I discuss black community studies in the social sciences, which overwhelmingly focus on urban areas and black masculinity. While there are some exceptions to these male-centered studies (Doughtery, 1978; Gwaltney, 1980; Ladner 1971; Osborne, 1996; Stack, 1974, 1996; Wilson, 1983), I summarize what I believe to be the strengths and limitations of existing black community studies and the importance of involving rural black women's voices.

In the next section I detail the history and emergence of Black Women's Studies as an academic genre and reference the call within the discipline of communication for more research devoted to black women's communicative lives, voices, and peculiar experiences (Harley, 2002; Houston & Davis, 2002). I highlight the unique ways black women communicate about their lives (Houston, 2000a, 2000b; Houston & Davis, 2002;

Scott, 1995, 2000) and the benefits of “bringing the everyday into academe” (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995).

Finally, I offer black feminist thought and womanist theory (Collins, 1990, 2000; Walker, 1983; Williams, 1986), alongside Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory (1991) and muted group theory (E. Ardener, 1978; S. Ardener, 1978; Kramarae, 1981), to establish a theoretical framework and grounding for understanding and studying black women’s lives.

### *What is Rural?*

A universal and centralized definition of rural does not exist. There are, however, several and conflicting definitions of what it means to be rural and what counts as a rural community. In her sampling of definitions, Betty Rios (1988) found the concept of rurality to be complicated at best. She states that although people know when they are rural, their perception does not qualify for research purposes. Therefore, rural individuals are not given the agency of self-definition. Rios argues that defining rural is a complex problem without an easy solution.

A definition of rural is necessary to distinguish rural and urban locations for research (Jones, 1995; Ricketts, Johnson-Webb & Taylor, 1998; Rios, 1988)<sup>6</sup>. Key characteristics that were previously used to define rural—“simple life, agriculture, smallness, homogeneity, and dullness—fail to describe much of rural America” (Blakely 1984, as cited in Rios, 1988). There is an “essence” to being rural (Blakely, 1984; Rios,

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the term rural has meanings beyond the ones discussed here and that a universal conceptualization of what “rural” means has not been identified. For the purposes of this project I focused on rural environments as those in isolated areas and with small populations. These communities face particular challenges because of a lack of resources, finances and opportunities that are usually available in more urban and metropolitan areas.

1988) that can only be discovered by examining the lives of rural people. How do they see themselves and how do they define their lives as rural?

Owain Jones (1995) has argued for a consideration of incorporating lay discourses— “people’s everyday constructions of the rural within the contexts of their own lives” with the academic discourses of rural (p. 35). His case study of a small village revealed that most rural residents don’t use the term rural in their everyday discourse, instead using the term ‘country’ to describe their surroundings. Though rural and country were used synonymously, residents’ individual definitions of what constituted rural shows that even in lay discourse definitions of rural remain indefinite.

The term rural is used by the Census Bureau to reference people who live in places with small populations with a density of less than 1,000 people per square mile (Ricketts, Johnson-Webb & Taylor, 1998, p. 3). Rurality is also defined in contrast to urbanized areas. Ricketts, Johnson-Webb, and Taylor (1988) found that “all territories, populations, and housing units that the Census Bureau does not classify as urban are classified as rural. For instance, a rural place is any unincorporated place or census designated place with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants that is located outside of an urbanized area (p. 3).” Rural populations also are divided into farm and non-farm classifications.

Based on the number of rural people (Ricketts, Johnson-Webb & Taylor, 1988), North Carolina is one of the “most rural” states, and is considered a state of “small towns” (Bass, 2005). Out of its 100 counties, 85 are rural (Bass, 2005). Black people are the largest minority group in the state and make up 21.6% of the population.

Given the number of African-American residents in North Carolina and the fact that 95.8% of African Americans reside in rural communities or towns, a study of

African-American experiences in the state is warranted. However, race is an un(der)investigated and un(der)represented topic of research in rural studies. A search of the *Journal of Rural Studies*, an international and interdisciplinary journal dating back to an archive of 1985 and devoted to researching rural issues, returned four results for articles on race and no results on studies of African Americans and/or African American women<sup>7</sup>.

Race, gender, and rurality are key features in this study. To explain the need for raced rural research, I begin with reviewing how race has been framed in existing research on African American communities.

#### *Black (Community) Studies*

Rural community studies have concentrated more on issues of gender and masculinity than on race. Rural studies recently have identified what Campbell and Bell (2000) call “rural masculinities,” which include “studies of the masculine in the rural. . . meaning the various ways in which masculinity is constructed within what rural social scientists would recognize as rural spaces and sites” (p. 539-540). The concept of rural masculinities has emerged recently within agricultural and country studies as a response to women’s “disempowered position in rural society” (p. 544). In 2000, *The Journal of Rural Sociology* dedicated an entire issue to the special topic, acknowledging the tendency of masculine studies within rural spaces to promote the invisibility of women and offering a critique of issues of power and visibility in society.

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<sup>7</sup> The search also included “Black” and “Black women” and yielded no sources. Additionally, with the exception of one article on race that merely mentioned the term in the abstract, the other articles were book reviews, not original research.

Masculine bias is not limited to rural studies, however. In African American Studies and Women's Studies the volume of black women's voices compete against gender hierarchies and race appropriations that have privileged white women's realities and black men's burdens over theirs (Bambara, 1970; Collins, 2000; Combahee River Collective, 1982; Giddings, 1984; hooks, 1981; Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Lorde, 1984; Smith, 1983). Early investigations into the lived experiences of black populations were largely centered on black men and urban cities (Anderson, 1978; Clark, 1965; Dunier, 1992, 1999; Hannerz, 1969; Rose, 1987).

Black community studies research usually focuses on locations where "so-called" authentic black experiences can be isolated and investigated. Ulf Hannerz (1969) refers to such communities, found in predominantly black neighborhoods, as "soulside," but they have also been referenced as "projects" (MacLeod, 1995), "urban villages" and "ghettos" (Anderson, 1978; Clark, 1965). Black community studies have situated black men on street corners and sidewalks and in restaurants, bars, and urban neighborhoods (Anderson, 1978; Duneier, 1992, 1999; Liebow, 2003; Rose, 1987; Whyte, 1993).

#### *Seeking the "Authentic" Negro: White Men Studying Black Men*

Studies of black men by white social scientists are challenging because the researchers look at and frame their investigations from their positions of privilege. In his critique of the way white social scientists construct black communities, cultural critic Robin D. G. Kelley (1997) calls for researchers to understand the complexity of peoples' lives and cultures. Citing social scientists for irresponsibly generalizing the black urban poor experience based on "a few representative examples," Kelley goes on to state that many social scientists "do not let the natives speak" (p. 16). Kelley's position is that

social scientists (mostly white and male) enter the field looking for what they believe to be ‘authentic black men’ based on pathological definitions. According to Kelley, many social scientists seek what they consider real Negro experiences, highlighting hegemonic assumptions about the black experience. Real Negroes, according to this logic, reinforce stereotypes and are uneducated, unmotivated and unemployed. Characters that do not substantiate these racist assumptions are often ignored and left out of the ethnographic text.

Mitchell Duneier, a Jewish sociologist, joins Kelley’s critique regarding the overgeneralization of black populations. In *Slim’s Table* (1992), Duneier observes the interactions between black men who frequent a local cafeteria in South Chicago. Based on four years of research, Duneier’s study departs from earlier studies that position urban black men as deviant and instead focuses on the significant relationships the men have across racial and class divisions. By regarding the participants as human beings and not merely objects to be investigated, Duneier offered one of the first non-racist, non-classist ethnographic portrayals of working class black men. Duneier was aware of pre-existing demeaning images of black men and sought to offer a more widespread representation that proved the range of black men’s experiences and realities cannot be limited to street corners and ghetto-specific masculinity.

Black male scholars began to emerge in order to tell their own stories and to introduce, through studies of black communities, the roles, responsibilities and stories of black women. Recognizing the failures of research on poor blacks, which included unsubstantiated claims, the reiteration of stereotypes, and the absence of black women’s voices, black male scholars highlighted the irresponsibility inherent in ignoring the

diversity of black people's experiences and began to study black communities on their own.

*Dark Ghettos, Rural Negroes & Ordinary Folk: Black Men Studying Black Communities*

Black community studies conducted by black male researchers and ethnographers allowed black people to speak for themselves, offering a common-sense insight that is missing from earlier studies. In his first book, *The Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*, black psychologist Kenneth B. Clark (1965) begins with a prologue entitled "The Cry of the Ghetto," where research participants voice their take on the realities of their lives and experiences in the ghetto. From the drug addict to the housewife, middle-aged to the teenager, both male and female, their voices cry out about racism, capitalism, classism, politics, disenfranchisement, discrimination and stereotypes (pp. 1-10).

Clark (1965) describes the ghetto:

The ghetto is ferment, paradox, conflict, and dilemma. Yet within its pervasive pathology exists a surprising human resilience. The ghetto is hope, it is despair, it is churches and bars. It is aspiration for change, and it is apathy. It is vibrancy, it is stagnation. It is courage, and it is defeatism. It is cooperation and concern, and it is suspicion, competitiveness, and rejection. It is the surge toward assimilation and it is alienation and withdrawal within the protective walls. (p. 11-12).

Many of the descriptions and pathologies of the urban ghetto translate to rural life and correlate with its rural twin-- 'the country.'

Carter Godwin Woodson's *The Rural Negro* (1930) was the first study of rural, black communities. Stemming from a three-year research endeavor of The Association

for the Study of Negro Life and History, this work describes the conditions of rural life and rural black people. It was compiled from “actual observation, personal knowledge, and documentary evidence” (p. xvi). Woodson’s report did not feature the individual lives or experiences of blacks but rather presented a collective representation of rural blacks in the south. Woodson concluded that rural black people suffered greater discriminations and racial restrictions than in the north due to unprecedented racism, white supremacy, classism, and a lack of education and resources. Rural people, however, were deeply religious and seemingly satisfied with their lot in life, having no point of comparison.

Studies of southern communities were notably absent following Woodson’s initial study of rural black people. Fifty years after Woodson’s study, John Langston Gwaltney’s book *Drylongso* (which means ordinary or everyday) was published, offering an interesting contrast to the then-popular ghetto ethnographies (e.g., Anderson, 1978; Hannerz, 1968; Liebow, 1967). Gwaltney’s (1980) study was based on interviews with working-class black residents in urban locations in the Northeast. Gwaltney gained entrée into the communities through his previous relationships and kinships with both men and women participants. He explained through his descriptions of participants and in their own words that their personal experiences and their interpretations of their experiences trump (override) all<sup>8</sup>. Allowing the participants to speak for themselves and interpret their own lives and communities, Gwaltney offered a counter to what he called “street-corner exotica” (p. xxii).

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<sup>8</sup> Nannette Pryor, a participant in Gwaltney’s (1980) study, expressed concern for outsiders (white people) imposing their own meaning on her life and history. Her participation in the study was contingent on Gwaltney’s familiarity of and connection to “black core culture.”

By looking at ordinary, everyday black people and allowing them to speak for themselves, Gwaltney's project was a reply to previous studies by white ethnographers that in his opinion "failed to assess black American culture in terms other than romantic" (1981, p. xxii). His concept of the "core black culture" from which he writes is a self-imposed, self-reflective and essentialist definition of black life as lived, with variegated experiences and responses.

Gwaltney's study shows that the "authentic" lived experience of African Americans are the ones they live on a day-to-day basis, not exaggerated versions of a subculture that begins to represent the whole. *Drylongso* emphasizes the diversity of black people's lives and experiences and moves beyond a mere diagnosis and prescription for black masculinity and pathology in these communities (Gwaltney, 1980). Gwaltney visited both rural and urban communities and joined black women's voices with black men.

#### *Where Are the Women?*

Studies about the black rural community often relegated women invisible or absent (Anderson, 1978; Duneier, 1992), since black women are mostly present in locations within the private sphere, including the home (Doughtery, 1978; Stack, 1974, 1996; Wilson, 1983), the church (Frederick, 2003; Gilkes, 2001), and the workplace (Harley, 2002; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). However, it is imperative that studies of rural communities not only focus on public spheres but private spaces as well. Studies that center the experiences of women must follow them in their daily routines and into their homes and personal, intimate relationships. Given the gendered differences of how

men and women engage in communication and negotiate relationships, the findings from studying black men would not necessarily translate to the lives of black women.

Early ethnographies of African American women and girls focused on gender roles, relationships, community, and family survival (Doughterty, 1978; Ladner, 1971; Stack, 1974, 1996; Wilson, 1983). Most of these were conducted by white researchers who participated in the lives of participants. Carol Stack (1974), a white anthropologist, initiated a female-centered ethnography with her research of a rural community in North Carolina. As a white researcher she was committed to not only observe but to participate and experience the daily life of black families, focusing on the relationship roles and negotiations between the women. Not only did Stack's foundational study focus on women's roles in the family and community, but it was also a transition study from urban areas to rural ones.

Molly Doughterty (1978) investigated black girls in a rural black community in north central Florida. Her case study sought to offer the viewpoint of the women she studied yet their actual voices are used only minimally in the text. Initially intimidated about entering a potentially hostile and likely suspicious black community to conduct research, Doughterty negotiated her role as a white investigator by establishing relationships with participants and sharing information about her life as they shared information about theirs (pp. 4-5). Though the book focuses on how rural black girls transition into womanhood (and the various roles associated with it) it also incorporates how gender roles/hierarchies, kinship bonds, and male-female relationships are experienced in the rural black community.

Black community studies have been progressive, with early studies and overgeneralizations leading to follow-up investigations and critiques. Studies of black communities and black men by white ethnographers led to studies of black communities by black men. Similarly, the ethnographic studies of black women began to look at the oft neglected environment of the rural and private spaces black women generally occupy in the south (Harley, 2002). All of these studies contributed to the field and helped to situate the lives and locations of black women in black communities as worthy of academic examination and opened the door for black women to begin to study their own lives and speak from their own experiences.

### *Black Women's Studies*

Marginalized within the margins, black women face double jeopardy (Beale, 1970) and ubiquitous stereotypes. Resisting the definitions imposed by a racist and classist society, black women seek heterogeneous representations while also claiming a common core identity and history (Collins, 2000). The necessity of Black Women's Studies as an academic discipline emerged from both misrepresentations and lack of representations of Black women in other genres of higher education.

In the introduction to the edited book, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (1982) write:

Because of white women's racism and black men's sexism, there was no room in either area for a serious consideration of the lives of black women. And even when they have considered black women, white women usually have not had the capacity to analyze racial politics and

black culture, and black men have remained blind or resistant to the implications of sexual politics in black women's lives (p. xxi).

Their argument leads to an academic call for the study of black women based on the fact that black women have a peculiar perspective linked to their unique raced and gendered experiences, colored and clouded by racism and gender discrimination. According to Hull, Scott and Smith (1982), black women intellectuals must respond to their oppression by naming and describing themselves, their experiences and their shared history. Black women must take the responsibility for researching and writing about their lives, which opens a space for my study of rural black women.

The benefits of Black Women's Studies programs are many. First, Black women's scholarship is valued and their unique vantage point as an outsider-within (the academy) is acknowledged (Brown, 1997; Collins, 1998; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995). Second, Black women's studies encourage Black women to study Black women and challenge and/or confirm previous scholarship conducted by non-black women (which also affords black women the opportunity to study themselves). Third, Black women's studies value the everyday lived experience of black women (Weems, 1983)s. Fourth, Black women's studies value experience as knowledge (Luttrell, 1983). Finally, the genres and forms of scholarship available in Black Women's Studies vary to mimic Black women's communication patterns and unique language use (e.g., stories, poems, dialogue).

In ways that will be detailed later (see Black Women's Theory section), black women scholars have established research agendas that honor black women's collective history, commonalities and difference (Banks-Wallace, 2000, 2002; Boylorn, 2006;

Clarke, 1983; Collins, 1990, 1998, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Franklin, 2000; Frederick, 2003; hooks, 1981, 1993; Houston, 1992, 2000a, 2000b; Houston & Davis, 2002; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; King, 1995; Lorde, 1984; McKenzie, 2002; Osborne, 1996; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995; Scott, K. Y. 1991; Scott, K. D., 1995, 2000; Smith, 1983; Wallace-Sanders, 2002).

*Who is the Black Woman?*

In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara (1970) offers a definition of the black woman that is both complicated and straightforward. She shows that black women do not have a homogenous identity and there is no “authentic” black womanhood (Ladner, 1971). She describes the black woman as:

. . . a college graduate. A drop-out. A student. A wife. A divorcee. A mother. A lover. A child of the ghetto. A product of the bourgeoisie. A professional writer. A person who never dreamed of publication. A solitary individual. A member of the Movement. A gentle humanist. A violent revolutionary. She is angry and tender, loving and hating. She is all these things—and more (p. xviii).

Black women and their lives are multifaceted, multilayered and multi-oppressed. The positionality of black women as insider-outsiders and outsiders-within influences both how she sees (and thus experiences) the world and how the world sees her.

*Outsiders-Within: Black Women's Double Jeopardy*

Julia T. Wood (2005) says “the outsider-within is a privileged epistemological position because it entails double consciousness, being at once outside of the dominant group and intimately within that group in ways that allow observation and understanding

of that group” (p. 62). However, as outsiders-within, African American women find that stance oftentimes problematic. Patricia Hill Collins (1998) defines outsider-within spaces as “riddled with contradictions” (p. 5). Though African Americans are and can gain knowledge or insight about the white culture, they will never have access to the position, privilege, or power of the dominant group.

Black women’s studies urge scholarship that allows black women to study and write about the lives of black women, in their own voices and in reaction to their own experiences. As Hull, Scott, and Smith (1982) explain:

Only through exploring the experience of supposedly ‘ordinary’ Black women whose ‘unexceptional’ actions enabled us and the race to survive, will we be able to begin to develop an overview and an analytical framework for understanding the lives of [Black] women” (p. xxi-xxii).

*Right From The Horse’s Mouth: Black Women Studying Black Women*

Joyce Ladner’s (1971) groundbreaking work was inspired by the inconsistencies she observed between her personal experiences of becoming a black woman and those that were available in mainstream scholarship. In *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman*, Ladner (1971) focuses on the adaptability and resilience of adolescent black girls, privileging their voices and linking them to her own experiences. Her research focuses on what it means to be and become a black woman in a black community. By documenting the historical legacy and implications of slavery on the psyche and familial role of Black women, challenging the findings of Moynihan’s report that blamed female-headed households for the breakdown of the black family, and negotiating her role as a researcher and as black woman, Ladner (1971) remained cognizant of how her intimate

familiarity with racist sexism influenced her study (pp. 8-9). A black woman studying black women essentially becomes black women studying themselves.

There are two significant reasons black women should be among the primary investigators of black women's lives. First, black women researchers can offer information about black women that others can't. Blauner and Wellman (1973) state that "there are certain aspects of racial difference that are difficult, if not impossible, for nonminorities to grasp empirically and formulate conceptually" (Blauner & Wellman, 1973). Researchers who are nonmembers of communities tend to see and speak from a position of disparity and separation.

Secondly, Black women's studies by black women allow black scholars to respond to earlier interpretations of their lives with their own perspective. Instead of adopting a non-authentic voice to respond, Black women's studies encourages black women to personally engage topics of discourse and communicate their lives in a shared language through everyday talk or sisterspeak. Black women consistently write themselves into their texts (Frederick, 2003; hooks, 1989, 1993, 1999; Hurston, 1990a; Lorde, 1984; Scott, 1991; Scott, Muhanji & High, 1999; Scott & Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Smith, 1983; Vaz, 1997; Walker, 1983), engaging them and reflecting on their own experiences in response to what they collect. It is not surprising that when black women document their own lives and experiences they do so through stories, superstitions, sayings, metaphors, poems and thick descriptions, for that is the way they live life.

Relying on the authority of their lived experience, black women offer a unique and necessary perspective to research about their lives. This resonance is part of the methodology Arlene Hambrick (1997) offers in her chapter, "*You Haven't Seen Anything*

*Until You Make a Black Woman Mad.*” She instructs the black female researcher who collects the oral narrative of other black women to “compare and contrast this person’s story with yours. Experience self-healing by discarding stereotypes imposed on you by the world. Find yourself by comparing, analyzing, and appreciating similar holistic experiences” (p. 81). Hanbrick’s second premise is that black women need to occupy more central roles in ethnographies, which place her at the forefront. Black women scholars must recapture their voice and agency in research by becoming the subject and not the object, using their stories theoretically to rearticulate black women’s standpoints and use their everyday and taken-for-granted knowledge.

bell hooks (1989) explains the difference between being the subject and the object of research:

as subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. . .As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject (p. 42).

Black women must become the subjects of research and not just the object of an outsider’s glare.

Research perspectives for black women’s studies must anticipate the location of oppression in black women’s lives. Kesho Y. Scott (1991) established criteria for studying the lives of black women when she studied the coping strategies of four black women, herself included. She identified the correlation between black women’s oppressions and the responsibility of researchers. She states:

Any study of black women living under American racism demands a research perspective that embraces race, sex, and class. Moreover, researchers carrying out such a study must beware of misrepresenting the cultural values and practices of black women's actual behavior and self-perceptions. Such a study must allow us to see how black women both shape the world and are shaped by it. It must acknowledge that black women create their own black feminist theory. They come to theory and practice out of the oppression they experience as people who are poor and black and women (p. 5).

Whether studying black women as a sub-culture or the communities in which they live, black women researchers can offer a privileged standpoint for collecting and analyzing the raw data of black women's lives—starting with their own experiences.

There are some potential challenges for black women primarily studying their own lives. First, black women will have an inevitable bias that may prevent them from seeing and/or taking into account an outsider's perspectives and/or views. Second, black women may dismiss or ignore significant information or findings they consider taken-for-granted or common knowledge. Therefore, black women's studies must take into account an outsider's curiosity as well as an insider's understanding.

### *Black Women Studying Their Communities*

Katie Cannon (1988) asserts that Black women writers recognize and value the consciousness in their home community and use the oral narrative heritage of that community in their writing. The community is a character in the lives and stories that black women tell. It is not only where they live, but a part of who they are (Cannon,

1988). As a backdrop to the goings-on of black women's lives, community settings, whether they be urban or rural, serve as mirrors. As Cannon speculates, black women reflect on the larger community and the human condition as part of her research. Whereas black men tend to create reports on their investigations of black communities, black women create stories. Relying on the power of story, Black women writers use narrative to uncover communicative experiences among black women.

### *Black Women's Communication*

Oral traditions are historical in black communities (Banks-Wallace, 2002), yet few studies focus on black women's communication practices, particularly from a southern rural perspective.

In a review of literature on African American communication, Mark Orbe (1995) identified several reasons and needs for additional research that moved beyond quantitative methodologies in order to reflect the lived experience of everyday African Americans in communication research. Quantitative approaches are useful but problematic because people of color theorize through narrative (Christian, 1988; Orbe, 1995). Orbe's assessment calls for experiential approaches to scholarship about African American communication. He suggests that future research embrace alternative methods and theories; identify the diversity within African American communities; improve the lives of participants by making the findings available and assessable to a larger audience; and acknowledge existing research on African American communication.

### *Talking in Rhythms: Black Women's Talk*

Black women's communication and communication practices are not isolated from racist implications (Houston, 1992) because as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) states,

“for many African American women, racism is not something that exists in the distance” (p. 23). Starting at the intersection of race and gender, black women’s communication is vulnerable to overgeneralization and stereotyping by outsiders but resonant and understood by community members (Houston, 2000b). Investigations into the self-definitions of black women’s talk has emphasized their everyday vernacular as it comes through in folk expressions, downhome talk, and “home language” (Lippi-Green, 1997, as cited in Houston, 2000a). A common characteristic of black women’s communication styles is their ability to speak in two languages (what is considered standard English and Black English vernacular).

Karla D. Scott (2000) likens the communication patterns of African American women to border crossing. She suggests that the multiple realities of black women in their daily lives lead to an identity and communication negotiation across borders and separate groups. Black women’s communication also has been distinguished as a kind of bilinguality (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Black women use codeswitching practices, slang, blackspeak, talking “proper,” and country words (Houston, 2000a; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Scott, 1995, 2000) in order to negotiate relationships inside and outside of their cultural community.

#### *Focusing on Black Women’s Communicative Lives*

African American communication scholars have sought to create a space for ordinary African American women’s definitions and ideological conceptions of their communication to be heard (Houston, 2000b; Scott, 1995). One approach to the study of communication that has not been widely used to study the communicative lives of black women is narrative. Black women scholars in the field of communication have used

various methods to interpret black woman's talk including poetic prose (Borum, 2006), conversational analysis (Houston, 2000a; Scott, K. D., 1995, 2001), and traditional interviews and analysis (Houston & Davis, 2002). The act of narrating is a form of communication that helps shape the identities of black women as well as how they are viewed in the public and is therefore a useful method for understanding and initiating conversations about black women's lives.

An interdisciplinary approach to studying the lives of black women allows the merging of Black Women's Studies and Communication Studies to identify how stories, silence, and deeds in ordinary everyday conversations are used by black women "to negotiate gendered cultural identities, affirm sisterhood, build community, and confront, demystify and overcome oppression" (Houston & Davis, 2002, p. 12). An investigation into the particular and unique communication practices of rural, black women (through self-talk, group talk, mother-daughter talk, sista-friend talk, as well as the unspoken but understood) can inform us about their lives. The stories they share, the secrets they hold, and the activities of their daily lives offer a window for understanding concrete lived experiences as communication experiences. Further, because stories are theories (Bochner, 1994, 2002) they can be used to explain and better understand the lives of black women in general and rural black women in particular.

#### *Theoretical Approaches to Understanding Black Women*

By definition, theories describe, explain, predict, increase awareness, foster understanding, and critique. Theories are embedded in our experiences and the questions that emerge from our curiosities about the world we live in. Theories are connected to praxis because practice allows a theory to be translated, carried out, rehearsed and

compared to the lived experiences of others. Theories are also stories, making theorists and practitioners storytellers (Bochner, 1994, 2002). Therefore in some sense we all are, knowingly and unknowingly, intentionally and by accident, naïve theorists (Wood, 2005).

Theories of black women (which include black feminism, black feminist thought, womanism, Africana womanism, and intersectionality theory) are all grounded in the multiple and overlapping oppressions African American women face including racism, classism, and sexism (Taylor, 1998). By making theory applicable to black women's lives specifically and in a sense getting into their skin and harboring their experiences, black women's theories are what Moraga & Anzaldua (1983) would define as "theories of the flesh" that use "flesh and blood experiences" to develop theory (p. 23).

In the collection of feminist writings, *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (1983) name theory, saying, "a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" and contradictions (p. 23). Contradictions of feminist experiences often are bridged by differences and give women the voice and space to "nam[e] our selves and tell our stories in our own words" (p. 23). This review of literature will focus on three theories that can be applied to black women's lives, including Black feminist thought or womanist theory, intersectionality theory, and muted group theory.

### *Black Feminist Thought & Womanist Theory*

Often used interchangeably, black feminist thought or womanism (womanist theory) is a standpoint theory whose common objective is black women's self-definition (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Brown, 1997; Collins, 1998, 2000; Taylor, 1998; Walker, 1983).

Some scholars conflate womanism and black feminism while others insist they are incompatible (Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006). For the purposes of my study, I use both approaches synonymously.

Grounded in the experience of ordinary African American women, black feminist thought “contends that Black women have a self-defined standpoint of their own oppression” (Collins, 1989, p. 747). The central premise of black feminist thought and womanist theory is the multiplicity of black women’s lives. This multiple jeopardy “entails both multiple, interlocking identities (e.g., Black, female, and working class) and multiple, interdependent oppressions (such as racism, sexism, and classism)” (Houston & Davis, 2002, p. 5).

Black feminist thought is characterized by two interlocking components—first, black women share a common experience of being black and female, therefore giving them a peculiar view of the world and a similar experience of oppression. Second, and equally relevant, black women have variegated responses to that oppression (Collins, 1986). In other words, though black women face the same mountain to climb (gender and race oppression), they don’t approach the mountain in the same way.

Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1990, 2000) presented black feminist thought as an opportunity for African-American women to interpret their own lives, establish their own standards for what counts as scholarship, and create their own theories—all of which are born from their lived experiences. “While black feminist thought articulates the taken-for-granted knowledge of African American women, it also encourages all Black women to create new self-definitions that validate a Black women’s standpoint” (Collins, 1989, p. 750).

Alice Walker (1983) offered womanism as an alternative ideological approach to (white) feminist thought. In her collection of nonfiction prose, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, she defined a womanist as:

A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: 'You trying to be grown.' Responsible. In charge. Serious. The definition continues to include a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

(xi-xii)

Womanism, according to Walker, is a tradition of black womanhood and therefore a central part of black women's experiences. Her definition attempts to give agency to black women historically by privileging folk traditions and black women's ways of knowing. She presents the black woman as someone who seeks knowledge (even to her own detriment) and relies on her experiences and emergence into adulthood or "grown up doings" to learn. Through her definition, Walker encourages self-love and

a love of black people (“the Folk”), spirituality, and customs (music/dance). She also recognizes and celebrates the dialectics of black women’s lives including her ability to be vulnerable and also courageous; outrageous and also serious; independent and also reliant on relationships (sexually and or nonsexually with men and/or women).

Some scholars interpret the fourth part of Walker’s definition, “womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender” (p. xii) as a way of stating that womanism is somehow superior to feminism. I do not believe Walker was creating a hierarchy but rather a dualism or alternative to white feminism. In an interview with David Bradley (1984), Walker explained that she did not feel black feminist described things correctly. She said,

I don’t choose womanism because it is ‘better’ than feminism. . .I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it, because I cherish the spirit of the women the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic-American habit of offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behavior and change that only a new word can help it more fully see. . .I need a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture, that really expresses the spirit that we see in black women.

And its just. . .womanish (p. 94).

Walker understands the complexities of black women’s experiences and the distinctions of black women’s unique experience of gender discrimination (coupled with race discrimination) and did not want to have to add a color to the term for it to become visible.

*Theorizing In(side) & Out(side) The Academy*

As a theoretical approach, womanist theory speaks to the idea that stories about black women should fall from black women's mouths. Teresa Fry Brown (1997) explains womanist theory as a way of translating womanist knowledge back to everyday black women in a language they can recognize and in terms they can apply to their lives. In what she referred to her as "academic elitism," Brown recognized that even though the women she engaged in dialogue could benefit from the information she had gained from womanist methods and perspectives they were turned off by the theory because it did not seem to apply to their day-to-day lives. Brown realized the need to create a bridge between academic theory and the everyday black woman. She urged black women academics to reach out to other black women through their research because "survival is not an academic skill" (Lorde, 1984, p. 112) and though "academe teaches us how to learn, life experiences teach us how to survive" (Brown, 1997).

The call for connection between academe and the everyday experiences of black women is further considered by Layli Phillips and Barbara McCaskill (1995) whose article, *Who's Schooling Who? Black Women and the Bringing of the Everyday into Academe, or Why We Started The Womanist*, discusses how womanist theory allowed them ways of seeing the relevance of their day-to-day struggles as black women and their responsibilities and goals as Black women intellectuals, using the metaphor of being simultaneously "in here" (in the academy) and "out there" (in the world).

Phillips and McCaskill (1995) urged Black women academics to recognize their role in educating other black women both inside and outside of the academy, recognizing the offerings everyday Black women and their experiences can bring to the academy to

“enrich the academy, further humanize it, and make it more accessible to a wider segment of humanity, including, but not limited to Black women” (p. 1010). They make black women accountable to and for black women, which led to the development of a newsletter for Black feminism and womanism in the academy. Their incentive was not only to translate academic scholarship to black women so that it can be applied to their everyday lives but to translate black women’s everyday lives to the academy.

To synthesize black feminist thought and womanist theory, I will briefly describe their common premises central to this project: black women’s experience(s), black women’s epistemology, and black women’s ideology. These premises will lead into a discussion of intersectionality theory and muted group theory as additional theoretical frameworks that are useful when investigating the lives of black women.

*Black women’s experience(s).* Patricia Hill Collins (2000) stated that “only black women know what it means to be black women” (p. 104). It is not uncommon, however, for other marginalized groups to attempt to co-opt their minority experience, claiming a universal oppression for all non-dominant groups. While white women can relate to gender oppression they have the privilege of whiteness. Black men understand the psychological and physical implications of racism but have the privilege of maleness. Only black women experience the combination of gender and race oppressions making them uniquely positioned and doubly vulnerable.

Black women’s multiple oppressions has lead to a multiple consciousness of what it means and what it feels like to be black and female in a world that privileges white maleness. A central premise of womanism “is the absolute necessity of speaking from and about one’s own experiential location and not to or about someone else’s. Black

women's scholarship has placed Black women and their experiences at the center of analysis" (Phillips & McCaskill, p. 1010).

*Black women's epistemology.* Race, gender and class designations are primary influences of one's epistemological positionality (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Because epistemology refers to how we know what we know, black women often rely on their concrete experiences to determine their knowledge (Collins, 1990, 2000). Therefore, the everyday experiences of black women have academic value (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995) and black women scholars are being urged and called forth to do the work of naming and speaking the experiences of black women (Atkinson, 2000; Bambara, 1970; Banks-Wallace, 2000; Bobo, 1991; Borum, 2006; Boylorn, 2006; Brown, 1997; Cannon, 1998; Collins, 1986, 1998, 2000; Combahee River Collective, 1982; Etter-Lewis, 1991; Giddings, 1984; Hill, R., 1991; Hill, S., 2005; hooks, 1981, 1989; Houston & Davis, 2002; Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Ladner, 1971; Lorde, 1984; Phillips & McGaskill, 1995; Scott, 1991; Scott, Muhanji & High, 1999; Shange, 1997; Vaz, 1997). Since "self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge" (Phillips & McCaskill, p. 1011), it makes sense to begin with the self.

Black women's epistemologies are rooted in lived experiences. The focus on lived experience joins feminist standpoint theory, which privileges/prioritizes women's lived experience as ways of knowing and understanding the world (Houston & Davis, 2002). Calling on experience as knowledge, womanist epistemology uses concrete experience as a criteria for meaning, calls on dialogue to assess knowledge claims, relies on ethics of caring and personal responsibility, gives voice to the lived experiences of black women, and values the connection between experience and action (Hill, 2005).

*Black women's ideology.* Ideology is how one sees and thinks about the world. Black women's ideologies, similar to their lives, are often circumscribed by deeply embedded hegemonic ideologies of larger society that jointly oppress and suppress them (Collins, 2000, p. 4-5). When viewed independently, black women's ideologies are inherited from and inspired by forebears whose experiences led to commonsensical approaches to life and conflict. There are certain things that you, as a black woman, "just know" from experience, teaching and common sense. Therefore, black women's ideologies set them apart from other women and sometimes from black men.

A theoretical approach best equipped to study the lives and lived experiences of black women must address the needs and issues that are prevalent and unique to black women, allowing black women to speak for themselves and tell their own stories about how they cope and make meaning and sense of their lives. Patricia Hill Collins discussed how all black women share unique experiences as black women but she also argued that they do not experience them in the same way. Our lives as black women are impacted by various influences beyond merely race and gender and those double oppressions are inextricably linked (Collins, 2000) where they intersect.

*Intersectionality theory.* Intersectionality theory offers a way of investigating and making sense of how gender joins other identity factors to influence how women experience oppression. Intersectionality theory is grounded in the idea that people live layered lives and oftentimes experience overlap making it possible to feel oppression in one area and privilege in others. For example, when multiple identity factors are considered, black women are marginalized by race and gender but may be privileged in society as heterosexual or middle-class.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) stated that “the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (p. 1244). Crenshaw identified additional factors such as class and sexuality, but focused specifically on the connection of race and gender for her argument about how black women experience gendered violence.

In *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Y. Davis (1983) discussed the concerns of black women by emphasizing the relevance and significance of the intersection of class, race, and gender in the lives of black women. Davis found that these categories of oppression are not discrete and therefore must be explored where they have similarities. Her perspective does not overlook the oppressions individually or their distinct causes and consequences but rather acknowledges how a concerted recognition of interlocking oppressions creates a greater opportunity for resistance.

The Combahee River Collective’s *Black Feminist Statement* (1982) argued that race, class and sex oppression often are experienced simultaneously by black women, and therefore cannot be separated (p. 16). Setting the foundation of identity politics that Crenshaw would later build on, these feminist women recognized the interlocking nature of oppression in black women’s lives. In her collection of essays and speeches, *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde (1984) furthered the concept by encouraging an acknowledgment, rather than a dismissal of differences among women, including age, race, class, and sexuality.

Intersectionality theory is particularly prevalent for black women because of their multiple and simultaneous experiences of gender and race oppression which is oftentimes

joined by additional factors of discrimination. Never separated, race and gender are inextricably linked oppressions that influence the daily lives and lived experiences of black women. In addition to race and gender, however, additional identity factors contribute to a black woman's experience of oppression, leading to a multiplicity of oppression (Beale, 1970; Combahee River Collective, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 1983; Lorde, 1984). Deborah King (1995) explained multiple jeopardy in the following way: "Multiple refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but also to the multiplicative relationships among them. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism" (p. 297).

Collectively, these works by and for black women feminists (Beale, 1970; Combahee River Collective, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 1983; Lorde, 1984) are invested in the fact that black women, unlike white women, face discrimination and oppression from multiple sides—their race, gender, social class, and sexuality meet together forming interlocking or interrelated oppression in black women's lives, leading to silenced and muted voices.

### *Muted Group Theory*

A final theory that can be applied to the lives and study of black women is muted group theory. Muted group theory attempts to represent nondominant or marginalized groups whose voices and experiences often are overlooked or silenced. Initially rooted in anthropological investigations of women (Ardener, S., 1978) and later applied to the discipline of communication (Kramarae, 1981; Orbe, 1998), muted group theory reflects the suppression of thought and silencing of black women's voices and experiences that Patricia Hill Collins outlines in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990, 2000). In a summary of

the theory, Cris Kramarae (2005) says, “muted group theory suggests that people attached or assigned to subordinate groups may have a lot to say, but they tend to have relatively little power to say it without getting into a lot of trouble. Their speech is disrespected by those in the dominant positions; their knowledge is not considered sufficient for public decision-making or policy making processes of that culture; their experiences are interpreted for them by others; and they are encouraged to see themselves as represented in the dominant discourse” (p. 55).

Muted group theory states that dominant groups determine how (or if) the experiences of non-dominant groups are communicated. Julia T. Wood (2005) identifies connections and distinctions between muted group theory and feminist standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint theory, like black feminist thought, “begins with the material conditions of women’s lives” (Wood, 2005, p. 61). However, feminist standpoint theory is focused on distinguishing women’s lives from men’s lives and does not specifically account for race.

Mark Orbe’s (1998) application of muted group theory in the lives of marginalized groups examines power dynamics and how they are translated into communication practices. Co-cultural theory “originates from the lived experiences of persons usually marginalized in traditional research and theory. . .and reveals the common practices of those persons traditionally muted in dominant societal structures” (Orbe, 1998, pp. 122-23). Orbe identifies muted group theory as a foundational starting place for “theorizing from the margins” (Orbe, 2005, pp. 65-66).

### *Meeting at the Margins*

Any discussion of black women should include a discussion of difference within the lives of women (Lorde, 1984) and the “simultaneity of oppressions” (Combahee River Collective, 1982; Smith, 1983) they encounter. Black feminist thought, womanist theory, intersectionality theory and muted group theory compliment each other as ways of viewing, understanding, framing and discussing the lived experiences of African American women and the places where their experiences collide and diverge. For decades black women have relied on their lives to make sense of the world. Their unnamed theories and often unheard voices not only legitimate their experiences as sites of knowledge but privileges their sensemaking capabilities for strategizing and analyzing their lives.

There are experiences common to all African Americans (Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003) and specific to African American women (Collins, 2000), but black women are not a homogenous group. Collectively African American women are haunted by ubiquitous stereotypes and generalizations that limit them to being seen as mammy or jezebel in historical and contemporary versions (Collins, 2000, 2004). It is, however, not only a misrepresentation but a lack of representation of rural black women that has inspired this research study. My study offers a representation of rural black women that was not romanticized or watered down—but also not exploitative or stereotypical. These women’s lives are generalizable to the extent that all black women share a history of slavery, racism, sexism and classism--yet they are particular to the women being studied. In addition, as the stories will demonstrate, rural black women’s lives are impacted by

personal choices, background, rearing, race and racism, colorism, gender, class, education and religion.

### *Conclusion*

“Black women are knowledgeable recorders of their history and experiences and have a stake in faithfully telling their own stories,” but are seldom given the opportunity (Bobo, 1995, p 36). When others speak on their behalf, black women are presented as predictable and one-dimensional. The purpose of this study is not to dismiss or challenge the important contributions that have been made about black women, but to introduce an in-depth story and analysis of the day-to-day lived realities of rural black women by emphasizing the private dimensions of their lives and using their own vernacular.

In the next chapter, I describe the methods used to collect, investigate, transcribe and story the lives of research participants. In addition to outlining and explaining my methodological choices, I also identify ethical issues of being an insider/outsider and the decisions made in transcribing interviews and fieldnotes into stories and poetry.

## Chapter Two:

### Collecting Myself: Fieldwork, Storytelling & Autoethnography

#### *Introduction*

The setting for my study of black women who live in the south is Sweetwater, a small town in North Carolina where I spent my first 22 years. In this chapter I offer demographic and historical information about the research site, describe the methods and procedures I used to investigate and interpret the lives of black women, outline my research design and collection procedures as strategies for gathering information, and explain the use of autoethnography, poetry and story as methods of inquiry and representation. I end the chapter with a memory of my life as a child in Sweetwater and my return home (emergence in the field) as a researcher. My reflection transitions to the next chapters of narratives, which focus on the day-to-day lived experiences of participants.

#### *Dead-Ends & Intersections*

Sweetwater, North Carolina is an agricultural and rural community located about thirty miles south of the state capital and fifteen minutes from the county seat (Hadley, Horton & Strowd, 1992; Harrell, Harris, McIntire & Rogers, 1999). Nestled in the “heart of North Carolina,” its picturesque landscape includes riverbanks, rhododendrons, laurels, honeysuckles, dogwood trees, mulberry trees, and white pines. A rural community of mostly cousins, some double kin, Sweetwater includes surrounding

villages that have Sweetwater addresses but separate community networks. The community is known for old time remedies and religion (Herb healing can keep a family together; Payne-Jackson & Lee, 1994; Wilson, 1983).

As an unincorporated town (Bass, 2005; Goodson, 1996b), population<sup>9</sup> and city limits information for Sweetwater are obscure (Wachs, 1995). When asked, residents were unable to say exactly where Sweetwater begins and ends but they shared a common idea of “where about” Sweetwater territory was located based on their own estimations and assumptions from having lived in the area all of their lives. Most agree, however, that if you travel more than five minutes in any direction you are no longer in Sweetwater.

For some, Sweetwater is centered by uncultivated family land and dead-end roads with cemeteries of unmarked graves and green signs named after a respected family or church members. For others, Sweetwater starts at the intersection of backroads and backwoods where historical landmarks reminiscent of a former downtown (which include the old post office, bank, funeral home and dry cleaners) now dead-ends at dilapidated railroad tracks and ancient homes. For still others, Sweetwater starts on Sweetwater Road, just beyond the chicken plant and then travels both ways about two miles at the dead-end intersection where the community formerly (as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century) split into separate towns. Still others remarked on Sweetwater being divided where Haw and Deep Rivers meet (see Hairr, 1999).

Archival research and newspaper clippings tell the story of Sweetwater as a community that once thrived on possibilities (Adickes, 1950; Daniels, 2002; Gilmore,

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<sup>9</sup> In 1950, the approximate population of Sweetwater was 250 citizens ([Sweetwater] Welcomes Children, *The News & Observer*, Jan 1, 1950).

1950; Goodson, 1996a; Hadley et al., 1992; Harrell et al., 1999). According to newspaper articles and historical documents<sup>10</sup> the town of Sweetwater and adjoining communities were well populated and the center of riverboat and shipping traffic well into the 1850s but experienced a decline as river transportation fell out of use (Hairr, 1999; Harrell et al., 1999). Eventually the small adjacent towns joined into what is now known as Sweetwater (Hadley et al., 1992; Harrell et al., 1999).

*Mirror Images: Rural Black Women Share Their Stories*

Images of rural black womanhood flash before my consciousness

as women with deep and tired eyes,

seeing through me and into the crevices of my soul,

seeing past me and beyond my awareness of what

true lack

and

want

and

pain

feel like.

Looking back at themselves,

because in their eyes,

a reflection of me

is a reflection of them.

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<sup>10</sup> Chatham News & Record (April 25, 1996) and Chatham County 1771-1971

It is hard for me to see myself in these images. The creases in her forehead, permanent like cracks in dried concrete. Her colorless lips and malleable skin the color of burned butter. Her toothless grin, close-mouthed and humble in a way that makes me wonder what my life would be like if I were in her body, what I would feel like if my hands ached from toiling land and taking care of other folks' children, minding and loving everyone else more than myself. Her body is a site of evidence, showcasing pain, intrusion, and loss. Her clothes, heavy and loose, fall off a well-fed frame, making her unsexy and unfeminine. Her hands, slightly arthritic and curved, are tired hands. Her face, beautiful and delicate, is timeless.

Scars hide beneath the folds of her stomach and she swears she can feel her heartbeat there, right above her navel, where her tits reside because too many children and too many men pulled on her like her skin was elastic. She warns me, with her eyes not with her words, to not allow myself to get pulled on.

I can see her in my mind and I love her and fear her, reverence her and admire her. I want to be like her but not be her. Her strong parts I envy in my weakness, yet her flaws and forced choices leave me feeling confused, resentful, and sometimes judgmental.

When I look in the mirror, the image of me that stares back is unremarkable<sup>11</sup> and I see rural black womanhood looking back at me, her eyes longing to tell me something her lips won't speak.

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<sup>11</sup> The unremarkable image I reference here refers to both how the masses interpret rural black womanhood, which is evidenced in the minimal representations and tributes to her; and to how rural black women come to view themselves (myself included). Many of the women I interviewed questioned my project, not finding anything "remarkable" or extraordinary about their lives that would justify the telling. This sentiment is shared in previous literature on rural black women where the participants were unable to see

They—rural southern black women and I—sat down for interviews and I began the process by explaining the significance of my research, going over IRB documents, and expressing my gratitude for their willingness to participate. I watched them half listen to me, seemingly anxious to get on with the telling part. They sat patiently, watching my mouth tell them the logistics of my study, my devotion to their privacy, my commitment to providing them with a copy of their story. They watched and waited for my mouth to stop moving and then they scribbled their names on the signature line of the consent form. Though I had followed many of them, with my eyes and feet, around their houses, yards, and across kitchen tables, the “formal” interview began with suspicion. Their eyes moved from me, to the pages of questions and notes placed in front of me, to the digital recorder sitting between us like an intentional divider, separating our sameness.

Sometimes it would take a while for them to speak after the first question, when I asked them to introduce themselves, tell me broadly about their family and background.

One woman watched for the red light on the recorder and at its urging sat up straighter, looked forward and spoke with an eloquence and deliberate tone that implied she was being both visually and audibly recorded by the tiny device and its red eye. When I suggested a more “authentic” stance she relaxed back into a comfortable slump, and relaxed her body, only occasionally, as if on cue, sitting up and looking ahead as she recalled her story. Continuously aware of the recorder, she used her

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their experiences or their lives as sites of knowledge or significance beyond themselves (see Bambara, 1970; Collins, 2000; Smith, 1983; Stack, 1974; Walker, 1983; Wilson, 1983).

“telephone/work/white” voice to continue our conversation. She seemed anxious to answer questions correctly and cautious to answer questions discreetly.

Another woman spoke more freely. I went to her as she was waking from a nap and lay down next to her and she told me about her life and her memories of growing up in Sweetwater like we were remembering together. She described the peaches her father snuck home in his pockets from his job at the hospital cafeteria and how delicious the peaches tasted, how happy she always was to see him, and how odd she felt to have that specific and vivid memory.

Another woman sat across from me with the plate of food she offered upon my arrival sitting before me, getting cold, as she watched me take small bites, chew, and listen. I had already eaten before my arrival but as a native of the country I knew she would be offended if I refused the food she had prepared. My plate was an assortment of orange, green, yellow and white: Yams, cabbage, corn, and pork.

Still another participant sat in a comfortable chair watching me watch her, crossing her legs, investigating my responses to her responses and apologizing for a ringing phone that frequently interrupted her telling.

Others were intimidated, changed by the recorder, watching it curiously, suspiciously, and saying very little when the recorder was on. One woman seemed paralyzed by the formality of the recorder. When it was not in sight, she would bless me with language and stories that spoke of her experiences and her power, singing to me like a beautiful song she made up as she went along. I would stop her, tell her to wait, pause, while I get the recorder. But the recorder would silence her again. Its presence somehow stole her voice and ability to speak. I realized that, with her, I had to record our

conversations, her stories, in my head. I had to force myself to remember them, to encrypt them on the crevices of my mind until I could steal away and jot down her lines. This seemed to make her more comfortable, though I have no way of knowing if she realized that when I was “observing” her, I was “recording” her.

The first time the recorder faded into the background was when I interviewed a group of women—family members—who remembered together, layering their voices and memories on top of one another for me to sort through. I tried to take notes but their expressions and presence distracted me. I watched as they remembered together and reminded each other and laughed about things that used to make them cry. Their voices competed, struggled, as if the person who said it the loudest or who spoke last was telling the greater truth. Their voices began to merge and I knew it would be difficult to distinguish them later, impossible to separate them when transcribing. I realized that not only could I not hear them but they couldn’t hear each other. They were speaking to hear themselves speak; they were speaking to hear their own story, spoken out loud, against the others. It became clear to me that as characters of each other’s stories and witnesses to each other’s lives they understood the unspoken things that I was trying to interpret and I could not “get” it all because I hadn’t been there, perhaps wasn’t really there while they were speaking. But being in their presence during their remembering helped me to recognize the significance of their corporate exchange, which was less about what they were remembering and saying and more about how they were remembering and sharing, together. They were speaking and sharing their legacy and I was hearing and inheriting it.

### *Collecting Data*

Sweetwater, North Carolina provides the context for the study for a number of reasons. First, it is a town I am familiar with and I have access to the women there. Second, Sweetwater has an interesting political history and legacy of slavery and racism that is embedded in the life stories of its residents<sup>12</sup> (Daniels, 2002; Goodson 1996a; 1996b; Hadley et al., 1992; Harrell et al., 1999; Payne-Jackson & Lee, 1993; Rogers, 1974; Wilson, 1983). At one time considered as a location for the state capital and University of North Carolina, Sweetwater is known as a town of un-reached potential. Many interviewees boasted proudly about how their town, the second oldest in the county, was considered as a potential location for the state capital in 1788 and lost by only one vote (Goodson, 1996a; Hadley et al., 1992; Harrell et al., 1999). A second opportunity for notoriety came in 1792 when Sweetwater was named a potential site for the first state university, but lost to Chapel Hill (Goodson, 1996a; Hadley et al., 1992; Harrell et al., 1999).

There is still evidence of slavery and segregation in the community. Land ownership and churches are still separated by race, though the one school in the community, Sweetwater Elementary, is now attended by all children in the community<sup>13</sup>. Participants mentioned, during interviews, segregated schools, separate entrances, and unfair laws for black people prior to the Civil Rights Movement. My aunt remembered hearing that something Martin Luther King did (she did not specify) made it so that black

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<sup>12</sup> At one time considered as a location for the state capital and University of North Carolina, Sweetwater is known as a town of possibilities. The town remains somewhat segregated based on the separation of races and influence of slavery. Currently, however, class, education, and age divisions are the most visible markers of difference and separation in the community.

<sup>13</sup> Sweetwater Elementary provides education from kindergarten through the eighth grade. Students must travel 10 miles to a neighboring town to attend high school.

people could walk through the front door of white stores and restaurants, instead of going to a window in the back. She remembers how proud and defiant she felt when she, alongside some of her friends, went to a local store together so they could be served with the white folks. This same aunt never had a white classmate<sup>14</sup>.

Third, Sweetwater is a small town where it is possible to get different versions of the same stories told by different people. People know each other so it works to get multiple perspectives. Finally, Sweetwater has been a site of research for academic and archival studies in the past so life there has been documented and this documentation will serve as points of comparison for my study<sup>15</sup>.

This dissertation is a result of listening, watching, seeing, witnessing, talking, remembering, and living. Zora Neale Hurston says that “research is a formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with purpose” (Walker, 1979, p. 49). I poked and pried by using various methods including ethnography, autoethnography, participant observation, interactive interviewing, informal focus groups, and traditional archival research to collect stories and other information about the community. I interacted with participants and joined them in their various daily activities during the summer months of 2006, holidays, vacations and various trips to the research site from 2006 through the spring of 2008. I did extensive observation during events where the extended and immediate family joined to reminisce and tell shared stories about their experiences. This happened particularly during Christmas and New Year’s gatherings in 2006 and 2007, a 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration for my mother in 2006, a birthday celebration for my

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<sup>14</sup> She graduated from high school before integration was enforced.

<sup>15</sup> See Harrell, Harris, McIntire & Rogers (1999), Hadley, Horton & Strowd (1992) and Wilson (1983).

grandmother in 2006 (where attendees were invited to share a memory of growing up), and following Sunday dinners.

I participated as an insider in the community—attending church services, going to the store and post office, picking up children from school, visiting the homes of community members, sitting on the porch and having conversations with passers-by, watching the local news and soap operas so as to have a foundation for common conversations among the women, and witnessing gossip and woman talk between women in much the same way I did as a child (though now I joined the conversation instead of interrupting it). I went about my normal routine during visits home, only this time with more open eyes. Because I was “Bread’s daughter,” back home to “do research” for school, no one seemed to be distracted by my presence or bothered by my questions.

Given my interest and curiosity about the lives of rural black women, I began by reviewing research, novels, and films on rural black women in the south<sup>16</sup> and conducting archival and historical research of the site. At the county library, I uncovered archives of old newspaper articles, census reports, history books, maps, research studies and community diagnoses facilitated by graduate students at a nearby university, transcribed narratives and lectures given by community historians for the Historical Society, and pamphlets and brochures that highlighted places of interest in the county. During interviews I was given wedding and funeral programs, bookmarks, pictures, church directories, tributes and books written about the community and/or affluent members of

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<sup>16</sup> In particular I read and viewed film versions of Maya Angelou’s (1993) memoir *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, Alice Walker’s (1982) novel *The Color Purple*, and Zora Neale Hurston’s (1990b) *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

the community. Within a few weeks of being in the field I began to make arrangements to begin formal interviewing procedures.

### *Conducting Interviews*

I aspired to conduct conversation-based research that encouraged participants to share their stories openly. The interviewing was sometimes unstructured and informal. They told. I listened. They spoke. I wrote. At other times I shared my own stories and memories of growing up in Sweetwater at which point our voices and experiences came together during the interviews—making them relaxed and interactive. It was in those moments they realized (or remembered) that I was one of them.

Interactive interviews encourage a reciprocal exchange between the researcher and the participant that closes the hierarchal gap and encourages dialogue, mutual investment, engagement and vulnerability (Ellis & Berger, 2001; Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). This method of interviewing proved beneficial because it allowed me, a rural black woman myself, to connect with the participants and identify places of commonality between our experiences during the interview process (Anderson & Jack, 1991).

I began with my family, recording in their own words their memories of growing up in Sweetwater and concentrating on their experiences as Black women in the community. I also brought people together in groups to observe their interactions. I observed what people said and did and how they interacted together, making note of how I perceived the interactions and what effects they had on me as a researcher.

Interviews were conducted in the homes of participants, in cars during brief trips, over the telephone, and while on long walks. Most of the interviews were one-on-one

though there were some occasions when two or more participants were involved in a single exchange. The interviews ranged in time from one hour to four hours each. Each first interview began with the same prompting. After explaining the purpose of my research project and asking participants to sign an informed consent form, I asked the women to tell me about their family background, education, occupation, and other information about parents, grandparents, and forebears. Beginning there, each woman shared what she remembered, careful and cautious at times to hold on to parts of her life story that she had perhaps never said out loud. The stories they shared and the experiences they revealed uncovered realities of their lives ranging from the everyday mundane to the extraordinary. Subsequent interviews usually picked up where the earlier ones left off, allowing participants to reflect on what they had previously shared, incorporate details they may have remembered since our last meeting and elaborate on starting points introduced in earlier exchanges.

Interviewees included ten women (myself included) who were raised in Sweetwater or currently reside there<sup>17</sup>. The ages of participants ranged from 27 to 95 at the time of the study. The current economic situations for the participants varied according to their occupations and livelihoods. As a student, my income was taken from student loans and scholarships while another participant was fully economically independent having secured a “good-paying” and professional job after graduating from college. Only three of the women were currently married and living with their husbands on whom they were mutually and financially dependent while the two older women, widows and retired, relied on social security, savings, inherited money and the assistance

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<sup>17</sup> Participants who did not currently live in Sweetwater live within 15 minutes of the research site.

of family members if and when needed to make do. Another participant, retired from working for the state for twenty years, collects disability and joins her income with two of her children who all share household expenses of the trailer they all live in.

As for education, two participants did not complete high school, four are high school graduates, two are college graduates, and one attended college though did not complete a degree. I am currently finishing a Ph.D.

Some of the most useful interviews were unscheduled and spontaneous (sometimes with unsolicited participants in passing). Following these conversations and observations I would jot down notes as soon as possible after they happened (since audio recording was either impossible and unavailable or inappropriate given the circumstances. For example, it would have disrupted the story and/or sharing if I asked a participant to pause while I went to get the tape recorder).

Information was not gathered exclusively from interviews, however. In addition to conversations with participants I also immersed myself into their everyday lives (Geertz, 1973).

### *Participant Observation*

I initially returned to Sweetwater for the purpose of participant observation research during the summer of 2006 (after having been away for ten years) and resided there to re-acquaint myself with the community culture and members. My complicated relationship to Sweetwater made it an interesting research site. I became a character during my research, re-adopting, re-learning and re-remembering what it meant to live in the community full-time. I had to immerse myself in the experience while at the same time observing and recording, and negotiating my inevitable exit.

I had to earn their trust. Coming home was not enough because I re-entered the community different from who I was when I left it. I was different. A familiar stranger. Black, smart and successful by society's standards but somewhat unrecognizable to my kin. The environment I grew up in had limited my expectations because most people don't expect a Sweetwateran to value education. The poverty mentality often led to visions of success not usually extending beyond graduating high school, getting married, having children, and securing a job that allowed you to sit at a desk. I was not like them and my leaving was somewhat of a betrayal, my return somewhat of a mystery.

When Carolyn Leste Law (1995) ponders the impact her academic pursuits had on her working class roots she quotes her mother saying, "Education destroys something" (Dews & Law, 1995, p. 1). I was never more aware of that loss than when I returned to Sweetwater as a researcher. The duality of my role as a community member of the working-class environment in which I was raised and as a scholar in the middle-class, educated and white circles I grew up being suspicious of, exposed my vulnerability and inability to adequately or neatly fit in either role. Education had indeed destroyed something in me while at the same time creating prospects for a "better" life. Education had created a bridge to opportunities I had never imagined growing up in Sweetwater while simultaneously degenerating the once concrete relationship I had with my home community.

I found it difficult to be fully detached as a scholar or participant. My relationship with the community, prior to my research and return as an involved participant, clouded my judgment and my perspective. My problematic role is what Kenneth Clark (1965) describes as an "involved observer," a position that is complicated by a researcher's

simultaneous role as a member of the community being studied and a witness. He discusses the implausibility and difficulty of maintaining the role of distant spectator and implicated participant saying, “He [the involved observer] must be exposed at the same time that he seeks to protect himself and to protect his role of observer. He must run the risk of personal attacks, disappointments, personal hurts and frustrations, at the same time that he maintains a disciplined preoccupation with his primary goal of understanding” (Clark, 1965, p. xxx). Clark’s (1965) ‘involved observer’ is similar to the participant observer in that both roles require an immersion into the culture. However, the involved observer not only requires participation in the rituals of the community but also in the social competitions at play within the community.

I was different. I talked different. I looked different. I acted different. I was all in all different. I had been sent to school so that I could have a better life but no one had really calculated what my ambition would mean and how it would translate to our nonacademic lives. During the first few weeks of my research when I would see members of the community for the first time in a long time they often looked at me curiously, studying my face and sighing in disbelief. “You are so different,” they would say. Their words would merge with recollections of me being a barefoot child running around with uncombed hair and sad eyes. I was not that little girl anymore. Or memories of me reciting Christmas speeches in front of the church congregation at the holiday program, saying how they knew, even then, that I was going to be somebody, with the whitegirl way I said words, sounding important. I was not that little girl anymore.

People I didn’t recognize, mostly women my mother’s age, would stop me at the

mini grocer or post office to comment on how “pretty” I had gotten and how much I “look just like my mama.”

“You still in school?” A woman wearing a head scarf and wrinkled jeans asked as we passed each other coming in and out of the post office door.

“Yes ma’am.” I did not recognize her face but her voice was familiar.

“That’s good, that’s good,” she said smiling, genuinely proud but likely confused about what I was still doing in school. She took a few steps away from me and looked back briefly, “with your pretty self!”

“Thank you,” I said walking through the door feeling awkward and confused. No one ever asked me what I went to school for, what I want to be when it is over. When they say “Robin is in school getting her doctoring degree,” they don’t know what I do or why, outside of writing and telling stories which I have done all my life. My grandmother told me that all of that learning I do would make her head hurt.

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*I remember sitting in classrooms with colleagues who envied my barefoot on red mud roots because of the exotic stories I told of shame, pain, lack and loss—because of the specificity with which I could call out stories of my rural working class upbringing. It was the first time someone had wanted to trade places with me and I resented the place of privilege from which they stated their envy—able to be a voyeur of my experiences, possibly feeling sorry for me, wanting a temporary taste of poor-little-black-girl living with which to color their lives and perhaps their own whitewashed voices. They were co-opting my experience as if it was somehow glamorous or romantic to have been a poor black country girl—and I had to consider the ways in which I was just like them—an*

*academic using unfamiliar stories about a marginalized group to further my own agenda, my own goals. That would not be the only time I felt like a traitor.*

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The difference the people in my community comment about had more to do with how I had physically grown up than who I had intellectually become. I realized, however, that an acknowledgment of the other ways I had changed would have made us uneasy. My education, more so than my leaving, is what divided us the most. My accomplishments left me feeling both proud and ashamed.

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Once the “official” research and data collection was completed, I continued to gather notes and make observations during subsequent visits home to the community. During later visits, however, I began to focus more on my personal relationship to the community, the characters, and my personal feelings about my identity and surroundings<sup>18</sup>.

I felt that traditional methods and procedures of data collection would fail to contribute to a view of the day-to-day realities these women experience. I was disinterested in a demographic or quantitative analysis of rural black women’s lives but rather wanted an intimate portrait of their everyday lived experiences. I felt that in order to compile and present their lives as stories I would need to collect their lives as stories. I was interested in learning how they understood and resolved conflicts in their daily lives and how they negotiated their relationships in the midst of poverty, joblessness, educational and gender inequalities, alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, and abandonment.

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<sup>18</sup> This is detailed in the autoethnography section of this chapter.

The women did not focus on themes as they spoke (though I was able to later recognize and identify themes from their stories) but rather concentrated on their memories, thinking backwards and talking forwards, telling me about their memories while also sharing their hopes for the future. It seemed to help them to view their lives as a story, the telling of which helped them make sense of their experiences. I was writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000) while they were telling as a method of understanding.

During the writing stage I listened to and transcribed recorded interviews, reviewed field and journal notes, wrote personal narratives from memory and translated the interviews into poetry and short stories. I felt that by writing stories it would give the participants an opportunity to participate in the process beyond being interviewed. By telling stories, to which they would later respond, I was making their lives, framed academically, accessible to them. The poetry-- a way of mimicking their way with words and the lyrical ease with which they told their lives in their native language--celebrated slang and sarcasm hanging heavy on their tongues like echoes off of hollow walls.

### *The Call of Stories and the Pull of Poetry*

Stories and storytelling are the foundation of qualitative research (Banks-Wallace, 2002) and a way of writing self-visibility (Bell-Scott, 1994). As we are engaged in our daily living we rarely think of ourselves as storytellers or poets but when we communicate our experiences they are translated in unintentional rhythms, storylines, and harmonies. As I listened to black women articulate their lives, their voices came to me in poetic phrases and lyrical lines. Our everyday speech is closer to poetry than academic

prose (Richardson, 1997, p. 142). I chose to present my research through creative writing and poetry in order to tell their lives with the hidden meanings layered between and beneath their words. Poetry combines emotional and intellectual efforts (Richardson, 1997, p. 166) and “acts as an embodied translation to lived experience. . .honor[ing] the voices that contribute to the project while allowing the voice of the author to contribute without disruption” (Boylorn, 2006, p. 652-653).

Valerie Borum (2006) developed poetic prose as a qualitative technique that interweaves voices paralleling the emotionality and intentionality implicit in the oral history of African Americans and the narrative exchanges of black women. Borum explains through her research how poetic prose offers the reader permission to enter the world of African American women and understand their worldview by viewing the world through their eyes (p. 341). Essentially when representing an oral, poetic culture it is best to do so orally and poetically. The authentic representation of life as lived and language as spoken creates a space for creativity and uncovering multiple meanings.

Poetry pushes the writer to read between the lines and color outside the lines. Poetry tempts theory to seek possibilities beyond concrete explanations by respecting and acknowledging the metaphorical meanings often locked in words. Poetry offers an opportunity to coalesce feelings (poetry) and thinking (theory), joining emotions with ways of knowing, imagination with insight. Because my particular perspective is grounded in my black woman-ness and my rural-ness the best way I found to articulate that intersection is through poetry.

Audre Lorde (1984) states that “poetry is not a luxury. . .it is a vital necessity of our existence” (p. 37). As a writer and rural black woman scholar poetry is a necessity

for survival. I write poetry to make sense of my life and to make my life make sense. By serving as a way of exchanging truths and honoring voices, poetry makes it possible for me to share my experiences of surviving with others. “Survival is not an academic skill,” as Audre Lorde (1984, p. 112) has stated, but rather a learned trait. The participants who demonstrated this survival were sometimes silent, sometimes screaming, and sometimes crying with their deep voices from deep places in desperation and repetition. They did not know they were speaking poetry. They did not realize they were forming theory.

In an introduction to *Sister Outsider*, Nancy K. Bereano (Lorde, 1984) articulates the assumed conflict between poetry and theory:

We have been told that poetry expresses what we feel, and theory states what we know; that the poet creates out of the heat of the moment, while the theorist’s mode is, of necessity, cool and reasoned; that one is art and therefore experienced ‘subjectively,’ and the other is scholarship, held accountable in the ‘objective’ world of ideas. We have been told that poetry has a soul and theory has a mind and that we have to choose between them (Lorde, 1984, p. 8).

I have found, however, that in much the same way that storying is a form of theorizing, so too is poetry. Poetry enables the researcher to give voice to the marginalized realities of participants’ lives, therefore making poetry personal, political and theoretical.

Additionally poetry deepens our understanding of the world by urging us to see the world both subjectively, from our own standpoint, and introspectively, self-examining our own lives in response to the life being presented. Poetry allows writers to place lived experience and emotions, uncontaminated by the weight of jargon, at the center of

research, therefore deepening our understanding of participants (in my case black women's) lives. Writing from the dailiness of life poetry speaks to and from—representing life as lived.

There are consequences, however, to pursuing unconventional representations of research. When defending her decision to write an interview as a poem, Laurel Richardson (1997) explained the importance of giving a representation of participants' lives close to their lived experience. For me this means scholarly jargon or dispassionate prose would relinquish the voices and contaminate the experiences of the black women in my study, making them unrecognizable. It would be useless and futile to collect their experiences with the hope of magnifying and centering their lives if they themselves could not benefit from or translate the meaning. If the text was written in such a way that they could not or would not want to read their own stories, what would be the point?

Poetic representations of research make research findings more accessible to a variety of audiences and fit well within a womanist framework (Hill, 2005), in that Black women are members of an oral culture that values creative expression. Poetry provides readers with a window into how characters feel, and summarizes the essence of events and experiences that many of us may have lived at some point in our lives (Hill, 2005). Further, narrative poetry compels readers to become emotionally invested and involved in the research (Austin, 1995; Clarke, 1983). Storytelling has a similar effect.

### *Transcribing Stories*

The stories emphasize the themes identified in the interviews. By making the participants narrators of their own experience, I focused on their communication choices and selection of words. I found a way to honor and maintain the words they used to

describe their lives by writing stories based on the situations and circumstances they shared, using (when possible) their word-for-word accounts in the re-telling. For example, I created scenes and setting based on the specificity of their memory and the details shared in interviews. I closed my eyes as I listened to the taped interviews, remembering with the women the texture of furniture, the smell of wood, the sound of fury, and the feelings of shame. As a writer and researcher, I was empathic to their stories and transferred that emotion into narratives that I would later analyze. I wanted to think “with” the stories as well as “about” them (Frank, 1995).

The stories shift between a third-person omniscient perspective that allows me, as the narrator, to have access into the private thoughts and hidden events of characters and a first person account that offers me the opportunity to talk back to the stories. The stories show how the participants talk to each other, and into a tape recorder, about their lives.

Stories resemble our lives as lived. Like theories, stories are generalizable and can be used to make comparisons and identify commonalities (Koch, 1998). Stories lend themselves to theories about living. Feminist theory, for example, is grounded in women’s experiences, allowing women to theorize about their lives by telling the stories of their lives. Particularly in my research project of studying black women, stories were useful data because the participants often were more comfortable sharing stories than they were answering questions. The storytelling was an opportunity for us to connect and get to know each other based on experiences that were familiar and resonant.

Black women communicate with each other in peculiar ways, using storytelling as a method of inquiring and telling about their lives. Marcia Ann Gillespie describes the naked talk that occurs when black women share stories with each other:

Unedited, uncensored womantalk. Earthily sexual, downright raunchy sometimes. Other times a bearing of wounds and hurts that have lain festering for too long: Spiritual boils in need of lancing. Tears too long damned. Feelings of shame and blame, of inadequacy, of frustration and rage. Unveilings of secret joys, forbidden pleasures, unresolved mysteries, and hidden dreams (Bell-Scott, 1994, p. 13).

The stories I collected and later translated inspired me to write my own story of being a rural black woman. After carefully writing about the extraordinary and mundane events of rural black women's lives that intersected in their memory sometimes with specificity and oftentimes with a lack of clarity I realized that it was the everyday experiences that most influenced their lives. The struggles. The sacrifices. The loneliness. Participants would mostly recall an out-of-the-ordinary event but would suddenly interrupt the story with a random recollection. For example, one woman's interview suddenly transitioned from a story about playing with her siblings, to the taste of sweet dirt, and then about the one time her father took her to the store with him and she had him all to herself. These memories were given alongside stories of violence and feeling abandoned.

By the time I had written the third story from interviews I realized that writing their life was writing my own, and my voice, abstract and poetic, felt a need to intervene. While I saw myself in their words and heard myself in their voices, my own story was

begging to be told. I understood, from previous autobiographical writings, that there is liberation associated with speaking from my gut and telling my truth. Like an absence waiting, words came to my rescue, luring me to write my own version of growing up in Sweetwater. I realized that my own story would contribute an important perspective to the study.

### *Telling Stories*

I interviewed myself.

The stories I wrote did not come easily or naturally. There were competing stories, competing versions, competing parts of me that struggled to emerge as I began to ask myself questions about my life in Sweetwater. Autoethnography had never been such a difficult strategy for coming to terms with who I was. The goal of my project was to look at rural black women's lives and to try to understand them. A byproduct, by necessity, was that I came to understand myself better.

In an early version of the manuscript I wrote about my life in the third person, distancing myself from my memories of growing up a rural black girl. I realized, however, that the disconnection between my history and present was not nearly as uncomplicated as I had originally thought. I could not separate who I was from who I am. The pseudonym I used to represent myself in the story, Bird, became another voice in my head, another person I was talking to and about, whose experiences seemed interconnected with mine. Bird came to represent who I am when I am at home and at ease with myself. The distinctions between Bird and Robin were not as enormous as I thought.

At first I found it difficult to separate my “country” self from my “scholarly” self and later, as I revised drafts and owned my story (replacing “she” with “I” in the text) I realized that the two selves are not distinguishable. I am who I am because of who I was. There is no difference. I am a rural, black girl. I share those sensibilities. Those instincts. I am also an educated black woman who has moved away from the country. I can be both selves simultaneously. Bird is me as a child. Robin is me as an adult. Bird had dreams. Robin fulfilled those dreams. Bird was stuck. Robin found a way of escape. Both selves exist in the same body—have the same tired emotions, the same insecurities, the same history.

Once I merged my competing selves I was ready to write myself into the story.

### *Writing Myself Into the Story*

#### *Autoethnography*

Autoethnographies are autobiographical, multi-layered and introspective (Ellis, 2004a, 2004b; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Having already decided to allow myself and my voice to emerge through the process of writing, I realized that my presence in the field and my own relationship to the community would offer an important perspective to the project. Autoethnographies allow researchers to use the materials of their personal lives and lived experiences to explain how and why they interpret things the way they do (Goodall, 2004, p. 187). Turning the ethnographic gaze in on itself, I began to focus on my own experiences in Sweetwater, telling stories in the first-person, making my self, my memories, my feelings and behaviors a part of the story that was being told. Because of my changing and contradictory identity roles as researcher and researched (rural black woman) it became important for me to identify how my background in the community,

my relationships with the participants, and my feelings while in the field were influencing what I collected and how I interpreted information.

Further, as a black woman who is implicated by representations of black women (Boylorn, 2008) I felt it necessary to incorporate a method that held me accountable for my words and allowed my marginalized voice to speak. By including my (raced, classed, gendered) body in the research I was writing myself into visibility and therefore offering a counter-narrative to the stories and representations being offered by women still native to the community. Making myself the subject and object of the study required me to reflect on my experiences in the field as well as my everyday lived experiences outside of it.

### *Reflexivity*

Relying on the authority of their lived experience, black women offer a unique and necessary perspective to research about their lives. To be reflexive in the field is to return the look/gaze of a researcher on yourself (Pini, 2004). By engaging in reflexivity I acknowledged my position as a researcher in the field and worked the hyphens (Fine, 1994; Fine et al., 2000; Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008) between the participants' and my own lived experiences. I was conscious of our similarities and our differences. I continually considered my shifting identities and how they competed, connected, and contrasted with the participants (see Pini, 2004).

In traditional social science research, there is a clear distinction between the researcher and the researched. However, I could not separate my identity as a scholar, a rural black woman, and/or former member of the community. My presence in the field coupled with my pre-existing relationship with participants, my prior membership in the

community, my race, class and gender, all influenced the stories I was told and how I interpreted and analyzed them. The ethical implications of the project were plenteous.

### *Ethical Dilemmas*

As a researcher I took the role and responsibility of not only *speaking about* but *speaking for* the people I studied, which created a dual identity issue. Added to this complication was my blurred role as participant and author, ‘speaking with’ and ‘speaking as’. Straddling the fence between the black working class and academe allowed me to look in both directions as an insider/outsider (see LaPaglia, 1995, p. 185). It was important to me to consider the potential consequences and weight of my words, which led to dozens of drafts, re-writes, and self-edits.

I considered various questions throughout the research process. For example, would my membership in both communities (as a researcher and an insider) compromise the integrity of the project? How would my prior knowledge of the community and participants influence data collection and findings? For example, would they assume that I already know some things and not share certain information? Did their silence about certain things mean they did not want me to tell? How would my familiarity with the culture affect my ability to see? Were there important and relevant factors that only an outsider would recognize that I would overlook as an insider? Would my portrayals and interpretations of rural black women perpetuate stereotypes rather than challenge them and in a sense do more harm than good? As a researcher and as a black woman I had to reconcile how to conduct ethical and reliable research as an insider/outsider. I turned to what other researchers had to say about this topic.

*Insider/Outsiders and “Outsiders Within”*

The controversy surrounding who is most qualified to conduct research on minority groups has been debated for over three decades (Collins, 1986; Merton, 1972; Zinn, 1979) and is often connected to who “belongs.” In the 1960’s and 1970’s there was an argument, among some black scholars, that white scholars should not be allowed to conduct research in white communities because of their inability to understand black realities (see Zinn, 1979). In response, Robert Merton (1972) critiqued the exclusive knowledge of insiders related to accessibility. In his overview of insider/outsider knowledge he critiques the idea of the monopolistic knowledge of insiders and identifies that while insiders may have insight that is obscure to others, outsiders offer an unprejudiced perspective due to their nonmembership in the group.

Collins (1986) focuses on the marginality of black women in sociological research, positioning them as “outsiders-within.” According to Collins (1986), outsider-within status provides black women with “a special standpoint on self, family, and society” (p. S14). Outsiders within bring new ways of knowing to the research process, trusting their personal experiences as a significant source of knowledge. Collins (1986) identifies three benefits of outsider within status which include:

- 1) ‘objectivity’ as a peculiar composition of nearness and remoteness, concern and indifference<sup>19</sup>; 2) the tendency for people to confide in a “stranger” in ways that they never would with each other; and 3) the

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<sup>19</sup> This is taken from Simmel’s (1921) essay, “The sociological significance of the ‘stranger’.” Pp. 322-27 in R. E. Park & E. W. Burgess (Eds.), *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ability of the stranger to see patterns that may be more difficult for those immersed in the situation to see (p. S15).

Collins does not identify outsiders-within as exclusive insiders but rather says that they “no longer belong to any one group” (Collins, 1998, p. 5) and are caught in the vulnerable space between fitting in and not belonging. This ambiguous space can lead to interesting ethical conundrums regarding allegiances and commitments during research.

This conflict is not uncommon for black woman scholars who do research on black women. Joyce Ladner (1971), for example, discusses her multiple role as social scientist and black woman in her study of young black women coming of age. Ladner embraced her positionality as a black woman and a researcher but recognized that while she could not divorce herself from the problems of her participants, she could neither lose sight of her research purpose.

In addition to insider/outsider and outsider-within ethics I also had to consider the relational ethics of my project with the goal of protecting the participants and my relationships with them.

#### *The Ethics of Dual Roles*

My simultaneous role of researcher, rural black woman, and community and family member caused several ethical issues because of my insider status. Zinn (1979) warns that insiders are not free from problems when studying minority communities, stating in fact there are some dilemmas that are unique to insider research. For example, as an insider, I experienced some internal conflicts as I learned the details about participants' lives. My familial connection to them sometimes led to short-lived resentment and anger (on my part) for realizations I had during the data collection

process. I learned things that upset me or caused me to be upset with family members. I judged and resented some of their choices and felt deceived because of significant stories and family secrets I had never known about. In those moments of overlap I was forced out of my researcher self and into my rural black woman self. I was firmly committed to not letting information that I learned as a researcher affect my relationships with these women. Though it took some time and reflection I found a way to situate the new knowledge in my research and in my life without disrupting or damaging my relationships. Collecting and reflecting on their lived experiences without judgment became a conscious strategy for me while in the field. I had to treat them as I would have treated strangers, with empathy and understanding.

Second, because I was always there and my role shifted between being a researcher and simply being “home,” it was not always clear when I was “recording” our exchanges for research. It is possible that some conversations that were intended to be confidential between family members may have been taken in as research data and later incorporated into field notes (see Ellis 1995). As a participant observer who was fully immersed in the field, I was continually observant and oftentimes would ask permission before recording field notes about discussions that were not framed as interviews. As the research continued, the participants often joked with each other saying, “be careful what you say in front of Robin, it might end up in her book.” There were occasions, however, when participants would specifically ask me to leave certain things out of the research, which I did.

Third, because participants were characters in each others stories they oftentimes told each other’s secrets. Information I may not have gathered from one person would be

revealed in another participant's version of the same story. For example, my grandmother told me about my mother's secrets. My aunts told me about my grandmother's secrets. They filled in for each other. They were invested in each other's stories and secrets, which gave them some protection. I had to decide, in the process of translating the interviews into stories, which secrets to keep and which to share (Ellis, 2007). I had to infer and assume what their silences meant which was problematic because though they were aware I was conducting research, my presence in their lives and in their stories and my prior knowledge of their back stories gave me access that an outsider would not have had. Many times I was aware of what was not being said. I was not, however, always aware of why and felt I couldn't ask.

#### *Relational Ethics*

In order to conduct an ethical project I followed the advice of Carolyn Ellis (1995, 2007) who reflects on emotional and ethical ways of carrying out research on intimate others. In addition to investing myself in the research and telling stories of my personal experiences in the field, I read the stories through the eyes of participants in order to consider how they might react to the stories. I also shared early versions of the stories with participants to get their feedback and permission to move forward. I began with my mother.

*Mama's story.* I read the first lines of the story about Twiggy and Cake fighting to my mother over the phone and she listened, quietly. When an extended pause marked the end, I asked for her reaction. "Well. . .that was how it was." That was all she said. I didn't know if that was a positive or negative reaction. I asked for more detail. She hesitated and then said, finally, in a voice that sounded suddenly sad, "It just makes us

look so bad.” I had not intended to make anyone look bad. I had simply taken the stories that were told to me and re-told them. Her response paralyzed me.

The realization that the project was exposing secrets and dredging up painful memories made me feel guilty. I was unable, for several months, to continue writing. Every word felt like a betrayal. Despite the fact that I was fictionalizing the stories I still felt responsible for the way my mother reacted—I was suddenly aware that regardless of my intentions I could not predict nor control how people responded to the stories, including participants. I wanted to give them a reflection of their lives, as lived, in an academic context but was that something they wanted or needed, or was it my own selfish need for rural black women’s scholarship that led the project. What if my well-meaning project failed and did more harm than good? bell hooks speaks of a similar writing block when she began to write her memoir:

There was very clearly something blocking my ability to tell my story. Perhaps it was remembered scoldings and punishments when mama heard me saying something to a friend or stranger that she did not think should be said. Secrecy and silence—these were central issues. Secrecy about family, about what went on in the domestic household was a bond between us—was part of what made us family. . . I did not want to be the traitor, the teller of family secrets—and yet I wanted to be a writer. (hooks, 1999, p. 81).

My intention was to use the stories and experiences of rural black women, my experiences as a rural black women, to not only understand and construct a place for us in scholarship but also to establish my career. I was being influenced by academic pursuits

and my allegiance to my black womanhood (see Ladner, 1971). Perhaps it was that reality, the reality of knowing that my livelihood and future were dependent on telling my truth, that left me feeling implicated by the possible hurt the stories would cause to the women I interviewed. Suddenly my ambition felt selfish. I had to justify my study to myself. As bell hooks notes, “many of us were raised to believe that we should never speak publicly about our private lives, because the public world was powerful enough to use such information against us” (hooks, 1993, p. 27).

My mother’s initial response to the research eventually subsided and she became more comfortable with our private and family stories becoming public stories. Her original discomfort challenged me to think deeply about the ethical implications this research would have on people who could be readily identified, especially those, who by association with me would be recognized. Autoethnography is an ethical practice (Ellis, 2007, p. 26) and as such I needed to be prepared for the potential consequences of my story. Regardless of the ramifications I knew I needed to provide my family with the courtesy of hearing the stories from me and the opportunity to respond.

*Grandma’s story.* Realizing that my grandmother, who only went to school through the fifth grade, would have no interest in reading the stories I wrote I decided to read them aloud to her, allowing her to hear every word and to give her the opportunity to ask questions if she had them. Our interviews had been somewhat disappointing because though I know my grandmother as a storyteller, she has always been stingy with words. She is more of an observer, taking people in with her eyes and her ears.

Most of the stories I collected about her life happened when the tape recorder was off, late at night or early in the morning before I was in “researcher” mode. I also

collected stories about her life from her children, whose own stories featured her as a main character. She seemed the least interested in my project, but she was willing to participate alongside others, even introducing me to other participants and recommending women who might be able to help me.

I sat with her at twelve o'clock noon and I had thirty minutes to read before her stories<sup>20</sup> came on. She sat in her recliner rocking chair, arms folded, wearing a sweater jacket even though I thought the temperature in the house was stifling given it was summertime. Her "sugar" diabetes, however, causes her to have cold chills and she is often "about to freeze," as she says, and bundled up in layers of clothing. I waited for her to get comfortable in her favorite chair, which is mix-matched with the other furniture in the den, but reclines and rocks, which she likes. Without permission I turn the volume on the television all the way down, knowing that she insists the TV stay on all day long, regardless if she is in the room or paying attention to it. It is one of her many daily rituals, which also includes cooking breakfast, cursing out her grandchildren so they make it to the school bus on time, and taking her medicine.

Butterflies danced in my stomach as I prepared to read an excerpt based on stories I had collected from and about my grandmother. I began reading the same story I read to my mother eight months earlier that caused her some disdain. I had chosen that story to share on purpose, thinking that it was the "worst" of them. I was nervous about how my grandmother would respond, but realized that documenting and analyzing her response was a necessary part of the research process. I wondered if she would be angry with me and feared what that would feel like as an adult. When I was a child her anger was

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<sup>20</sup> soap operas

manifested in a raised voice, a good cussing out, and a butt whipping. What would she do to me now? I know that other family members who make her mad are immediately put on her “shit list” and it takes weeks to get off. How many days of anger and resentment might this story cause? I wondered if she would ask me to change the story. And if she wanted the story changed, what would she want me to put in its place? Would she require me to start over by refusing to be a character? I wondered if she would tell me I had it all wrong.

I read the story, as simply and evocatively as I could. I was careful to change my intonation, ever so slightly, when I read the dialogue and to slow down when I got to the parts that I suspected she would have concerns about. When I finished reading, I glanced up at the antique clock on the wall and realized ten minutes had passed. There would be time for us to talk about the story before *The Young and the Restless* started.

“Well,” I say half to myself and half to my grandmother, “what did you think?”

When she did not respond immediately, I feared she was staring at me in disappointment, but instead I looked up and saw that she has dozed off.

“Mama!” I called, waking her up.

“What?” She sits up in her chair and rubs her hands over her face, wiping imaginary saliva from her mouth, half listening.

“Were you even listening? I was reading you the story.”

“I heard it,” she said.

I look at her suspiciously, not believing her.

“I heard it. That was good, it put me to sleep. It sounded like a real story.”

I laughed because it was a real story, her story, her life story, disguised behind fictional components and pseudonyms. I laughed because she compared the narrative to a lullaby, its virtue being connected to its ability to put her to sleep. I worried that the story was boring, but then thought that perhaps my voice was soothing.

When I asked my grandmother's permission to leave the story as is she nodded her head, still trying to reassure me that she had indeed listened to my words and hoping she had not hurt my feelings. "I like it," she promised.

I realized in that moment that my grandmother was less concerned about the story and how she might be viewed by others than I was. Having lived over seven decades, she was not concerned about what people might think about her. She is also not apologetic or ashamed of her past. She taught me a tremendous lesson in that exchange and told me she didn't need to hear any more of my stories. She instead turned her attention to the TV and turned the volume up. Her "stories" were about to come on.

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Despite my mother's forgiveness and grandmother's open-mindedness to my research I worried about whether or not my research was ethically responsible and if it was continually guided by my commitment and promise to "do no harm." Had I taken liberties with information that was shared in confidence? Would participants agree with my interpretations of their lives and my portrayal of their experiences? Could I conceal the identities and stories of participants from each other? I will return to a brief discussion of ethics in the final chapter, particularly internal and external confidentiality.

As I prepared to story the research, I thought about my role and identity as a rural black woman and reflected on my personal experiences in Sweetwater prior to my

intellectual investigation. I had lived there for most of my life and returned there for weekly visits until I left the state in 2003. I have always considered Sweetwater home and still do, though I have no plans to return there to live. I did, however, return there for my research. It began with a long and lonely car ride from Florida.

### Chapter Three:

#### Where I Come From: Bitter & Sweet(water) Stories

Driving to Sweetwater I am filled with anxiety. Instead of simply going home, I am going to conduct research and collect stories for my dissertation. My home community is going to be a research site, the field, the foreign place I am supposed to interpret with my trained ethnographic eye. I don't feel capable or qualified to be objective. I don't even know if I will be welcomed back with open arms. However the proposal has been accepted, the IRB approval has been granted, and my apartment in Tampa has been emptied. I am going home and there is no turning back.

I have felt conflicted about my rural woman identity since I left in 2003. Coming back, as a supposed authority to collect and interpret women's lives leaves me feeling confused and inadequate. I feel like a fraud (not a legitimate academic)—much the same way I feel sitting in academic classrooms teaching or learning, oftentimes stumbling over my words, and trying hard to not give my rural background away in my speech, my words, my dialect. I am always masking. And now returning home I have to find a way to be approachable (one of them) and professional (one of the 'other') simultaneously. I fear my family will realize that my fancy and expensive education has not changed me. I am equally afraid that they will learn that it has. I am paranoid that at any moment I will be recognized as a fluke and a fraud. The counselor I have been seeing at the university calls it "imposter syndrome."

The people in Sweetwater know me, a different me (perhaps the real me), from the one I am in Florida. They know some of my secrets and my past. I know some of theirs. There are so many beginnings, I learned, as I collected their stories. I began with Patience.

### *Surviving*

*There is not much killing in the Bottom (the all-black part of Sweetwater) on the outside, but many folk are dying on the inside or killing each other with meanness and spite and unforgiveness. If it wasn't for the sin, maybe they would kill themselves, but somebody said that if you commit suicide you will go to hell and that one sin was unforgivable. Nobody seemed willing to take that chance. Self-inflicted murder happened slowly—with liquor and bad habits. Unnatural dying happened by accident though there were the stories of women being murdered by drunken boyfriends, fed up wives putting roots on deadbeat husbands, and men who owed money to loan sharks being set on fire. The thing about a community as small as Sweetwater is that there is no place to hide your secrets, especially the ones that involve killing.*

*White clothes were still on the clothes line when Walter raised his hand at Patience. Towels, bras, socks, panties, and sheets were neatly hanging on the invisible line and held in place with wooden pins. She had put them out that morning, before she went out, and had gotten home too late to bring them in. She hoped the night wind would not carry any of the socks away.*

*For some reason it was those white clothes still on the line that crossed her mind when his fist pushed against her face that first time. Patience did not hear him coming.*

*Walter had always been a quiet man, a silent man. It was his stillness that made him so dangerous.*

*Earlier that day Patience had received a call from Sweetwater. Her brother was visiting from out of town and everybody had gathered in the country to eat and talk and catch up. "Why don't you and Walt come for dinner and a good time?" he had said. She accepted without asking her husband. She hung up the phone smiling, anxious to see her brother, excited about visiting her family. Walter watched her from the crack in the floor that divided the two main rooms of their humble house and waited.*

*"Sammy is home," Patience had said, smiling, already getting ready, walking fast between rooms to pull a decent outfit together. "They want us to come down."*

*"I'm not going no where," Walter's words were slow and final, but Patience did not hear him. Her attention was on what she was going to wear to cover the pot in her belly that her child left as evidence that she carried him for over nine months over five years ago. She liked to wear clothes that hid the extra skin that still fell over her pants like loose meat. The stretch marks, lines that looked like someone had scratched ashy skin, met at the center of her body and faded away at her navel. She wanted to camouflage her imperfections. She had not seen her family all together in over a year and it would take over an hour to get to Sweetwater from Raleigh. She and Walter would need to leave soon.*

*Walter's stubborn stance gave him away. Patience stopped in front of him wondering where her white bra was. "What did you say, Walt?"*

*"I said I'm not going no where, and you ain't either."*

*His words came at her with the force of unexpected, bad news. Her consideration of the situation was brief. She was going to visit her family. She missed them and she missed back home, the all black part of the rural town known to locals as the Bottom. She often wondered why they called it the Bottom because it was not underneath the town but seemed rather to be in the center of it, but it seemed to make sense that the place where all of the poor blacks settled would be considered the least, though she liked to think of it as the foundation.*

*At Walter's insistence, she had not gone home since she pushed her second child into the world. The baby, a girl, had been born three months early and fell into her grandmother's hands crying around a storm that was already brewing outside. The rain had held them in and the close pains between her legs and in her heart had kept them there for the hours it would take to coax the baby out of the safety of her womb. The baby was fully developed, ten fingers, ten toes, and for some reason that was what Patience checked for when her teary-eyed mother passed her the heavy, still, dead baby to hold. Patience counted the fingers and held up the tiny dry hands, peeling at the edges like splinters on wood stacks, wanting the hand to stand on its own and for her baby to come back to life. Lifeless, the baby looked like she was sleeping. Dead and newly born the baby favored Patience's son Idgy, but Walter had insisted that the baby didn't look anything like him or his kinfolk. The child was probably somebody else's from her whoring around and had died as God's punishment, he had claimed. Patience let his hurtful words go when she finally released her still baby to her mother, the midwife, who recorded the time of birth and the time of death two minutes apart on a used piece of receipt paper.*

*Walt would not hear of spending money on a funeral for a life that had never lived, so Patience's parents had wrapped the baby in blankets and sweet smelling oils and buried her on their land in the country. They could not afford a headstone so they planted a weeping willow tree next to the body in the woods so Patience would know where to stand when she went to talk to her child.*

*Patience had given birth to her first born child, a boy, five winters earlier and he was born a blend of brown and pink. He had cried without tears and she knew he had gotten that from her. Everything else, his features, his skin, his eyes, and his hands were Walter's. She had always loved the feel of Walter's hands on her cheek and the softness of her child's palm on her skin reminded her of what Walt's hands must have been like when he was young. Walt was a city boy, not a farmer. And he was the youngest of four children, all boys. He had left his northern roots to live in North Carolina after he was married so Patience would be driving distance from her family, which she insisted, as a stipulation of marriage. He had agreed reluctantly to live closer to her home but thought the country was too slow-paced and that black folk in the country didn't try hard enough to make something of themselves. He tried to limit their returns home to scheduled visits during the holidays or funerals.*

*"Did you hear what I said?" Walter asked.*

*"Yes, I heard you," Patience said in her soft-spoken voice. "I heard you say that you were not going. But do you see that De Ville out there? That is my car! Now I don't know what you doing today, but when I get all of my things and my baby's things together, I am driving down home to spend the day with my family." Her daddy had given them the car as a wedding gift so that his daughter would always have a way home.*

*Her family, farmers, had done well for themselves and her father was generous, especially to his daughters. Her college education and inheritance allowed her to be independent. Walter resented it.*

*Later, as Patience stood in the mirror admiring her coconut brown complexion and the lovely way the house dress she had picked out fell loosely below her breasts, her husband stood behind her, undressed. "I just need to get ready now," he said.*

*By now, Patience had had enough of him. "I don't have time to wait." She rolled her eyes, gathered her keys, and helped her son to the car. She wanted to make it to Sweetwater before the sun sat as high as it would go, and she needed to leave right then to make it. Half-dressed and humiliated, Walter stood at the screen door and watched her leave.*

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*Patience arrived home hours later to a still and dark house. She carried her sleeping son with both hands and put him in his bed. He was a heavy boy. She didn't realize how strong she was when she had to be.*

*"Walt?" She called out her husband's name in the silence. Nothing. She wondered where he could be, but was too tired to think. She warmed some water on the stove and ran a steaming hot cloth over her face, under her arms, and between her legs. When she laid her head on the pillow, she welcomed sleep. She woke up to the sound of a door closing. "Walt?" There was no answer, no proof that she was not dreaming, so she closed her eyes again. Suddenly and without warning, she felt the weight of a heavy fist.*

*Walt had straddled her, immobilized her between his legs, and threw his fists at her the same way he threw vicious words. She kept her eyes open, as he struck, only closing them at the impact of the blows. For some reason, all she could think about were her brilliantly white clothes; only now, in her thoughts the white clothes were stained with her blood, the same way her night gown was.*

*When he grew tired, he collapsed next to her the way he did after sex. His hot breath carried the stench of liquor and she could not see his eyes. She lay still until she was sure he was asleep. When she stared into the mirror, she did not recognize herself. Her lip was already swollen, her skin was cut and bruised, her shoulders had turned purple.*

*As her broken reflection looked back at her, she remembered the freshly sharpened butcher knife in the top kitchen drawer. She considered going to the kitchen, opening the drawer, grabbing the knife and burying it into Walter's chest while he slept. She knew that she didn't have the strength to fight him, but she could and she would kill him if she had to. The image of her son stopped her in her tracks. How could she kill the man who fathered her child? How could the man who fathered her child touch her with forceful fists?*

*Out of habit she returned to her side of the bed and collapsed under the covers. She listened to Walter breathe and contemplated her life, how she had found herself a beaten and broken woman, laying next to the man who she loved and who loved her, but who had put his hands on her in a way that was not about love. As she lay there she considered all of the times she had felt Walt's rough hands rubbing up and down her*

*body and the pleasure they had given her. How could those same hands have done this to her?*

*After Walter rested a while, he woke up and started beating her again, turning around and leaning over her half-asleep body like a ghost. This time he seemed sorry, his eyes almost apologetic, his hands almost gentle as they slapped against her body with an open hand and then a closed fist. The sound of his fists hitting against her was the sound of a fist hitting against a hand. This time, when he had tired of beating her, he returned to sleep and she turned to face the wall, her pillow soaked with blood and spit. She knew this would be the last time she lay in the bed next to her husband.*

*The next morning Walter rolled over to make love to his wife and found her stiff and afraid. She lay there motionless, flinching at his touch, and watching the light outside her window as she waited for it to be over. When he was finished she went back to the bathroom and used a wash cloth to wipe the smell of his touch from her body. Not recognizing her face she stared at a reflection that was not her own. She stared at an ugly woman that didn't favor her parents anymore. When she opened her mouth and inspected her smile she saw blood outlining a loose tooth and pulled it out with two fingers, watching her lips sink in, making her look old and pitiful. The taste of blood in her mouth had become familiar from last night. She spit into the sink until her spit turned pink and put balm on her face so that it was shiny in all the places that hurt. She grabbed a long-sleeved shirt from a wire hangar that she had hung to dry, it was Walter's, and buttoned it up to cover the large bruises on her arms. The shirt was almost too small because she was a larger woman than her husband was a man. Without*

*looking at the mirror again and without giving in to the urge to sob, she went to the kitchen to cook breakfast.*

*Idgy, her son, was already there in the kitchen waiting for her, wearing the same clothes from the day before. He was a slow learner, born “special” as her mother called it. He was mostly silent and the few words he could speak were always directed at Patience, who devoured them with a mother’s pride. Idgy could say “mama,” “no,” and “help me please” (which sounded like hep me peace). His eyes said good morning and Patience kissed the top of his head, thankful, for once that he could not talk to ask her why her eyes were swollen nearly shut and where the hole in her face had come from. Her movements were robotic and she decided to act as if the night before had not happened.*

*She gave her son a piece of day old fried fat back to chew while she cooked scrambled eggs, hash browns, ham with red eyed gravy and homemade biscuits for the man she gave her heart and life to at the altar. She remembered that day, the way Walter’s baby hairs laid flat against his face from sweat and the way he smiled when she said she would “honor and obey” him. She remembered how much love she found in his eyes when he looked at her. Lately, though, that love had turned cold. Walt didn’t have warm words for her and would just as soon spit in her face than admit that his wife was his equal and in many respects his superior. She was an educated woman, the only one of her siblings to receive a diploma and due an inheritance of land from her family. The only thing Walt had passed down to him was a bad name and a reputation that he wouldn’t amount to much more than his own father had, a man who suffocated in his own vomit after drinking a bad batch of home brew.*

*The eggs were in the plate, slightly runny, the way Walt liked them when he walked in like nothing had happened, rolling his eyes over her and inspecting the food. He sat straight up, his fingernails stained with her blood and his fists swollen and sore from hitting her. He noticed the boy in the corner, not saying anything, and did what he did most mornings and ignored him. The boy acted like he was afraid of Walt and Walt used that terror to control the boy. Now, he figured, he would use that same power to control his wife.*

*He sat at the table and reached in his pants to pull out a gun. Walt had traded his wage for the gun weeks ago and had waited for a chance to use it, fumbling over it every time he reached for his good shoes on Sunday. He had found it that morning and knew it was time to put Patience in her place. He put the gun on the kitchen table, between his plate and resting hand. The gun seemed enormous on the table and Patience eyed it suspiciously. She was not aware Walt had a gun. She wondered where it had come from, how long he had it, what he planned to do with it. The gun lay there like a threat, daring her to step out of line, raise her voice, misbehave or defy him. He saw her looking at the gun and lowered his eyes to it, knowing she was afraid. It reminded her of how a switch or belt, in her father's presence, instilled the same fear, the same forced obedience when she was a child. She had never imagined having to mind a man once she was grown with her own child to raise. She poured well water over the ice in Walter's jelly glass and went to get him coffee. She knew how to serve him without him asking. She had done it humbly and happily for more days than she could count. The only difference was this time he had beat her into submission. This day was different and she would never be the same.*

*“I spect you’ll know to mind me now,” Walt said, drinking the cold water so fast that the ice seemed to sweat through the glass. “I’m tired of you talking to me any kinda way.”*

*Patience glared at the gun and then at her son, who was sitting innocently on the floor, grasping the soggy meat with all of his might. She poured red gravy in the center of a biscuit she had dug a hole in with her finger and Walt grabbed her wrist, spilling the hot gravy on her skin.*

*“Did you hear what I said?”*

*“Yes, I heard you.” Patience moved her mouth but the words only barely came with sound. Walt let go of her wrist and dipped the hot biscuit in the extra gravy in his plate, turning the white biscuit brownish red and wet.*

*“You better!” He swallowed the bread without chewing.*

*The gun was interestingly heavy and slick in tender, soft hands. There was no aim, no premeditation, no thought, no consideration, no malice, no intended harm, but the bullet, once fired, found its way to the place in his chest where a heart would have been if he could remember how to love. Patience had leaned forward at the force of the impact and the bullet was released close range.*

*The gun shot cut through the silence and blood spotted the walls, and the house coat, and the plate of food, and the crying boy in the corner whose scream was as loud as the bullet escaping the chamber. Patience put the gun back down where she found it, Walt’s body fell forward and heavy on the table, his eyes wide open, shocked, seeming to look right through her.*

*Smoke was rising from the barrel of the gun and the hot food at the same time. Idgy sat still in the corner, his little hands covering his ears and his mouth wide open, spit and saliva falling from his mouth and meeting tears on his chin. Patience imagined his screams but the gun had temporarily silenced her hearing. The boy, the only child that would ever fall from her womb and live, stopped crying immediately when she picked him up and cradled him like he was newly born. He saw his father hunched over his breakfast plate and suddenly all sound escaped his ears. He was as afraid of his father dead as he had been of him alive. Walter's face held a look of shock, terror, and shame as he seemed to look, one last time, at his only child. His eyes were still open, glassed over with tears. Blood met the un-swallowed food in his mouth, turning it brownish red and wet.*

*Patience picked up the phone to call home. "Walt dead," she managed matter-of-factly into the receiver. "I shot him."*

\*

*"Lord, did you hear about Patience?" Mae June was talking before she got in the house good and came in making herself at home. She spent as much time at her cousin Twiggy's as she did in her own dollar down house, which was more than five thousand steps away walking. She walked in catching her breath and starting something. She grabbed a mixed matched plate from the cabinet and spooned out some piping hot grits in the center of the plate. Twiggy was cracking an egg in a hot skillet full of pork grease and Cake, her husband, was already sitting at the table, rubbing his big hands against his knees as if he was trying to warm them up. Mae June was Twiggy's second or third cousin (they didn't know which since both of their mamas had been long dead) and*

*she was the town gossip. She sat at the table next to Cake, nodding without speaking. "You know she married that out-of-town man with the shifty eyes and done gone plum crazy. Shot his ass dead at the breakfast table."*

*"She ain't go crazy," Twiggy said shaking the pan so that grease would slide all over the frying egg. "She got sense. She got his ass back for beating her half to death." Twiggy poured the cooked egg in a plate that was waiting by the stove, fried with the yellow running. "Mae, you want eggs?"*

*"Nawl, girl, I ain't hungry." Mae seasoned her grits with salt and pepper and tasted a small bite before blowing her spoon to cool them for her waiting mouth.*

*"They say she didn't look like herself when they brought her home. Her face was all swole up, eyes half shut. He even knocked the teeth out of her mouth," Twiggy said reaching on the stove for the coffee pot.*

*"She done been married enough years to be able to take a good beating without going crazy." Mae shook her head at the thought. "That daddy of hers ruined her by not beating her enough as a child."*

*Cake was drinking some of the hot coffee Twiggy had poured and thinking about the nonsense Mae June was saying. He was going to say something, but knew better than to get in between woman folk talk.*

*"And that poor Idgy might as well be a orphan," Mae continued. "Got one parent dead and the other one might as well be dead. I heard they going to lock her up at the crazy house and throw away the key."*

*"Where you get that from?" Cake asked, finally speaking, his hands on the table now.*

*“I heard it,” Mae June said mysteriously, resting her fat arm on the table and somewhat surprised to hear Cake speak. “Hell, it’s better than jail. She might as well be locked up somewhere cause wouldn’t no other man in his right mind have her, after she shot and killed her own husband. And Idgy is a handful. He don’t talk much.”*

*“You know that boy was born slow,” Twiggy said, passing Cake his plate. “Lost some breath when he was first born.”*

*“Well, I heard his ear drum shattered at the sound of that gunshot, so now he is going to be slow AND hard of hearing. Bless his little heart.”*

*“You sho’ do hear a lot,” said Cake.*

*“Uh-huh,” Twiggy agreed.*

*“And on top of that Walt’s family wouldn’t allow none of Patience’s people, including the boy, at the funeral or no where ‘round the body. They say when they found him he had piss in his drawers and food still in his mouth. They say his eyes was wide open.”*

*“People don’t die with they eyes closed no ways,” Twiggy said, remembering what her father looked like dead. “Peoples just think that cause that’s how they look when folks see ‘em.”*

*“Anyway, his kin acted like Idgy wasn’t no part of ‘em, but he look just like Walt. If he could talk, he probably sound just like ‘em. And if he wasn’t slow, he’d probably be just as mean,” Mae June said finishing off her grits.*

*“You women always got something to say about other folks’ business,” Cake said, shaking his head at his wife and her kinfolk. He could hear some commotion outdoors*

*and knew it was children but couldn't distinguish which ones. He and Twiggy had five and he hadn't laid eyes on none of them all morning.*

*Little, the youngest boy, came trotting in near-naked wearing underwear and nothing else. His thumb was in his mouth and he went from his mother's knees to his daddy's. Cake picked him up.*

*"Where your hard-headed sisters at, boy?"*

*"Out yonder," Little said with his thumb still in his mouth. He was a handsome boy, but didn't favor Cake much at all. He had droopy, sad eyes that made it so Cake or Twiggy would give him anything they could in the world. He had dirt on him from outside, the same color as his coffee colored skin. Cake lifted his legs on his toes to rock Little while he sat. He watched his mama cook and shook his head when Cake offered him some meat from his plate.*

*"You still sucking your thumb, Little? You gonna be as buck-toothed as hell." Mae June pushed her plate forward and smiled.*

*"Leave my baby alone," Twiggy ordered. She had tried everything from threatening him to bribing him, but Little would not stop sucking his thumb. She told him that he would get picked on at school, but he didn't care. She told him that big boys don't suck their thumb, but he didn't care. She worried the act somehow reflected on her mothering skills. Having a four-year-old child sucking his thumb was as bad as having one still pissing on himself.*

*"Come, go with me. I got something at my house for that thumb." Mae June lifted Little from Cake's lap and was surprised at how lightweight he was.*

*"Where y'all going?" Twiggy wanted to know.*

*“We’ll be back. I’m going to put something on that thumb to keep it out of his mouth.”*

*Twiggy turned the stove off and put her plate on the table next to Cake’s while she watched Mae June carry Little out of the house and up the road.*

*“I’da been killed the son of a bitch,” Twiggy said, returning to the conversation. Twiggy didn’t know Patience well, but she knew they were kin and saw her from time to time when she was walking the road. She knew Walt because he had caught her eye on occasion. That man was a pretty sight in a suit, long, slender, and dignified looking. You could tell, when he put on those clothes, that he wasn’t from around there.*

*“And your ass would be locked up, too!” Cake said, sitting in front of a plate of pork brains, molasses, and cold grits. He waited for his grits to get cold enough to cut into pieces.*

*“You can’t fault a woman for protecting herself.” Twiggy sat down in front of her husband and her own plate, reaching for the molasses and pouring it over an open biscuit. Her mouth was watering at the anticipation of the sweet syrup on the fluffy bread.*

*“She didn’t have to kill him, Twig.”*

*“Shit. I woulda quit his ass like a low-paying job.”*

*“And that’s what she shoulda done. Just left him alone.”*

*“They say the gun was hissun. He probably intended to use it on her and she turned it around. Serves his ass right.”*

*Cake didn’t have an answer and filled his mouth with a biscuit, swallowing and shaking his head at the same time.*

*“Mama, where do people go when they dead?” Peaches busted in the front door and scooted into her father’s lap at the kitchen table. Peaches, the baby girl, was six years old and bony as a rail. Her skin was the color of an overripe peach and her hair and eyes light brown. Bread, nine years old, walked in behind her, the screen door slamming shut when they made it into the kitchen.*

*“They don’t go no where. They dead,” Twiggy answered.*

*“See there, Bread, I told you ain’t no such place as hell.”*

*“You don’t get to say hell. Where you get that from?” Twiggy asked, frowning. Cake ignored his wife’s question, knowing good and well if Peaches learned cussin’ it was from one of them.*

*“I got it from Bread!” Peaches said smiling, her eyes glossing over her sister who she hoped was in trouble.*

*“There is too a hell, little girl,” Cake said, saving Bread a beating from Twiggy, and Peaches a beating from Bread.*

*“Is that where Idgy Carrington’s daddy went then?”*

*“That is between him and the good Lord. Don’t you go worrying about it.” Cake pulled a plait of his daughter’s hair and held it out, measuring it. “Look at how long your hair is, little girl.”*

*“I know Daddy,” Peaches said, rolling her eyes. She was too young to know, care, or realize how powerful a long braid was for a little black girl and how proud her father was that her hair grew so long.*

*“Yawl want something else to eat?” Twiggy asked, her mouth full. She had already fed her children, before Cake got up. Bebe had left early, running the streets,*

*and Junior had been right behind her to meet his friends to pick up bottles on the side of the road and exchange them at the store for nickels.*

*“No ma’m,” Bread said, wishing there was room on Cake’s lap for her and Peaches.*

*“Well then, y’all see grown folks talking. Get out of here while we trying to eat.”*

*“Come on Peaches. Let’s go to the playhouse,” Bread said, leading the way back out the front door. The playhouse was not really a house at all but an imaginary mansion they had made across the road. Twiggy knew they would be entertained long enough for her to eat and clean the kitchen.*

*“It’s pay day, ain’t it?” Twiggy asked. “We need some groceries in this house.”*

*“We’ll have some,” Cake promised, finishing his breakfast and heading for the door.*

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The story about Patience gave me nightmares. The dreams have become metaphors for my memory of episodes of domestic violence in the community when I was growing up. Broken limbs. A face sliced open. Angry words breaking through silence. Fear so suffocating it seemed to make oxygen thick. My body remembers the shame and paralyzing fear of adult anger turned outward—fueled by alcohol and paranoia. The fighting seemed normal. I expected such exchanges in relationships. When a boy I thought I loved threatened to kill me and throw me in a ditch, I thought it meant he loved me<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Donna L. Franklin (2000) reports, “the rates of violence between black men and women are higher than other races. Not only are black wives more likely to kill their husbands than wives of other races, but the majority of the women killed by husbands or boyfriends are also black” (p. 17). This finding is

When I discussed the story with Patience, she explained to me, calmly, that there was no such thing as domestic violence in those days. Husbands and wives fought all the time, it was almost their way of loving.

“It was like a religion,” she shared, “and they were faithful to it.”

Patience said that fighting was just “one of those things” and you learned to live with it, if you could. My interpretation of marital violence as domestic abuse is an act of semantic contagion, adapting a new meaning to a past context. Semantic contagion refers to assigning meaning to a story that didn’t exist at the time of the experience (Bochner, 1997, p. 427). Because domestic violence and being a battered woman were not terms or definitions these women would have been familiar with at the time, domestic abuse was elusive. Still, some people got tired of fighting. Others didn’t know how to fight or learned to grin and bear it, mistaking wedding vows as submission to hits. Bread recalled a neighbor who would beat his wife in public and out in the open. Nobody intervened or interfered. Relationships were different then. There was little respect, little fidelity, little security. With no birth control, young girls often were forced into loveless marriages and motherhood without fulfillment. The climate of relationships was dismal.

As I write about these seemingly dysfunctional relationships I realize that the situation is only slightly improved (see Franklin, 2000). During my visit to Sweetwater I encountered women who have either remained in marriages because divorce did not seem an option or had never been married, though had children with men whose level of responsibility to their children (or wives) is futile. It is not uncommon for women to

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substantiated by the persistence and normalization of violence in interpersonal relationships found in this study. Both Patience and Twiggy’s characters are representative of women’s ways of confronting violence in their marital relationships.

have children by more than one man or for women to (knowingly and unknowingly) participate in relationships with the same man. Rural black women, like black women in general, compete for a diminishing population of eligible and available men. Due to proximity, limited resources and education, incarceration, drug abuse, and familial ties, black women in rural communities have restrictions on who they are eligible to date. In small communities like Sweetwater, where people are oftentimes unknowingly kin, relationship courting is problematic. Men and women run the risk of recycling unhealthy relationships, sharing fathers of children and settling for men who are incapable of contributing financially to multiple households. Few young people move out on their own to live independently after high school so leaving the area to find a mate is not always an option.

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After writing this story I told my grandmother (Twiggy) I had no idea what I would do if a man hit me. She looked at me and frowned, as if that response could not possibly come from her grandchild. “You kick ‘em in the nuts,” she said seriously, balling her fist as she spoke. “And then you knock the hell out of ‘em.”

### *Fighting Words*

*Bread covered her head under the lint infested blanket, making her body a cave that turned in on itself. This is how she slept—in a tiny ball, with her head folded into her chest and her arms wrapped around her knees and her feet balled up. She tried really hard to stay in her own tight space and be still. Every time she moved she would bump into one of her sisters, Bebe on the left, Peaches on the right. They slept on both sides of her in the double bed, closing in on her like secrets and lies.*

*She used to touch them on purpose to make sure that somebody was there with her. She would wake up searching with her hands for a familiar body. Lately, she wished for her own bed, and her own room, and her own space. She shifted her weight again, trying to get comfortable so she could fall asleep.*

*“Be still god-dammit!” This is Bebe, the oldest daughter, who thinks she is grown.*

*Bread knew it wasn't worth saying anything. Bebe liked to cuss, liked to be the boss, liked to act like she was the mama when their real mama, Twiggy, wasn't around. She knew that Bebe would love to whoop her before she fell asleep so that it would be tears and not saliva that wet her pillow. Bread remembered the time when Bebe beat both her and Peaches for peeing in the bed. When Bebe woke up in a damp yellow circle, she blamed Peaches, then Bread for the crime. When they both denied it, she took the switch to them, calling them a “damn lie,” when they said they didn't do it. It was hard to determine the culprit since they all smelled like piss, having slept in it all night, but it was Bebe's pissy drawers that told the tale. She had punished them for her own laziness in sleep and her inability to keep her legs together tight enough to hold the water until morning or make it to the pee pot that was in the hallway. She didn't apologize because parents don't apologize to children and Bebe thought of herself as everybody's mama.*

*Peaches, the baby girl, was already fast asleep. Bread figured that by daybreak her legs would be tangled up in her sister's, like always, and that she wouldn't be able to move when she first opened her eyes. A lot of times she would wake up not knowing*

*where she was, but a slight turn of her head would reveal the cracked window and the shadow of the outhouse.*

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*Sleep was sweet but temporary. Bread's eyes opened fast and she was facing Peaches, already awake, her hazel eyes full of water. Out of all of the children, Peaches looked the most like their father. Her eyes, giant circles of white with hazel centers, looked just like Cake's when he wasn't drunk. Most days, though, his eyes were bloodshot red and his pupils were so dilated that you couldn't tell what color they were. But on days when he wasn't tired and wasn't drunk (which wasn't often) he had the most beautiful eyes Bread had ever seen. Bread assumed that it was his white people's eyes that made her mother love him and always take him back. She secretly wished for eyes like Cake's but her eyes were oval and black. She also longed for hair like Twiggy's. Her mother's hair, like all of her mother's siblings, was dark and long, what folks called good hair, Indian hair. Twiggy's hair didn't need a hard brush to lay down, while Bread's hair was stubborn, kinky, and short. Bread often wished she looked more like Twiggy, more like Cake, more like Peaches. She didn't know who she looked like.*

*Bebe was up, listening at the door, even though you could hear good enough from the bed. It sounded like the sky was falling, like the roof was caving in, like the world was coming to an end, but it was just Twiggy and Cake fighting—again. It was payday and Cake came home empty-handed and drunk. The weekday peace was over.*

*Bread and Peaches rolled out of bed and followed Bebe into the boys' room and then outside. There they stood, three girls, two boys, barefooted with naked arms and naked legs, standing in their t-shirts and drawers, on rocks and glass, throwing what*

rocks they could find on top of the house. The house was barely as tall as Cake so it didn't take much effort to hit the roof with the debris they threw. The tattered shingles on the tin roof of the little shack popped as rocks and glass hit against it like hard rain. Throwing rocks was their act of rebellion, turning on the structure that should have protected them. Longing for safety and a lack of screaming, they stood defenseless trying to rectify the wrong and destroy the discourse in the house by going outside of it and picking up symbols of their anger. They threw rocks until the bang against the roof sounded like, "Stop! Stop. Stop. Stop." Suddenly and with more force the rocks fell, sliding down the exterior to the ground, moist with the dew of the coming morning and last night's sweat. The noise competed with the angry sounds falling out of the windows from the front room where their parents slept. The room served as the den during the day.

It didn't scare Bread when her parents fought because she had grown used to it as a routine. She was relieved that both Peaches and her brother Little were old enough not to cry. They too, got used to the fighting which came every weekend like Sunday morning. After a long time passed and the exhaustion of interrupted sleep crept back onto their bodies, Junior barged in the house to try to break up the fight. He knew, from getting in the middle before, that it was best to wait until the noise died down. By now Twiggy and Cake were both tired and almost sober. They were looking for a reason to be reasonable, but neither would be the one to give in. Bread peeped in the cracked door and realized that while there were empty liquor bottles on the floor, broken glasses on the table, a lit cigarette still burning in the ashtray, swollen fists and messy clothes, the room was no different from the aftermath of their lovemaking, which would inevitably follow.

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*Twiggy woke up sore and sober. She had some Bengay in the kitchen drawer and a corner of gin in the bottle by her bed so she knew it wouldn't take her long to remedy both wrongs. Cake was asleep beside her, his arm strewn across her chest so she couldn't turn around or get up. She rolled her eyes remembering last night's fight and contemplating today's civility. With both hands she pushed his heavy arm off her body and sat up in the bed. Cake didn't budge. Sleep cradled him in its arms like a loose woman as his head sunk deeper into the bed pillow. She watched him lay there on his stomach snoring loud enough to wake her children, but she knew they would sleep as much of the day away as she let them. They were up half the night throwing those damn rocks on top of the house like they didn't have good sense. She couldn't remember when they started throwing rocks and she never bothered to ask them why they did it.*

*She didn't know if she wanted to slap Cake's face or kiss it, so she decided to leave him alone. Her arms were bruised from him holding on to her too tight after she knocked him upside the head with a pan. Cake was one of the strongest men she knew. He hauled pulp wood for a living and could carry most of the chopped tree parts without help. His broad shoulders and long arms felt good wrapped around her in public, but the thought of him hugged up with some other woman was more than Twiggy could stand. She knew Cake ran the streets, all men did, but she hated the thought of him throwing it in her face. And she had warned him that the next time she heard tell of him being over to that fat, ugly ass Neesee's house, that would be his ass. Twiggy always kept her word.*

*Neesee was a big, burly, dark-skinned woman with beady eyes and a round face, who wore cat glasses and burgundy lipstick. She had moles on her face that looked like*

*polka dots and thick lips that she rubbed together all the time like she was blending in lipstick. She didn't smile much because she had gotten her two front teeth knocked out in a fight with one of her boyfriends. She was far from what you would call an attractive woman but she had a way with men who already had commitments. The heifer didn't care if a man was married, widowed, or had a house full of youngins to feed as long as she had somebody paying her bills. She always had a thing for Cake and despite Twiggy's threats, she just couldn't seem to leave him alone.*

*Neesee lived in the trailer park in a town about ten miles down the road. She didn't have any children of her own because her womb was closed up but she kept people's kids in her house to make extra money. Twiggy had even dropped her kids off over there a few times until Bebe came back and told her that Neesee had them calling her Mama. Twiggy went to Neesee's house, called her outside, and cussed her out in front of her children to make her an example. She slapped Neesee's face so hard and so fast that she forgot why her hand was stinging when she walked back to her car. On the way home Twiggy warned her kids that she would kill them dead if she ever heard tell of them calling some other woman mama. She felt they should be glad that they had a mama living—her own mother had died when she was too young to remember her.*

*Twiggy didn't feel sorry for herself, because she knew she had options. She prided herself on three things: being a good looking woman, having good hair, and being a good cook. It was a combination of those things that made her life bearable. She knew she would make a good woman to another man just like she had made a good wife to Cake, but she never wanted to get married again. She wasn't going to take her kids from the only home or the only daddy they ever knew. So she wasn't going anywhere and deep*

*down she knew that Cake wasn't either. Instead they fought, with words, fists, whatever they could find or think of to throw at each other.*

*Twiggy was vengeful and she had to get back at Cake. She had already stepped out on him. Damned if she would be the stupid wife waiting at home twiddling her thumbs while her husband was out sniffing around every tail in the neighborhood. And stepping out didn't mean nothing if you end up back together. No matter what, she figured that she and Cake would be together until they killed each other. Her vows were to love him until death do them part. But she didn't want to kill him, she just wanted to make him suffer. So she started pouring lye in his food and spiking his liquor with rat poison. She knew that there were three things he couldn't live without: food, liquor and sex. She figured she would fix him something to eat, let him keep his own stash of liquor in the cabinet, and lay down with him every pay day like always, and he would never suspect her revenge.*

*"Twig, this liquor taste funny!" Cake had said the week before, his red eyes protruding out of their sockets. It had begun to happen gradually, probably a side effect of the rat poison. "Taste it," he held out the jelly-jar-turned-house-glass and Twiggy turned away.*

*"I don't want no liquor, Cake," she said eyeballing the poisoned brew.*

*"But it taste funny. Here drink some and see."*

*"I said I didn't want no damn liquor. If it taste funny, why the hell you drinking it?" Twiggy took the bottle from Cake's hand and poured the evidence down the drain, hoping his crazy ass hadn't drank too much at one time. "Probably just a bad brew."*

*Cake nodded in agreement and laid his head in his hands, tired, dizzy. He swallowed what was left in his glass before passing out.*

\*

*The night before, Twiggy had caught Cake at the liquor house smiling in Neesee's face, like teeth and good looks had gone out of style.*

*Tate Thomas had turned the tool shack behind his house into a liquor house. The house was the size of small room, but on pay day it could hold as many black fools as had money. Every corner served a purpose. The corner by the door with the best light is where you took your money and cup to get a shot or a glass of home brew. The second corner had a side table for playing cards. The other two corners were for socializing. Lopsided tables were spread around the room holding ashtrays and abandoned cups. It wasn't easy for Twiggy to find Cake in the dimly lit room. It was his shitty grin that she recognized and Neesee squealing like a pig, rubbing on his arm like it couldn't keep warm any other way. Before she knew it she hit Neesee upside her head and grabbed the first thing she could find to back up her rage.*

*Twiggy had had her cousin Mae June drop her off outside the liquor house because she figured she would drag Cake's drunk ass out after she had a few drinks. She left the kids at home and told them to mind Bebe until she got back. She walked in like a bandit. Her hair was fixed up in the slick curls it made when she put water and vaseline together. She had slid her money in her wallet and stuck it in her back pocket like she always did when she went out because she didn't carry a pocketbook and always wore pants. The imprint of the wallet in one pocket and her cigarettes in the other offered the illusion of a curve below her back, where a booty would have been if she had one.*

*She didn't understand what Cake saw in Neesee. If he was going to step out on her, there were better women around for him to do it with. More decent, better looking women with some money in their pockets and some teeth in their mouths. When she realized who he was with, her vision got so red she thought she was looking through blood-stained eyes. Before she knew it, she had punched Neesee in the back of the head, while Neesee's face leaned toward Cake like she was sneaking a kiss. Neesee was too drunk to recover before Twiggy grabbed a butter knife from the bar and held it to her throat.*

*"Twiggy, what the hell?" Cake's words were slurred and spread apart, like he wasn't sure if he was dreaming. He stood between them.*

*"You willing to get cut for this bitch?" Twiggy asked, not knowing who she wanted to stab first, her husband or his whore.*

*"Put the knife down," was all Cake could say. He had already drunk half of his paycheck in liquor, but Twiggy's anger had a way of sobering him up.*

*Twiggy wished she had a razor blade instead of a butter knife, but at the right angle she could still use the dull edge to cut through skin and possibly to the bone. She had done it before with chicken, using her strength to cut through the edges, leaving the flesh jagged and raw.*

*Everybody in the liquor house was paying attention to Twiggy. Tate Thomas, the owner of the liquor house, decided to offer his voice of reason. Tate never got drunk with customers because if he did people would slip out without paying and he could always count on a fight breaking out. "Twiggy, now y'all gonna have to get out of here with all this now."*

*“Come on here, Twiggy, fore you get yourself locked up!” Cake was standing in front of Neesee, shielding her from the knife Twiggy was waving in her hand like a flag. He was partly protecting Neesee, but mostly protecting his wife because he did not want to have to bail her out of jail. He started taking steps and pushing Twiggy toward the door, everyone making room for them but not taking their eyes off the scene unfolding before their eyes.*

*“Bitch, if you don’t stay away from my husband Ima kill you dead as hell,” Twiggy yelled as she threw the knife across the room, just missing Neesee’s arm. Neesee was stunned, still, like she didn’t know what had happened.*

*Cake struggled to get Twiggy in the truck and listened carefully as she cussed him out, threatened to kill him, and warned him as he drove down the road that he had better get all of his shit and get the hell out of the house if he knew what was best for him. She was tired of his shit. Sick and tired. And she wasn’t playing this time. Drunk bastard. She wanted him gone. If he wanted to be with Neesee’s black, fat, ugly ass then so be it.*

*When they got home the lights were on but the kids were in their rooms. They knew better than to be in the front room, which became their parents’ room at night, when Cake and Twiggy got home. Cake followed Twiggy in the house and she started pulling his clothes out of the closet and throwing them in a pile. She rested long enough to light a cigarette and wonder where her gun was.*

*Cake was mostly sober now, feigning for a drink. He didn’t feel like getting into it with Twiggy. He was tired, just got off work, had some money in his pocket, and just wanted to enjoy a few drinks before he came home. He couldn’t help it if Neesee had a thing for him. She wasn’t the best looking thing in the world, but she was soft and told*

*him what all she would do if he was hers, and it was good to hear. He didn't love her, he just laid with her sometimes, when he wanted to feel something different. He didn't feel like fussing with Twiggy, but he wasn't going to just sit there while she hit him tonight. If he wasn't too drunk he would mostly just grab her, wait for her to calm down, throw things around the room and try to break something she loved or needed, like a souvenir shot glass her sister had brought her from New York or her favorite clay ashtray. He knew Twiggy had a temper like her father and once she was mad, nothing could calm her down but time. The fight lasted until the sky was so black the moon looked white. They were both glad when Junior came in and begged them to leave each other alone.*

*“Mind your own damn business,” Twiggy had said, satisfied that Cake was miserable and bleeding, “and y'all get in the bed. You ain't sleeping all day and all night tomorrow.”*

### *Finding Religion*

Despite the goings-on in various households, rural black women are devoted to religion. Even though there are some people who attend church faithfully and others who only go occasionally, everybody believes in God. Even people who don't go to church believe in God. Even the women who sleep with other women's husbands feel a little conviction on the inside when the loving is over. Even the men who abuse drugs and alcohol know that praying makes a difference. Even heathens fear God.

I never encountered a black atheist until I was in college. Her deep-seeded unbelief startled me. I had never considered the questions she asked me about how I knew God existed. Fully unprepared for her questions I did not have answers. I knew because I knew. It was all that I had ever known and everyone in my community had

nurtured that belief and used it to show me miracles, healings and prophecies in my own life. I had never considered that there were people who did not believe in God, though I was aware there were different ways to know and worship Him.

There are at least eight churches in Sweetwater, all different denominations. Methodist, A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion, Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal, United Church of Christ, nondenominational. Some people even had church in their homes. The denomination determined what kind of Christian you were, and what you could and could not do and still be holy. Pentecostal or Holiness Christians cannot show their ankles or their elbows so their skirts are long and their blouses are long-sleeved. They spend most nights in church and have services that last hours and hours. Baptists don't believe in speaking in tongues or prophesying. They live their lives during the week and repent for their sins on Sunday, faithfully paying dues, tithes, and offering. Even though Baptist church congregations are majority female and older, they can be counted on for missionary work and building funds.

For the most part people pick up religion because it is convenient. Faith offers unrelenting hope in the face of suffering and oppression. Faith becomes the core of rural life, the core of rural black women's lives. Few conversations take place without an acknowledgment or reference to God, His goodness, His wrath, His mercy. After enduring loss, disappointment, and various forms of self-hate and abuse many rural women are left with their belief in God to sustain them. Godly women, however, are no less susceptible or vulnerable than anyone to rural black woman blues and insecurities. This revelation was like the sun rising.

I went to church every Sunday growing up. I realized through interviews that motivations and motives for church attendance are widespread, especially for little girls. Bread was seduced to church by a simultaneous infatuation with the preacher's son and a desperate need for her father's attention. Some women went to church for the socializing and after-church gossip. Some women wanted (or needed) an excuse to get dressed up. It was my interest in the choir and the special way black women praised God that lured me back to church Sunday after Sunday and offered me a glimpse of what it meant to "truly be saved."

### *Revival*

*The first time Bread laid eyes on Ray-Ray Carmichael she was playing in the backyard. He rode up in the truck with Cake, looking out the window and jumping out before the truck had stopped all the way.*

*"Stink-Stink, where your mama at?" Cake wanted to know.*

*Bread was humiliated that her father was calling her by that nickname in front of a cute boy she didn't know, especially when he knew good and well that Twiggy did not announce, especially to her children, where she was going or when she would be back.*

*"She's gone up the road," was all Bread said and was all Bread knew. She had watched Mae June's car, barely running, ride down the road coughing smoke behind it. She knew more than likely that her mother was in the car with her friend, but she didn't know for sure.*

*"How long she been gone?"*

*"Not long."*

*“This here Ray Carmichael. His daddy the one who just took over the church down there at Antioch.”*

*“It’s nice to meet you. You can call me Ray-Ray, that’s the name I go by.” Bread watched him extend his hand to her and she took it, rubbed her own callused hand against it, and tried not to let on how warm and soft his hand was. She suddenly wished she had soft hands, or at least clean hands.*

*“Where Junior and Little?” Cake asked.*

*“I ain’t seen Junior. Little is gone with mama. Peaches went to get us more leaves to play with.”*

*“What y’all playing?” Ray-Ray asked smiling.*

*“House!” Peaches yelled, her hands full of dead leaves she had found in the ditch, “Bread gets to be the mama, again.”*

*Bread’s eyes told Peaches to shut up but when she looked up and saw Ray-Ray watching her she just smiled. She was always the mama when they played because she was the oldest and she already knew what mamas are supposed to do.*

*“You’re lucky to have brothers and sisters,” Ray-Ray observed, “I’m an only child.”*

*“Well, tell your mama I bought somebody by to meet her,” Cake said. “The pastor wants to get to know the families in the area and sent his son since he had some other stuff to work on today. I spect he’ll come by another time.”*

*“Come on back,” was all Bread knew to say. That was the kind of things that grown folks said to each other when they met someone for the first time and she wasn’t used to meeting new people. Everybody she knew in Sweetwater she had always known.*

*“I’ll probably just see y’all at church this evenin’. Revival starts tonight!” Ray-Ray called back, following Cake to the truck. Bread nodded, but worried that she had not been to church since the last time somebody had died, and she couldn’t remember who it was or why she was made to go. Peaches started crying.*

*“What’s wrong with you?”*

*“I don’t want to go to no church,” Peaches whined and her eyes filled with water. Even when she was acting like a baby she was a pretty sight. Bread rolled her eyes.*

*“Well I do. I need to find some decent clothes to wear.”*

\*

*At the revival Bread sat beside Cake because nobody else had wanted to go. Twiggy insisted she had better things to do with her time than sit around with a bunch of fake and phony church folks. Besides, Twiggy preferred her church. She never switched her membership to her husband’s congregation because she liked the fact that her church only met two Sundays out of the month and left people alone to tend to their own business. Religion had always been a requirement in her father’s house but everyone there seemed so old. To Twiggy you get saved when you get ready to die, and she wasn’t in no ways ready to die. She sent Bread wearing a homemade dress that belonged to Bebe. She used safety pins to tighten it up on the sides and re-combed Bread’s hair so that she would look halfway decent.*

*“Act like you got some sense in front of those people,” Twiggy warned her daughter after tying ribbon on the end of her straw-like hair. “Don’t let me hear tell of you showing your ass in church.”*

*“I won’t mama,” Bread promised, running out the door to get to the truck before her father left. Cake liked to be on time.*

*Ray-Ray’s father, the new preacher, was tall and long-winded. Leaning over the pulpit with deacons sitting behind him in high sitting chairs, he was standing, sweating, stomping his feet and spitting with every word he said that started with an f. Bread counted. Fix. Foolish. Fire. Faith. Forgiveness. Forgetfulness.*

*“If you ask him, the good Lord will throw all of your sins into the sea of forgetfulness. But you have to have faith, church!”*

*As he said those words Bread looked around the small church and found Ray-Ray, still sitting at the piano, his bible in his lap and his eyes closed. At that moment she was sure he was a God-send. The only boy his age in the community, Ray-Ray was like an angel. Even girl children weren’t made to go to church service on a weeknight. Sunday school on Sunday. Choir practice on Saturday. But not church service during the week. Bread suspected that Ray-Ray wanted to be there, that even if his mama and daddy didn’t run the church that he wouldn’t mind coming. His mother, the first lady, sat in the first pew fanning herself with the paper fan advertising Smith & Sons Funeral Home with a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr on it. Bread recognized the black man from tv. He was a great black man, gave speeches in front of white people and led marches. Twiggy had said she didn’t have any use for marching or agitating white people, but she would watch the news to see what Martin Luther King had done. He had been killed in April and black people in Sweetwater cried like they knew him. Bread was sad too but she didn’t really know why.*

*When Rev. Carmichael started praying, Bread got tired of keeping her eyes closed and concentrating on the complicated bible words. She looked up at her father, whose eyes were closed tight and then looked around the room. Some people were holding hands, other people had their hands raised up and there was moaning and “Thaaaaaaaaaaaaank you Jesuses” being spoken across the room like greetings. The mothers of the church, dressed in long dresses and holding their pocketbooks in their laps, sat up front on the first pew, rocking and swaying to the music they made for themselves. Thanking Jesus. Saying Hallelujah. Humming and swaying their bodies back and forth with a grin on their face like they knew the secret to the world. The women did everything but stand up and shout, which Bread had wondered about. So far, no one had caught the Holy Ghost. She wasn’t sure exactly what that meant, but Bebe had said that when she went to church with Twiggy that the preacher talked a demon out of a body. And once that happened everybody got happy and started running like they didn’t have good sense. Bread remembered promising her mother to act right and hoped that the Holy Ghost wouldn’t jump on her that night.*

*Church was mysterious to Bread and she usually didn’t go because she didn’t have “church clothes.” The few dresses she did have had been given to her from older relatives and either looked too old-timey or had somebody else’s stains, or somebody else’s musk, or somebody else’s tears on them. The dresses were new to her but already looked old. Bread saved them for Peaches, who didn’t know any different and thought that anything she hadn’t had before was new. When the prayer ended, church was over and she watched Ray-Ray stand at door with his parents, shaking peoples’ hands as they walked out. She waited her turn and took Ray-Ray’s hand, her own hands soft this time,*

*after putting Jergens lotion on them before she left home. She went back to revival the rest of the week.*

*Ray-Ray was there every night, playing the out-of-tune piano and watching his fingers dance across the keys, barely touching them, and making music that pushed up against the voices of the grown up choirs. There was something special about Ray-Ray and Bread wanted to get close to him, to be his friend. She knew if she could pray long and hard enough and get to church every Sunday God would make it happen.*

### *Sunday*

I remember Sunday services at my home church in Sweetwater. The announcements. The laying on of hands. Getting caught up and slain in the Holy Ghost. Laughter. Hollering. Tears. Smiling. Crying. Jumping. Running. Dancing. Singing. It was a magnificent time.

Bulky bodies dressed in simple clothes made the scene overly-familiar. I was often surrounded by a sea of black bodies, ranging in color from beige to blue-black, bodies as tall as trees and as short as bushes, bodies as wide as watermelons and as thin as time. Wails rose in the air hanging over me like my mother's shadow and I looked up, mesmerized by red lips covered in cheap lipstick, the sticky kind that pulls apart like glue when you smack your lips, the kind that hair and lint get stuck to, the kind that stains your teeth, the kind you find in the bargain bin and in the trash can after just one use was on women's lips like unintentional smiles. Older women, church women, sat with their arms crossed in their lap and their pocketbooks hanging on their wrists. The purses all looked alike so they never sat them down, afraid someone might pick the wrong one up by mistake. The gaudy purses were empty except for crumpled up dollar bills, a house

key (they didn't need car keys because most of these women didn't know how to drive and either walked or came with their husbands or neighbors), Kleenex to pass around in case somebody cried, and pictures of great-grandchildren they had to show just in case somebody asked. Only some women had colored lips, but all of them had on dresses. It wasn't decent for a woman to wear pants to church but loose fitting dresses hid the aging bodies of grown women and the blooming bodies of young girls.

The ancient pastor, already sweating, sat in the pulpit. Reverend Carmichael had been the preacher there for years and he was all I knew at the time. He talked slow but no matter what he said the congregation responded in kind. "God is good," he began.

"All the time!" the church called back, even the small children, because they were used to the routine, the same every Sunday morning.

"Let us give a hand to the choir who will bless us with a selection from the hymnal."

I sat up straight, making sure that my eyes could reach as far back as the last pews by the door and as far up as the last row of the choir stand. This is it, I thought to myself. The microphone is passed to my mother and I am excited. My mother's voice is like a soprano blade, cutting people's insides open until all they can do is cry their eyes out because of the blissful pain, the release, the beauty of her speech. The song, I Won't Complain, was a congregation favorite at our nondenominational church.

"God has been good to me." The choir's voices met together at the center of the room sounding good together while their robes swayed to and fro and their hands clapped in perfect synchronization. The choir made the modest church feel like a mansion, and the little choir sounded one hundred voices strong.

“If we had ten thousand tongues,” Reverend Carmichael began, “Lord, we could not thank you enough!”

The tongues sounded off like a siren, inaudible ramblings elevating to a concert of voices, “Ella-nawnda-bo-sha-ta!” First slow, then fast, until it almost sounded like a foreign language, deliciously falling from the lips of the women who were truly good and who truly believed. I could not remember having ever heard a man speak in tongues, unless he was demonstrating in a sermon or speaking against it altogether. A man, especially a man of God, could not be outdone by a woman. Reverend Carmichael stood up, looked at Bread admirably, and stomped his feet against the hardwood floors until it sounded like a thousand drums.

The claps and “thank you Jesuses” had already started.

I tried to resist standing up, but in church, when the song sounds real good, you stand up and clap to show the choir that they really ushered in the Spirit. It was especially wonderful when a child, anyone less than 20, stood up, clapped, raised their hands, or seemed genuinely touched by God.

Usually, the only ones standing were women who worked jobs that gave them barely enough money to get by, who had more children than they knew what to do with who were so bad they couldn’t barely stand them they damn self, who had boyfriends who wouldn’t be their husbands or husbands who they wished were just boyfriends who wouldn’t come to church on Sunday to save their lives. These women were ready to give their all and all to God, looking up, crying, hooping, hollering, and having a fit every Sunday like in their head they were begging God to just come and take them right then and there. The Holy Ghost made you run around the church, jump up and down like your

feet were on fire, and lay on the floor and have fits and seizures. I didn't want to get happy, I just wanted to feel grown. I figured that standing up showed everyone I was paying attention, letting that music get all down in my soul.

"God is here!" Reverend Carmichael announced, as if God had only just then entered the sanctuary. People applauded his presence, clapping their hands, wiping their eyes, and pulling out their bibles. Everyone knew that Reverend Carmichael was a true man of God because he had endured tremendous loss and still held on to his faith. His commitment to Christ was a testament to the congregation, old and young alike. We followed his instructions obediently and listened to his words intently.

"Turn with me to Matthew. . ."

*Ray-Ray*

*"Sho' is hot out here." Doughboy, Little's friend from the Bottom was fanning himself with his hands and sweating like a hooker in church. Doughboy was waiting for Little, who had run in the house to get something, while Bread watched him from the wood plank that led to the backdoor. Doughboy was more stomach than anything else and the only young person Bread knew of that wore glasses. He couldn't see a lick without them.*

*"Sho' is!" Little said, opening and slamming the door fast, trying not to let the hot air in or the cool air out.*

*"Ray-Ray Carmichael on his way over here to meet us." Doughboy announced.*

*"Sho' is!" Little repeated.*

*"No, he ain't." Bread hadn't seen Ray-Ray since she had been to church revival a month earlier, and didn't expect to see him again unless she went with Cake to church,*

*which she felt less inclined to do as the days went on. The hotter it was the more lazy she felt.*

*“Yes he is and we’s going swimming wit him.” Little seemed proud of himself, all of his permanent teeth crowding in his mouth like broken crayons in the box.*

*“Y’all fools can’t swim,” Bread said, swatting flies and waving to a car that was driving slow on the dirt road.*

*“We gon’ learn, stupid!” Little said, moving closer to Doughboy to get out of Bread’s reach so she couldn’t strike him for his smart mouth.*

*Bread knew that Ray-Ray had come from up north and had probably learned how to swim in real swimming pools. Little and Doughboy, bragging and lying and trying to be as good as Ray-Ray had probably claimed that they, too, could swim and that there was a decent place in Sweetwater to do it. Ray-Ray would have never suspected them of lying because he hadn’t lived in Sweetwater long enough to know that there was no need to know how to swim because the creeks and rivers were so dirty that nobody would put their feet in, let alone their whole bodies. And Ray-Ray was too good to know that bragging and lying were mostly the same thing in Sweetwater, especially to the children.*

*“Here he come,” Doughboy said fixing his glasses on his face and watching the lanky figure approach the house. Ray-Ray had a straw hat on his head, hiding his hair so you could only see his childlike face and his teeth from his open smile.*

*“How y’all doing?” Ray-Ray asked, walking fast until he got close enough for them to see it was him. “North Carolina summers is mighty hot.”*

*Bread didn’t say anything, just nodded, to keep from looking at Ray-Ray in the face. She could tell by his bare arms that he was already sweating, wetness had*

*saturated his t-shirt under his arms and on his chest. She would have offered him a drink of water but she didn't have time.*

*"Y'all ready to go?"*

*Ray-Ray's question was directed at the boys but Bread almost answered saying yes, but caught herself. Instead she asked, "Where y'all going?"*

*"None of your business." Little was afraid of Bread, but knew she wouldn't smack him upside his head with his friends around, and as the youngest in the neighborhood he wanted to show his friends, especially Ray-Ray, that he didn't take no mess from no girl, especially his nappy-headed sister. Seven years old and hard-headed he smacked his lips and stood between Ray-Ray and Doughboy.*

*"Don't get too big for your britches," Bread said, trying to look disinterested. She didn't really care to know, though she figured she would be the first one Twiggy asked when she got home. Ray-Ray, with his beautiful eyes and wide gap in his teeth frowned at Little as if he had been disobedient to an adult and not just his twelve-year old sister.*

*"We going to the creek down by the church. We'll be right back." Ray-Ray said smiling, but not really realizing it. Ray-Ray had good manners, even with other children, and all of the neighborhood boys wanted to be like him and wanted to impress him. At thirteen, he was a few years older than Bread which she appreciated knowing after she decided she might love him. He had hazel eyes that made up for every other flaw around his face, mostly scars from what looked like deep cuts. His hair grew in large, unbrushed, untamed patches and was hidden by the hat he wore. His skinny arms looked like they might just break if you held them too tight but Bread knew she didn't have to*

*hold him to love him. She could learn how to do it from a distance, the way her parents did when they were mad at each other. The way every couple in Sweetwater did. They rarely ever touched.*

*Ray-Ray wore a cross around his neck that he reached for periodically, as if to make sure it was still there. Bread imagined Ray-Ray would be a preacher, like his daddy, when he grew up. He already seemed to love God enough.*

*“It’s over by the church, you know where that is?” Ray-Ray asked.*

*Bread nodded.*

*“You can let Ms. Twiggy know when she get home, but we’ll be back long before dark. I’ll take care of Little.”*

*Little and Doughboy smiled and paused to congratulate each other for being invited on an adventure with Ray-Ray.*

*“Gimme five!” Doughboy stuck out his hand for Little to hit, “On the black side,” (he turned his hand over to show his brown skin and knuckles, “. . .stick it in the hole,” (he made a circle with his free hand that Little pushed his index finger in, “.what do you got?”*

*“Soooooooooul!” Little said slowly. Ray-Ray looked at them suspiciously, curious about their hand game and looked back at Bread and winked. Bread’s heart sank and she smiled back and watched them until she could not see the backs of their heads anymore. She figured they would be joined by however many knucklehead boys were outside on their way up to the creek. It was a little over a mile walking.*

*\**

*The ambulance raced past the house around five o'clock in the afternoon, before Cake or Twiggy were home. In fact, it was word that her child had drowned that brought Twiggy home from work early. Rumors spread like a disease and there was word that a little black boy had drowned. Twiggy's heart was beating so fast and so loud she could hear it ringing in her ear drums. Everything was moving in slow motion and a trip that would usually take five minutes, seemed to take hours. When she got home everybody was outside.*

*Poolie Boy, a neighborhood boy in his twenties, was there holding Little and told Twiggy about how he had fallen in the creek on the deep end and sank to the bottom like a piece of cement. Ray-Ray, the only boy that could swim, jumped in and pushed Little to the shallow end of the pond so the other boys could fish him out but not before the sink hole suctioned him down by his feet, his hands flailing until all the boys could see were the tips of his fingers. When he never came up the boys tried to hold their breath long enough to reach him, but when they opened their eyes in the water all they saw was black. It took a while before someone took off running to get help, screaming and hollering and flailing their arms in the air the way Ray-Ray had before he went down. Poolie Boy and Crip were walking the road when they heard Doughboy and some other neighborhood boys calling for help. Poolie Boy ran down there but couldn't find Ray-Ray's body anywhere. They kept looking, way past the time the ambulance and fire trucks came, but it was if Ray-Ray had disappeared. They were still looking for him and his parents had opened the church so people could pray for a miracle.*

*Twiggy couldn't help but feel relieved and for that her guilt made her cry. She remembered Ray-Ray, the boy that Little talked about all the time and the one who called*

*her ma'm and Ms. Twiggy. If what Poolie Boy was saying was right, this man child, this beautiful boy with eyes like Cake's, had saved her child's life. She wanted to shake Little, to find a switch firm enough to last while she whooped him for jumping in water any way. She wanted to beat him but all she could do was hold him and squeeze him tight, pulling him away and looking at his face, before hugging him again. And even though Twiggy wasn't much for praying, that was what she was doing when her eyes were closed, praying and trying to catch tears before they fell. When Cake got home his arms were long enough to wrap around Twiggy and make her feel all right.*

\*

*It took days for them to drag the pond and find Ray-Ray's body, which was folded down like a leaf and bloated when they pulled it out in a net. His body had gotten caught in the sink hole and tangled in a patch of tree roots that grew obsessively under the water. His skin was almost transparent and they knew him, mostly, by his hair, still spongy and thick, the wide gap in his teeth and the cross around his neck. His clothes were mostly gone.*

*Ray-Ray's parents had church as normal the next Sunday, saying that the Lord works in mysterious ways but stopping every few minutes to cry. When a child dies it is always a wake up call to adults who aren't living right, motivation for them to do better. The church was packed and some people stood shoulder to shoulder behind the last pews and some people stood outside of the church by open windows and some men stood by the trees smoking cigarettes but within earshot to listen to Rev. Carmichael preach from the open church windows reading from Ecclesiastes and saying how there was a time and a season for everything.*

*“A time to be born and a time to die,” he said, trying to sound strong, trying to sound full of faith, but all the while questioning God more than he ever had, his only child laying dead in a wooden box before him.*

*His wife sat silently in the first pew, looking as if she had cried all the tears her body could create. Her expression was sullen, empty, and hateful. When Ray-Ray first died she could not be comforted and called all the church women from her prayer group over to pray her baby back alive. They said scriptures over his body, poured oil on his head, prayed, pleaded and moaned all night long but come daybreak Ray-Ray was still dead. When he didn’t come back to life she lost all of her faith in God and swore after her son was in the ground she would never step foot in another church and would never believe in anything again.*

*“I feel right sorry for her,” Twiggy had said when she covered up a bowl of greens she was sending for the repass. The thought of one of her own children lying in a casket haunted her. “It ain’t natural for a child to die.”*

*Bread sat beside Cake at the funeral. Twiggy stayed at home with Little, who didn’t want to go, didn’t want to see what Ray-Ray looked like dead. Bread did. She went to the funeral to see Ray-Ray’s face one more time, decide right then and there if she could in fact love him and if she always would. The casket was closed, though, since Ray-Ray’s mother had threatened to pull him out and demand that God take her and let her baby live.*

*The folk at the funeral home said Ray-Ray’s casket couldn’t be open anyway on account that he didn’t look like himself—that he was in the water so long that he had bloated up, turned two shades lighter and his eyes had popped out. There was only so*

*much they could do and with no eyeballs in his head, there was little they could do to keep his eye lids from sinking in.*

*Bread secretly wished to find the eyes, floating at the top of the pond. She would grab them, put them in her pocket and roll them around like marbles. She would keep them forever to remind her of Ray-Ray. But the eyes never popped up—Bebe said fish probably ate them.*

*After the funeral, Mrs. Carmichael left her husband and moved back up north, saying that Sweetwater was a cursed place and she would never come back to the place that claimed her son. Raymond, Sr. stayed, holding his bible tight, wearing the cross his son wore when he died, and preaching the Word of God at Antioch Church.*

*Bread didn't get to tell Ray-Ray she loved him and Little was so traumatized that he was afraid to go to sleep, thinking he wouldn't wake up and would die like Ray Ray did. Then he wouldn't take a bath for weeks, saying he was afraid of water. When she couldn't take it anymore, Twiggy whipped him until he got in the wash tub.*

*"I'm scared I'll get drowned! I'm scared I'll get drowned!" Little yelled hysterically, screaming and out of breath.*

*"You damn fool, I didn't say to put your head in the water."*

*"Leave the boy alone, Twig." Cake came to Little's rescue, "He done lost a friend and that hurt him. He can't help it!"*

*"Well you wash him then," Twiggy said, losing patience. Cake lifted the boy up in his arms, cradled him, felt sorry for him, and took his time running a warm rag over his body, after wringing all the water out.*

*Not many nights after this Cake left for work and never came back.*

*Peace Be Still*

My mother's (Bread) life was punctuated by tragedies. Love and loss seemed inextricably connected realities during her childhood in Sweetwater. People were going in and out, but mostly staying in. The community populated itself from the inside out and families kept growing, only occasionally managing a temporary escape. The instable stability of a two-parent home was taken away when her father left, yet it was the "peace and quiet" she and my aunt say they most remember after his departure. They were almost glad their father was gone because the fighting stopped. The house stayed still for a long time. But then they started missing him.

When I asked Twiggy about Cake leaving, her face remained unchanged. There had been a fight, as usual, but this time he had made her bleed. Put a hole in her head. Mad as hell she told him if she ever came back she would kill him, and he knew she meant it that time.

"Did you miss him?" I ask.

"After while I did, but I still didn't want him around no mo'. I fought til' I got tired and I didn't want to fight him no mo'. I ain't never had to fight another man like that."

"But you loved him?"

"I reckon." Twiggy says the words slow and bitter-like, as if she does not want to admit any lingering feelings for her long-dead husband.

After Cake left, Twiggy moved on to other relationships with men, without the benefit of a divorce.

“I ain’t need no divorce,” she said remembering, “I would have a man ‘til I got tired of him and then get me another one.”

\*

As I settled back in the community I was sent on daily errands in the town that oftentimes included going to the post office, the bank, or the mini grocer. At first I resisted the requests to put on some shoes and run to the store. The trailer was like a safe haven, protecting me from being seen or judged while home. My grandmother loved my being there, serving as her company and chauffeur around the town. I would take her to the bank to cash her check, ride with her to visit friends and relatives, and she would tell me about what the town was like when she was growing up, where she used to live, where she was born, what the land looked like 50 years ago. Our excursions lent themselves to remarkable fieldnotes but she usually sent me on errands alone.

On one such outing my grandmother instructed me to get some “old sausage” from the mini grocer. I park her car in one of the too-few spaces and walk in, realizing that the store has not changed at all since I was a little girl. There have been no renovations, no enhancements, no fancy upgrades. If you are from Sweetwater and your account is in good standing, you can still get items on store credit without a credit card by signing your name in a receipt book. I wonder if my grandmother still uses that receipt book.

I walk around the cluttered store to the back where the white butcher is standing in his white apron. For some reason I feel intimidated but stand in front of him, avoiding eye contact, looking at the various cut meats on display.

“My grandmother wants some old link sausage, at least two weeks old.”

“Whose your grandma?”

“Twiggy.”

When I say her name he smiles, knowing her but not knowing me.

“She said to tell you you’d better send her the right kind of meat,” I add, feeling it is safe to do so.

The butcher smiles wide and nods.

“About how much?”

“Three dollars worth,” I say. He measures the meat with his hands and then puts it on a scale, wraps it in white paper, and writes a price in black crayon across the top.

“Tell Twiggy I said hey, y’hear.”

I smile, regretting that I don’t know his name but promising nonetheless to relay the message. I take the meat to the register where I read a sign that says, “If you need it, we got it. If we don’t got it, you don’t need it.” I re-read the handwritten sign over and over again so I don’t forget it and pass the cashier a five dollar bill and wait for change. I can’t help but notice the confederate flag lighters that are for sale on the counter. I pretend not to notice as I shove the tattered bills and loose change in my pocket and walk out with the bag. The racist paraphernalia reminds me that I both belong and don’t belong here. By the time I have been in Sweetwater for three weeks my visits to the store are less awkward. The butcher remembers me, the lighters don’t bother me. That revelation scares me.

\*

“Who are your people?” The words are given to me in almost a whisper when I am out in public, alone. Pleasant and familiar faces greet me with the words and a look

that says, “I know you.” For some reason I feel uncomfortable because I don’t always have that same recognition. To name my people I immediately say my grandmother’s name, who they know, nodding now, smiling, and before I have a chance to call out the name of my mother, they have said it. “You look just like her,” they say, now feeling connected to me somehow. And I smile politely, feeling somehow guilty for not knowing who they are or who their “people” are. “Tell your mama and them I said hey,” and I find it impolite to ask for a name so instead I memorize their features, their voice, their skin, their face so I can describe them to my grandmother who will, after trading descriptions with me, know who I am talking about and then simply nod, satisfied. I greet and am greeted by dozens of strangers during my visit—who know who I am but I don’t know who they are. I wonder, however, if I really know who I am.

As a researcher I am intrigued but as a (former) community member I feel uncomfortable that I am not able to recognize my people. Their faces have changed and over the years my ability to remember who they are has faded. We seem so distant. I seem so distant.

### *Conclusion*

In the next chapter my personal memories of growing up in Sweetwater are interspersed with a continued narrative about Twiggy and Bread. A shift in focus to mother-daughter relationships serve as alternatives to unhealthy and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships between men and women. As expressed in their interviews rural black women identify fatherlessness, abandonment, and fairy tales of white ideals as the reasons their relationships with men fail. Oftentimes they substitute their desire to be loved by a man with devotion to their children.

Chapter Four: “A Squadron of Conflicting Rebellions”

*Black Mother Woman (Audre Lorde, 1997)*

I cannot recall you gentle  
yet through your heavy love  
I have become  
an image of your once delicate flesh  
split with deceitful longings.

When strangers come and compliment me  
your aged spirit takes a bow  
jingling with pride  
but once you hid that secret  
in the center of furies  
hanging me  
with deep breasts and wiry hair  
with your own split flesh  
and long suffering eyes  
buried in myths of little worth.

But I have peeled away your anger  
down to the core of love  
and look mother  
I Am  
a dark temple where your true spirit rises  
beautiful  
and tough as chestnut  
stanchion against your nightmare of weakness  
and if my eyes conceal  
a squadron of conflicting rebellions  
I learned from you  
to define myself  
through your denials (p 68).

\*

The words of Audre Lorde’s (1997) poem, *Black Mother Woman*, resonate as I read them aloud, forcing the words from my mouth and meaning them. The black mother

woman she describes reflects to me a mirror of my own reckoning. Women who teach their daughters through actions, not words, and have expectations of realized dreams and destinies unextinguished by the guile of words, abandonment of men, rejection of opportunities, and racist acts hidden behind artificial smiles and blank, staring eyes. My mama's wounds were real and open wide from life circumstances that split her open like a draw bridge, pouring in and seeping out pain so unimaginable it remained unspoken. I was confused when she told me that motherhood did not scare her. Many of her lessons to me were shrouded in an assumption that I was better than she was and would in turn be better off than she had been. So she made sacrifices, along with her mother, my grandmother, to see if they could make their crooked paths straight through me.

We don't talk about what it means to live in the South because it is all we know. And though the words were never spoken between us, my mother shared with me lessons of survival and habits that would ensure my independence both inside and outside our rural community.

We don't talk about existing in a world where as women of color we are viewed through lenses of negativity.

We don't speak of women's bodies or women's needs and desires.

We don't say we are poor. We learn to hold our tongues.

*"Woman's Talk"*

*quiet ways*

*woman's talk—*

*easy*

*slanted lines*

*as eyes*

*meeting together*

*somewhere in the middle*

*looking sideways*

*pains prosperity*

*foreign tongues*

*speaking urgently and fast*

*what were the right words*

*dirty mouths and tired*

*lazy tongues*

*take turns*

*like see-saws*

*eyes of contempt and worry at once*

*fade into laughter*

*by chance loving me*

*haunting me*

*wrapping me up like*

*so many tears*

*that fall*

*silently into muted pillows*

*that capture  
suppressed screams  
and sadness*

*chasing God  
moving mountains  
making miracles  
as mothers*

*daughters dancing gracefully on the lines of obscurity*

*fading in and out  
going back and forth  
between  
a mother's fantasies  
and a woman's legacy*

*my sanity, certainly  
was not tangible*

I was a difficult daughter. My mother struggled to balance her dreams and the possibilities she envisioned for her daughters. She gave me my earliest knowing of what it meant to be a woman, a mother. The roles she played were paramount. Her presence large in my small world. Her expectations daunting. She wanted me to save her—

dreams of escape. The roles she played. Mother. Wife. Sister-friend. Church daughter. She had ambitions outside of Sweetwater. But too many limits by the roles she was given.

I was a difficult daughter, but my mother was powerful. She learned it from her mother. Took it all in when she was growing up. Her strength. Her unintentional beauty. Her conscience. She took on too much and was given too little. A mother perhaps before her time, perhaps in spite of herself, perhaps in lieu of her dreams.

Her first child was a fish dream.

### *Fish Dream*

*Brown-skinned and holy, Sister Whitehouse gave up the sins of the world for culinary delights of the pork variety. Chitterlings. Fried pork skins. Pig's feet. Pork brains. Cured ham. She was short and enormous, her fat arms and legs meeting each other in a hill of rolls that was her stomach. She was always breathing hard, always walking slow, and always wearing Vaseline on her lips so that they stood out when she spoke (she didn't believe in wearing make up or lipstick, she wasn't a heathen). Bread had often thought that underneath all of those rolls behind all of those years of hard living, Sister Whitehouse would have been a pretty woman. If she didn't give up the other sins and live off prayer and pork she probably would have been better off. Bread had never seen pictures but she had heard the grown folk tell stories about how Sister Whitehouse had let herself go after she got married, and about how she used to have a nice shape and keep her neck clean. Now, she seemed most miserable, her shape was long gone, buried beneath the folds of skin she hid behind crossed arms in the company*

*of unfamiliar company, and her neck was dark black. Twiggy had said the more big Whitehouse got, the more saved and sanctified. They had gotten pregnant around the same time, Whitehouse and Twiggy, but Whitehouse found a woman who had a home remedy for unwanted pregnancies. When that didn't work and she kept growing big with child she went to where they used a metal hangar, bleeding and crying something awful for days. After that she couldn't get pregnant no more and didn't bother telling the would-be father, who married her out of guilt when she never got back right after what he had made her do. They were distant cousins but acted like they didn't know, and nobody in Sweetwater ever said anything about it, especially since they couldn't have children anyway.*

*Whitehouse's mother had blamed her womanish body and her heathenish ways for getting pregnant. She begged Whitehouse, her only daughter, to "live right and for the Lord," before she died. Wilmer (Sister Whitehouse) honored her mother's wishes and hid her "womanish" body behind an unhealthy appetite and used every Sunday to repent, thankful for a husband too old and too haunted by his sins to leave their loveless marriage. They were both too ashamed of having sex, which the children called, "doing the nasty" because anything that sweet and that good had to be sin. And the ways men often rubbed their hands on the insides of little girls' shirts and sat them on their laps in church were all muted subjects. Girls learned to keep secrets and grown women learned to be ashamed for anything that had been done wrong to them when they were younger. As children they were made to feel somehow responsible for being girls. As women they were made to feel somehow guilty for being sexual.*

*Sister Whitehouse was at the church every time the doors were open and was known for church-hopping, going from one ministry to the other every time somebody hurt her soft feelings or brought up her past. She and Johnson Davis had been married for as long as she had known Twiggy, twenty years, but they were almost never at the same place at the same time. They went to separate churches, slept in separate rooms, and avoided each other altogether. She knew he spent time with other lady friends but she didn't mind because he always came home. On Sundays his absence gave her time to herself. This Sunday, to avoid going home to an empty house, Whitehouse decided to visit with Twiggy. Everybody at the church had been praying Twiggy would make it without a husband. After all of those years and all of those children and all of that fighting Cake finally up and left her with bills and mouths to feed. Whitehouse stopped by with vegetables from her garden, which she figured, would help out. She put a re-used brown paper bag full of sweet potatoes, cucumbers, corn and collard greens on the table.*

*"Lately, I brought some stuff from the garden," Whitehouse announced as she came in and sat down, making herself at home. She and Twiggy called each other by their last names, something they had picked up from working together at the chicken plant. Twiggy didn't hug Whitehouse but thanked her, peeking in the bag and putting it on the floor. She was slow cooking black-eyed peas.*

*"Been dreaming of fish, Lately." Whitehouse said her words slow, watching for Twiggy's reaction, but there was none. Disappointed, Whitehouse helped herself to a pickled egg from the open jar on the kitchen table and fell back into the chair, leaning over it with her egg, looking for salt or pepper.*

*“Well,” Twiggy said finally, watching Whitehouse bite the soft boiled egg that was pink on the outside and white on the inside, “it ain’t me. I can’t have no more chuluns.”*

*“Is that right?”*

*“Hell, you knowed that.”*

*“Well, you don’t figure Cake un went around here and got no other woman pregnant, do ya?” Finally, Whitehouse had managed to work Cake’s name into the conversation.*

*“Better not,” was all Twiggy would say, rolling her eyes and patting her back pocket for her cigarettes. “Hell, what you been doing, you the one dreaming.”*

*Whitehouse couldn’t remember the last time she had made love to her husband, or any man for that matter. Any late night pantings from her bedroom were her petitions to God. On those rare occasions when she wanted to be held and touched she would beg her husband to put his hands on her, to make love to her, but it happened too infrequently to make a baby, even if her body was able. Twiggy knew that.*

*“What about Bread? She way past child bearing age and you know she been seen walking the road with that fast girl, what’s her name, down the road?”*

*Twiggy thought about it but couldn’t call the girl’s name. “I know who you talking ‘bout,” Twiggy said, finally taking a drag from her cigarette, “I don’t ‘llow that girl ‘round here, sassying grown folk.”*

*“Well,” Whitehouse was beating around the bush, leaning back in the chair ‘til Twiggy thought it might break, “they say that fast girl got a baby herself.”*

*“Well there go your fish dream.”*

*“Nol, Twig, I don’t believe it is. I don’t even know that child’s name. How would I be having dreams about her? Maybe you should check Bread.”*

*Twiggy could feel her temperature rising and blew out smoke, watched it disappear and cut her eyes over to her friend. Twiggy was fiercely protective of her children. She never asked them when someone accused them of something—she simply came to their defense and rescue, even when they were in the wrong. To her, that is what a good mother does.*

*“Let me tell you something,” Twiggy started, “that’s my damn chile. Ain’t none of my children asked to be here. Long as I’m living she’ll have a place to stay and something to eat.”*

*“And what if this fish dream is hers?”*

*“Then I guess we gon’ have us a baby around here.” Twiggy took one last long drag from her cigarette, held the smoke in her mouth a while, and put the butt in a cup of cold coffee on the table.*

### *Pus In the Blood*

*Bread fell in love with a light skinned boy with a big smile and thin lips. She was eighteen years old and newly out of school. Her father had been gone for five summers and the void he left in her had transformed to a need she didn’t recognize at first, a need that drew her to the boy. There was nothing extraordinary about him, other than that he was not from the country. His citified ways reminded her of Ray-Ray and she knew she could easily love him. It was his smile, bright and magnificent in front of a dismal backdrop that caused Bread to feel so drawn to him. He had seduced her by accident,*

*not knowing that all he had to do was look at her long, reach out his arms and wrap them around her, and smile that sweet smile at her like he had never shown anybody else in the world his teeth except her. And that is how Bread felt around Uli, silly, foolish, and like there wasn't anybody else in the world except her. And him. The broken bottles and her broken heart and her parents' broken marriage and the broken down cars and the broken windows and the broken fences and the broken down signs that told you where to go and how to get there and the broken dreams and the broken promises and the broken English and the broken focus all seemed to mend themselves when Uli was around. He made her life better but she was too young and too naïve to know, at first, that the ache in her chest and the ache in her middle parts might be love, or lust, or a combination of both of those feelings. Uli would show her. By accident.*

\*

*With peach fuzz growing under his lips Uli stood in the doorway after knocking. Bread wasn't sure she had ever seen anybody that beautiful in person, up that close. He was tossing a basketball from one hand to the other.*

*"Y'all want to play some ball?" His words were regular but Bread couldn't take her eyes off of his mouth. His voice seemed to come at her in waves and slow motion.*

*"What you say?"*

*"Y'all want to play some ball?"*

*"Y'all who?"*

*"You and Butter that's who."*

*"O." Bread frowned but hoped Uli didn't notice. She assumed he was over at her house looking for Butter, her best friend, who would have been the second prettiest*

*thing she ever seen in person. She and Butter were like fric and frac, when you saw one you saw the other. They had been best friends since Butter's mother married Black Charles and she moved in next door with her seven brothers and sisters.*

*"Butter gone away this weekend to see her real daddy."*

*Uli didn't look surprised that Black Charles wasn't Butter's daddy by blood. He just stood there like he did in her dreams, not saying nothing, throwing the ball between his hands, daring it to drop.*

*"Well, you want to play?"*

*"Sho," was all Bread could say as she walked out before Uli tried to walk in. Only people she wholly trusted were allowed to come in her house, people who she knew wouldn't think less of her, people who wouldn't go around talking about how raggedy or dim-lit her house was, people who wouldn't pay attention to the fact that there weren't any family pictures hanging on the walls and that nearly every window was cracked or broken, people whose own house was just like hers. Uli wasn't from Sweetwater and he seemed like the kind of person that lived in a real house, a nice one.*

*"Where everybody at?" Bread asked once they got to the basketball goal.*

*"I don't know." Uli threw the ball to Bread. "I got dropped off up the road and got here to find wasn't nobody home. You'd think it was Sunday, church time."*

*"Uhm, hm." Bread caught the ball and threw it through the net-less hoop. The homemade goal was pushed against a dead tree and held up with rusty nails. She looked around her and back at Uli and didn't want to think about what she must look like. She grabbed a fistful of hair and pulled, wishing she had her afro pick, or better yet wishing she had wavy hair like her sisters and older brother.*

*“Where you learn to play ball so good?”*

*Bread looked at him like he was speaking a foreign language. She knew she could look at him in the face while he talked and not be caught staring.*

*“Uhm-um,” she said, hunching her shoulders forward and throwing the ball through the hoop again.*

*“I hear you and Butter is all the rage down there at y’all school. Play better than those white girls who go to the basketball camps and stuff.”*

*“We do all right. Coach said I coulda got a scholarship for college if I wanted to.”*

*“Why didn’t you want to?”*

*Bread didn’t know how to answer the question, besides saying that she was more scared of what she didn’t know than she was sure that she could play basketball. She and Butter had promised each other that they would go take the SAT together and then go to the same school, play on the same team, and stay together in one of the tiny rooms on campus. Bread chickened out and broke the promise. On the morning of the SAT she left her ID at home on purpose, knowing there wouldn’t be time to go get it and she would be off the hook. She was afraid of not knowing the answers, of not being smart enough for college, so she didn’t try. She knew enough to get by in school but she didn’t think she was smart enough to go to college.*

\*

*Bread lay underneath Uli feeling embarrassed and ashamed. Sex was different from what she expected. Different from what she had seen in movies or heard about in*

*the whispers of friends who had already done it. It was not romantic. It did not make her feel beautiful.*

*They sat in the silence for a while until Uli pulled his pants up, which made Bread feel vulnerable and stupid all at once. She hadn't known what to do next. She wondered if this meant he was her boyfriend now.*

*“Come on, I'll walk you back home now.”*

\*

*Bread knew something wasn't right. She had been sick on the stomach for days and every time she prayed and checked and then checked and went back to pray there was no sign of reddish-brown in her underwear. She didn't know a lot about her body but she knew what to come to expect of it and that every 28 days she would bleed and cry. This time she was crying without the bleeding. Something wasn't right.*

*“What ails you?” Twiggy's hand was on Bread's forehead testing for a temperature, “You need to go to the doctor?”*

*“I will,” Bread promised, taking the single bills her mother slid in between her hands.*

*“Gone to the clinic and get whatever medicine the doctor tells you to get.”*

*When the doctor told Bread she was pregnant she wanted to die right then and there on the table, with her underwear buried beneath her clothes in the corner. She wanted to die because she was embarrassed and scared and didn't know what to do with being pregnant. She always knew she wanted to have a child but she was confused about what it all meant. Nobody had ever talked to her about getting pregnant and now that*

*she had a baby inside her she didn't know what to do about it. It seemed all of her dreams and ambitions would have to be in that baby now.*

*Uli was sitting on the neighbor's porch, smiling that beautiful smile when Bread walked over. They hadn't seen each other or talked to each other since being in the woods and when she asked, nobody knew when he would be back through Friendship. He looked up at Bread and his smile was no more remarkable than she remembered it but she still thought to herself how she could spend all day just looking at him. He nodded his head to acknowledge her and went right on listening to the lies Bootsy, one of the drunks that walked the road, was telling to the group of boys that had gathered there.*

*Bread thought she would feel embarrassed or ashamed around Uli but she didn't. But she didn't feel special either.*

*"Hey, hey Bread. What you know good?" Bootsy extended his soiled hand to Bread to take and she gave it to him and frowned when he kissed it and gave it back to her with the foul-odor of his breath lingering up her arm.*

*"Nothin' Bootsy."*

*"That's a pretty girl there," Bootsy went on, as if Bread wasn't still standing there. "Don't look nothing like her mama, though."*

*"Uli, I got something to tell you about."*

*Uli was still smiling when he stood up without saying goodbye to his friends. They knew he would be right back and wouldn't go far. He and Bread started walking up the road, the opposite direction of her house. He didn't say anything, just waited for her to talk, and she wondered what he was thinking. She stopped walking once they had*

*gotten far enough for no one to hear their voices. She looked at his face and recognized, as if for the first time, how handsome he was. What would he want a baby with her for?*

*“I’m pregnate.” By the time Bread said the words she wasn’t sure if she had said them out loud or not. But then the look on Uli’s face told her that she had. He just looked at her like she was a ghost, or like she wasn’t right there in front of him at all, like it was just the thought of her that he was looking at.*

*“Say something,” Bread urged, worried.*

*“What you want me to say?”*

*“Something.” That wasn’t entirely true. What Bread wanted Uli to do was to grab a hold of her shoulders and squeeze them the way he did a month and a week before when she followed him in the woods to see what laying up against him would feel like. She wanted him to tell her that everything was going to be all right and that he loved her, even if he didn’t know it until that very moment, and that he loved the baby too. She wanted him to say he was going to rescue her from Sweetwater and take her away somewhere far enough so that people won’t know by the time she came back to visit that she had left pregnant. She wanted him to tell her that he was going to marry her and buy her a house that she could spend all day in sweeping the floor and trying out recipes. She wanted him to tell her how happy he was that she was the one that would make him a daddy. She wanted him to lie if he had to.*

*“Is it by me?”*

*Bread was startled by his words, like he had slapped her face with a cold hand. She wanted to curse him out like her mama would or punch him in the gut with her fist*

*and make him spit on the ground because she had done it before to boys bigger than him, but she felt paralyzed and mute.*

*“Yea, it’s by you,” she said simply, quietly, shame-faced. “I’ve only done it that one time.”*

*It. In a word she had reduced her moment of awakening to something that made it seem insignificant, though it was extraordinary. She had made something out of nothing—a life was created from curious bodies and anxious hands. Uli stood there silent again, as if it had never occurred to him that Bread could be carrying a child, his child. He looked at her stomach, it didn’t look like nothing was in it.*

*“What you gon’ do?”*

*“Uhm-uhm,” Bread said, close-mouthed, when really she wanted to say that she was going to have it. Love it. Take care of it. Whatever it is that grown women do when they have a baby out of the blue.*

*Uli didn’t say anything after that and Bread looked at his mouth and wondered if it would ever smile again. “Well, I just wanted you to know,” she said, still waiting for him to comfort her, love her. She started taking steps back toward home and looked back to see Uli still standing in the same place, staring off in the opposite direction. When she walked past the boys, still talking to Bootsy, she pretended she was invisible and that they couldn’t see her pass and pretended she couldn’t hear them, when they called after her asking where Uli had gone and if he was coming back.*

*“What did the doctor say?” Twiggy’s hand was on Bread’s forehead again and she had been crying.*

*“He say I got pus in the blood. It’ll pass,” Bread lied, eyeballing her mother and hoping she would believe it.*

*“Puss in the blood?” Twiggy said it out loud while she went over it in her mind, “What the hell is that? Where you get that from?”*

*“He didn’t say.”*

*“It ain’t cancer is it?” Twiggy feared that her child was about to die and was too scared to tell her the truth.*

*“No mam. He said it’ll pass.”*

*“He give you something for it?”*

*“Just a shot. Said to get some rest.”*

*“Well, you get some rest then.”*

\*

*“Teeth and tongue in the same mouth and they don’t fall out and here y’all is can’t get along in the same house. Too many damn women in this house to have peace. Now, you know Bread don’t feel good. You just do what the hell I said do.” Twiggy’s voice carried through every room in the house. She had had enough of Peaches’s backtalk.*

*Sixteen and smelling herself, Peaches had been responsible for the bulk of the housework since Bebe and Junior had moved out and Little was always gone and as a fatherless boy, not expected to do much more than run the streets. Peaches felt that Bread had been playing sick for a day too long.*

*“You act like Bread is dying or something,” Peaches challenged.*

*“She got pus in the blood.”*

*“Pus in the blood?” Peaches frowned at her mother’s ignorance. “All them youngins you had and you don’t know when somebody is pregnant?”*

*Peaches had said it before she realized it but was satisfied. Women had babies all the time and Bread wasn’t nothing special. She had a baby coming and wouldn’t call out who the daddy was.*

*Twiggy walked to the back room where Bread was laying down, asleep. She went in the room and left the door open behind her and leaned over Bread watching her sleep, looking at her stomach, that looked more bloated than pregnant. Bread opened her eyes and stared at her mother with alarm.*

*“You pregnant?” Twiggy said it as much as a statement as a question and Bread couldn’t form the words with her mouth to respond. Suddenly and unexpectedly she began to cry, as much from relief as being sorry.*

*She expected Twiggy to ask about the father, but she didn’t. She thought Twiggy might slap her across her face, but she didn’t.*

*Twiggy’s words trailed her out of the room, “All right then. Stop crying.”*

*When the baby was born everybody knew from looking at it that it was Uli’s. The yellow baby laid still in Bread’s arms looking like somebody else’s child. She had almond eyes, a thick head of hair, and thin lips that all but disappeared when she closed them shut, but pushed out pink and round when she pouted. They were her daddy’s lips. Bread fell in love with her all at once.*

*The baby took all of Bread’s color and she turned dark, like a shadow was sitting on her face, and neck, and hands. Tired and restless, Bread didn’t look at all like herself,*

*as if she had literally become another person when she pushed that baby out. Twiggy looked at that light skinned baby and checked her ears and nail beds to see what color she would end up being. "That's gonna be a pretty baby. She gonna be red as a new penny."*

*She knew that babies were usually named after their daddies but she didn't have one and from the onset neither did her baby, so she decided to name the baby after her mother and grandmother, who both had the same name.*

*"What you gonna call her?" Twiggy asked, wrapping the baby up in a sheet.*

*Bread named her daughter Sadie California. Sadie was Twiggy's first name and California is where Uli had went away to go to school when he learned she was going to be born. California was on the other side of the world; as far as Bread was concerned it could have not been a place at all. Even if Uli was still in North Carolina he would never see her child. She called the baby California to remind herself every time she called her daughter's name, not to love her daughter's father. People usually frowned when she told them the baby's name, like it didn't fit, or they couldn't quite believe it. It was a white girl's name, an old person's name, a city name, it didn't seem to fit Sweetwater. But they seemed satisfied by the time she told them, "We call her Cali for short." And they would lean down and rub their hands through her hair, suspecting how in the world that pretty, light skinned baby could be Bread's. Some folk said the daddy must have been a white man.*

*Twiggy pretended to not be tickled to death that the baby was going to carry her name. She looked at the baby and loved it immediately, its little fingers wrapping around hers in a fist and holding on tight as if she knew these women were all she had in the*

*world. Everybody else fell in love with her the way people love babies that are beautiful, babies who make you glad that they are somehow related and connected to you. The family passed her around to find traces of themselves in her. “She definitely has that Bishop chin,” they would say, calling out Twiggy’s maiden name. “And look at that nose, that’s Cake’s nose,” they would say, seeing something that was really not there.*

*A second daughter would come two years later, after Bread met and married a sweet-talking man who told beautiful lies. When Lionel said he wanted to marry her and adopt her child, Bread thought her life could still be salvaged. They were married at the courthouse. There was no church, no gown, no congregation of witnesses or gathering to celebrate. It wasn’t the wedding she had imagined but the man that would be her husband stood in front of her and promised to love her forever, to take care of her, to be faithful to her. To have her, to hold her, in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, until death did them part. She believed him because he seemed to be her last chance of escape. There was still the opportunity to have the fairy-tale ending she had dreamed about—a white woman ending to her poor black girl beginning.*

*But Lionel had a way of lying like he was telling the truth. They lived together for two years before Bread packed her bags and moved back home to Sweetwater with two little girls trailing behind her.*

My father’s love of women was as destructive as my grandfather’s love of alcohol had been. Both addictions destroyed non-traditional but nuclear households that led to female-headed homes and children with no fathers or father-figures. I don’t remember

many men, other than my uncles, who I saw almost every day in my life. The men in church were ancient. They were handsome if you looked at them long enough and imagined them young. Their faces, like masks, held disappointments and trials. The men, many of them, had been away to war, or out of the state to work, and came back to Sweetwater with either appreciation, resentment, or a mixture of both. For recreation they played sports, drank liquor, made love, picked fights, played cards, listened to blues records and tried to forget they were the worst things to be at the time, poor and black. War had some of them out of their right mind and racism was out in the open, so natural that even black folk showed favoritism to light-skinned kin. The men looked the same on the outside but on the inside they were hurting the same way the women were but for different reasons. Unsure of how to fit the canonical representations of manhood, rural black men often took to gambling, drinking and womanizing. Their physical strength and sexual prowess served as substitutes for white masculinity. We were all products of our environment.

The children, particularly the girls, grew up with dysfunctional understandings of relationships. I was no exception. Having never witnessed a healthy, monogamous, long-term relationship and being estranged from my father, I often mistook kindness or attention from a man for love. No one had ever told me not to give myself away, so out of loneliness and emptiness I became infatuated with a boy just like my father. When he insinuated no one else would want me, I believed him. When he made love to other women I begged him to come back. When he threatened my life, I thought it meant he loved me. Opening my eyes took time and strength. After a while, fully conscious of my unhappiness and grateful no child was conceived through my desperate lust, I took my

life back. Everyone had different coping strategies. For my grandmother it was violence. For my mother it was religion and the education of her children. For me, it was depression.

*A (Rural) Black Girl's Blues*

*“So, so, so your draws*

*Wash them out with alcohol*

*Hang them up for Santa Claus”*

*But there was no Santa Claus that Christmas. By the sixth grade I developed a fascination with dying.*

*Death was final. Mysterious. Intriguing. Death impressed me. I envied it. I was tired of living, tired of breathing, hoping my heart would stop beating if it meant it would stop hurting. It felt like the world was suffocating me and the world only spanned as large as Sweetwater.*

*Death fascinated me. I imagined dying early, as a child, how glorious it would be to be remembered as the “poor child with so much life left to live.” I often wondered if my death would be a hardship. Would I really be missed or would my mother be relieved to have only one mouth to feed instead of two? Would my father even care, would he cry crocodile tears and sit in quiet indignation? Would it be devastating for everyone? For anyone? Would people scream and holler, run the aisles like they had the Holy Ghost, begging Jesus to give me back? Or would they be glad, would they not be surprised, would I be forgotten and not remembered? I wondered if I would die as I had lived, quietly and without much notice.*

*I longed to know what death was like. As days passed, death seemed more unattainable and out of my reach. No matter what I tried, pills, prayer, poisoned potions, nothing ever worked. But I still wanted it, dreamed about it, and wished for it more desperately than for white dolls on Christmas. Sweetwater was the perfect backdrop to my melancholy, gray and dismal days, especially in the winter. Everything happened in slow motion. Words, somehow caught in the air. God did not immediately come to my rescue.*

*I had no idea how to stand up for myself and I felt out place, like I didn't belong anywhere. Depression was white woman's shit. My family didn't know where I got that from. Where I had come from. Watched too much TV. Wanted too much attention. Was too much like my daddy.*

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*Adults, mostly women (because they were in charge of my world), moved around like they were walking in water, feet like cement, breathing silent but heavy breaths, eyes sharply on whatever it was the children were doing, especially me. Girl children were particularly worrisome in the summer and in the days leading to the fall, the change of seasons, the growing of the moon. It was pneumonia weather, the time of the year when it would be warm outside all day and night and then the cold air would sneak up on you the next day causing a terrible cold, the worst kind to have when it is hot and humid outside. And the days are longer.*

*Girls find more mess to get into and the women worried because they remembered their own Indian summers, curiosity and calamity meeting at the stumps of trees where boys sit together, sweat falling off their brow and mischief in their eyes. By*

*the time puberty finds them, boys have already started eyeing girls and standing close to them, rubbing up against them, trying to bribe them to see beneath their clothes. Their faces, masked with the dust of dirt dry from too many days of the sun with no rain, and yellow, jagged teeth that have not been brushed for days. They want to steal some sugar from the girls and see what happens when they rub their legs. They want to whisper in girls' ears and tell them lies. And the women don't want their daughters to be hussies or heifers. Women would watch the way I never met a stranger and smiled back when people offered me any ounce of affection. "Fast ass," they would say, shaking their heads and smiling like my youth put them in the mind of something.*

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*I am often afraid that Cali is the preferred child so I find ways to be mean to her. It does not work around adults but when it is just the two of us I can usually manage to pass on some of my insecurities to her. We are outside watching bugs crawl when I tell her she is not really black, but yellow. She has heard this before from me and usually the only insult I can throw at her is that she is "yellow as a banana." It does not do the intended harm. She doesn't care. Being yellow is not a bad thing but when she calls me "blackie" it does more harm than she probably intended. It hurt to be called black, it hurt worse than being ugly or dumb. Nobody had ever said it with words but by actions it was understood that there was something wonderful, better, altogether beautiful about being white or light as white. I was neither, a pitiful brown-skinned child with ashy knees and rusty elbows. The worse thing I could call my sister was yellow, which made her more beautiful and wonderful than I could ever be. So I decided to pretend that there was something wrong with her, since she had the lightest complexion in the household.*

*“Your daddy must be white,” I said, not knowing what it would mean if he was, but knowing that he wasn’t. Her father, Uli, was bright skinned but not white. We have both seen him before, Cali up close and me from a distance, watching, but Cali didn’t have a picture of him, in her mind or in her pockets. She could not prove me wrong but because we both knew I didn’t know what I was talking about, we let my accusation go. I suspected that she grew to look more and more like him as we got older because she looked less and less like us.*

*“That’s why Mama and them say you ain’t gonna be no good when you grown,” Cali boasted proudly. She knew how to break my heart and in that moment she did it quick and easy. I pretended not to care, which did not deter her from her retaliation. “They say you gonna be somewhere with a house full of youngins to feed,” Cali continued, watching me to make sure I was about ready to cry.*

*I wasn’t sure what that meant, no good, mouths to feed. Were they saying I would be just like them? Worse off than them? Better off than them?*

*“I ain’t studying you<sup>22</sup>,” I rolled my eyes and wished I could say more but words were not enough to penetrate Cali’s thick skin. “I don’t care what they say. I am going to be just fine when I am grown. Just fine.”*

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*Cali is too much of a goody-two-shoes to listen with me so while I hide under the table she goes outside to challenge the neighborhood boys to racing games or basketball. The women are drunk off house liquor and rum mixed with Pepsi until it turns the color of copper. Their words are delicious and forbidden which makes me more anxious to*

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<sup>22</sup> A phrase often used that means “I ain’t paying you no mind.”

*hear them. I listen in silence, our New York cousins talking in their New York accent and I am mesmerized and hypnotized at once. I recognize some of their words, some slurred from too much liquor and not enough sleep, others hidden behind cuss words that it takes me too many seconds to decipher.*

*“Lester ain’t worth a damn, never has been.”*

*“Sorry sumabitch. . .must have a dick dipped in gold.”*

*“That home-wrecking heifer call the house at least once a week to let her know he just crawled his trifling no count ass out of her bed to go home to hers. Aretha just hang up the phone. I would cuss her ass out and kick his ass out.”*

*“She don’t know what to do without him. Said he’s all she know.”*

*“Yea, and he knows it. He don’t want her but don’t want nobody else to have her.”*

*“Ain’t no man worth that much sorrow.”*

*Lester is a yellow skinned man with a smile that makes you forget bad things are possible. When I first see him I am not surprised that Aretha loves him and doesn’t know how to make herself stop. Aretha, my mother’s first cousin, is not ugly, but she is not beautiful either. Average-looking and pear shaped, she favors the side of the family that is so mixed together that everybody looks alike, mamas and daddies, sisters and cousins, aunts and nieces. Some of the relatives on that side are cousins in two ways, double kin, the offspring of first and second cousins who didn’t know until they had already made their own babies that they had the same blood running through their veins. Aretha is Twiggy’s sister’s child, which makes her my mama’s first cousin, my second. She doesn’t seem to have much use for children and all but ignored me when she saw me, after*

*noticing how much I favor my mother and commenting on how I was probably going to be a slut when I grow up. "Got the frame for it," she had said walking by. Mama said not to pay her any mind, said she was drunk, but I couldn't help but wonder why she would look at me and see something so dismal in my future. I don't understand why all of the women think I am going to be a young mother. Maybe being black, country and poor leaves me with no other options. At least Cali is light skinned.*

*Aretha's clothes hang loose on her body like she is trying to hide something, hide herself. But she smiles big and wide when Lester is in the room. His good looks give her something to be proud of. They are an odd couple, the kind that makes people look, stare and wonder how she got a man like that. The truth is, though, at least according to her sisters and cousins, that she doesn't really have him.*

*"He loves her, I guess, in his own way."*

*"What he loves is her money."*

*"If he really wanted to quit her he'd be long gone."*

*I cross my legs, listening, but getting bored at the repetition of their conversation. The husband is no-good and trifling, words I have heard before in relation to men. The woman he has been loving for as long as he has been loving his wife is someone his wife knows and he has apologized, cried, said he was sorry and begged to come home. She allowed him back for the sake of their children, all daughters, but he still sneaks off to see the other woman. He just can't leave her alone, they say. But he still likes to call Aretha his wife and tells the other woman when she tries to take up too much of his time how he will always go home to his wife. The women sitting at the table laugh a little bit, cuss for a while, and then say he ain't going no where because Aretha is his bread and*

*butter, which means that she is all he has and all he needs, but like men (they say) he just can't help himself, can't keep himself from running the streets and sleeping around. "It's just what men do," they say, "just how men are." I decide that I do not want a man to love me like that, but my father, who is everything to me and the only example of manhood I can use to compare, runs the streets and sleeps around. He is not present in my life except for odd days in the summer and one Saturday every other month when he comes to rescue us from "the country," as he calls it, for a day in the city to ride around in dirty cabs and visit his woman friends. They are pretty women with houses (apartments) that smell like fruit and they have blue water in their commodes.*

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*I linger around the threshold of the wash room and the hallway. I know from there I won't be seen, at least for a few minutes, and can listen. The trailer is dim, partly because the sun is going down and partly because the orange curtains make the inside of the house seem dark and dingy. Aunt Peaches is at the kitchen table, playing cards, three women who I am fascinated with sit on both of her sides and in front of her. They are gambling, playing tunk for fifty cents a hand.*

*"You gotta watch the dog that bring the bone cause she'll carry the bone. If they'll talk to you, they'll talk about you!" Peaches warned, a cigarette halfway in and halfway out of her mouth. The ashes on the edge of the cigarette are going to fall at any moment, but either Peaches doesn't notice or she doesn't care. Her hands are on the deck of cards she is dealing, talking like she has something more than just the cigarette in her mouth.*

*I am supposed to be outside where Peaches made me go since my mama wasn't home and she doesn't tend to other folks' children. She doesn't have any of her own and so she isn't watching anybody else's kids for free—even if we do all live in the same house. It is one of the many things I find odd about my aunt. She writes her name on the things she bought in the refrigerator. And even though I sneak a taste of store-bought food or steal a swallow of soda when I don't think she will notice, I am mostly too afraid to touch anything that belongs to Aunt Peaches.*

*“Ain't that Bread's youngest?” One of the women noticed my silhouette in the corner as she counted out fifty cents in dimes and nickels.*

*“Bird, didn't I tell you to get outside 'til your mama come home?”*

*I nod my head but don't move my body. I don't know if I am more embarrassed or afraid for my disobedience.*

*“Come on over here,” a woman with coconut skin and a head scarf called. “You ain't got to go out no damn doe. Peaches ain't none of your mama no way.”*

*I only half smiled as I walked over and sat next to the nice woman with the head scarf and the coconut skin. Her face was filled with indentations and moles. Her fingernails were long, sharp and pointed like red sticks. Her voice was deep like a man's voice on the telephone.*

*“How you doing?” The woman seemed curious about me and took a moment to take me all in with her eyes.*

*“Fine.” I am not sure how to sit at a table of grown folk because I am usually banned. I try not to look up so my eyes watch the ashes from Peaches's cigarette fall on the table but I don't say anything, figuring my aunt wants me to act invisible like always.*

*“Well, hell, we all fine too. Just having us some girl talk.”*

*The women all lived within walking distance and favored each other. The more I sneak looks at them, I realize they almost favored me—there is something about them that is familiar. They are probably cousins, most of the women in Sweetwater are kin somehow and somewhere along the line, whether they know it or not.*

*“What do you want to be when you grow up?” the coconut-skinned woman asked, raking in with both hands her profit from a won hand. It was a predictable question along with how old are you, what grade are you in and do you like boys yet, but I was not prepared with an answer. I had not expected the women to ask me questions. I was satisfied to just be in their presence, sucking in their air, smelling their funk.*

*I halfway looked up to see my aunt, finally putting the cigarette out in the ashtray, rolling her eyes at me, resenting me for invading her privacy and space.*

*“I’m going to live in a big house,” I say out loud, hoping the three strangers would close their eyes and see the house with me, help me decorate it with their words, help me fill it up with beautiful things and books.*

*“You ain’t gonna have nothing,” Peaches said, not meaning to sound as mean as she sounded but meaning her words. She was too caught up in her own pain to give me false hopes. “You ain’t gonna do nothing with your life. You probably gonna end up being the fourth generation to live in this pitiful ass house. Probably won’t even finish high school.”*

*I wanted to cry but stubbornly held back tears. I kept biting my tongue to keep from saying out loud what I was thinking in my head—that Cali wasn’t the only one that was gonna be something special when she grew up and that they would see. I almost*

*spoke up but knew that talking back would be inviting a heavy hand across my face and a second scolding when mama got home to hear how I had acted grown in front of company. I closed my mouth instead of opening it and closed my eyes, diminishing my tears and immediate fantasies about living in a house and making it out of Sweetwater. Suddenly I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up, or who I could be for that matter.*

*The other women at the table looked at me and felt sorry for how I still had hopes. Behind their eyes was what used to be a dream and what used to be a thought of being something different or doing something different. It was possible, but they figured it would probably be Cali, not me, to make it out. I was too attention hungry. I was too needy. I was too much like them.*

*"Little girl, you just wait," a cinnamon-colored woman wearing bifocal glasses and orange lipstick said. I did not recognize the woman by name but knew her face. She walked the road sometimes, found her way to our house whenever there were a lot of cars in the yard, and that was probably how she had made it to the table tonight. "You gonna be just like me—wallowing around in this dirty ass place trying to make a dollar out of fifteen cents." When the woman smiled all I saw was the huge gap where her teeth should be. Everyone at the table, my aunt and her drunken friends, laughed out loud and I couldn't tell if they were laughing at what they were claiming to be my fate or if they were laughing at how ugly the woman looked grinning, and how she grinned anyway.*

*"O, no I'm not!" I said defensively, rolling my head and my eyes. I was glad that the women were too intoxicated to notice my sass, or I would get a beating for sure.*

*“Yes you will,” they all said, mostly to themselves and each other, grinning.*

*“Some nappy-headed boy is gonna make you love him so much and so fast that you ain’t gonna be thinking about leaving here. Then, once he uses you up for all you’re worth, he’s gonna leave you so broken that the only thing that will comfort you will be this dingy assed town.”*

*“Sho’ is.”*

*“Yea, you get you a lil’ bit and you will live in a damn hole as long as you somewhere where you can smell that man and keep up with what he doing.”*

*“Love is a funny thang, ain’t it girl?”*

*“Ain’t no boy gonna make me fall in love!” I swore.*

*The women just laughed, shaking their small glasses until they could hear the ice cling against all sides and then swallowing what was left in the glass in one gulp, together.*

*“Probably be one of those red, pretty boys like your mama,” Peaches teased.*

*“She always has been color struck and you just like her. Those the ones you got to look out for. Take every piece of money and good sense you got.”*

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It was not until I was grown that I fully understood the truth of those words.

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There was an atmosphere of truth in the room and he looked at me with magnificent eyes that I felt could have changed me if he looked at me long enough. His eyes could have made me beautiful. His eyes could have made me significant. But his eyes, having seen worldly women with more to offer than temporary spells cast on men

in the moonlight, glanced over my body and I felt suddenly exposed and ashamed of the imperfections I housed in the form of moles, stretch marks and keloid scars left from tripping over stumps, falling on rusted nails, and walking barefoot on rocks.

He already knew my secret. My southern drawl gave it away when I got comfortable in conversation and exposed my accent. He smiled when he heard it, his almond eyes dancing at the thought of me, but not wanting me entirely. “Country girls don’t have enough ambition for me,” he had whispered. But he liked the way home cooking had stuck to my bones giving me child-bearing hips and big feet. But the desperation he saw in my eyes, the neediness for him to rescue me was too much. Not knowing how to make love but knowing how to love I wrapped my arms around him, begging him to take me with him wherever he went, whenever he went. But he preferred his women big-boned and red-boned and I was neither.

To him I was just regular, nothing moving in me—nothing about me that could move him to love me. Not the sway in my hips, the roam of my eyes, the beat of my heart—anxiously panting and desperate for the kind of love that would make sense to me. The inability to make sense of relationships and love men who love you back seems to be an inherited curse.

### *Life After Death*

*A black man with old skin had knocked on the door and let himself in. Aunt Peaches and Twiggy had seemed happy to see him but surprised, like they used to know him but didn’t know him anymore. The sun was orange against a darkening sky outside and the man’s voice was husky and old, his teeth dingy-looking. I watched the way his lips moved while he talked and he smiled at me, patted my head and pulled me into an*

*embrace I resented for some reason. He smelled old, musky, sour. I was afraid he would leave his scent on me.*

*“This must be Bread’s child,” he decided, leaning back into the raggedy recliner chair and then sitting up, when he realized it didn’t recline anymore.*

*“She can talk,” Peaches said.*

*“What’s your name?” He asked.*

*“I’m Bird.”*

*“Bird, huh?” He seemed to be considering whether or not my answer was a lie.*

*“How old are you?”*

*“Ten.”*

*He smiled and grunted at the same time and I could almost see inside his mouth, thick spit collecting in the corners of his mouth. “I remember when your mama was your age.”*

*I was altogether disinterested in what the man had to say, in the way that I was with adults who seemed surprised that you had actually continued to grow older and taller when they weren’t around to witness it for themselves. I also knew that he was talking more about me than to me—the way adults generally do. I scooted to the front of the television so I could hear the cartoons and the adult conversation at equal volume.*

*“What you know no good?” Twiggy asked the stranger.*

*“Just got back from up north, got some news to tell y’all, what I heard while I was up there.”*

*“Bird, get your ass in the back room somewhere. You see grown folks talking.”*  
*Twiggy pulled a crumpled pack of Salem cigarettes from her back pocket and a Bic lighter from the other one.*

*On cue I stood up and walked slowly, hoping they would accidentally say something while I was still in the hall but they did not. There was complete silence until I was in the room I shared with my mother and sister and the door was shut all the way. I sat on the floor and pressed my whole body against the wall to try to hear. It was mostly muffled voices, until finally, Peaches hollered out a scream so loud it sent a chill through my body. I knew better than to come out so I waited for the back door to close. It took forty-five minutes.*

*I eased out of the bedroom and into the hall, peeking most of the way and not seeing anything but hearing the muffled sobs of my aunt who I found crumpled on the floor like something broken. Twiggy stood over her staring in the distance and not seeming to see me standing there, confused, curious, worried. The stranger had said something terribly wrong and he left the Lately family with something he could never take back. I stayed in the hallway and slid down the wall, sitting with my legs stretched out. Eventually, Cali walked in and slammed the door behind her. She could tell something wasn't right and looked at me for answers but only received my hunched shoulders. I did not know what was going on.*

*Older and carrying Twiggy's heart and her name, Cali walked over to our grandmother and hugged her hip. Twiggy looked down for the first time, saw Cali, and hugged her back, a river of tears falling down her face.*

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*Twiggy still loved Cake but she wouldn't admit it. The truth was she didn't know how to stop loving him, or how to stop hating him. He was in her blood.*

*"I'm looking for John Lately," Peaches said into the phone. She was surprised at how her daddy's name sounded coming out of her mouth. She had never called his full name, his real name, always said Daddy, always heard Cake when anyone referred to him, and that was years ago, before she was even a teenager. She had not called his name for as long as she could remember.*

*Peaches had been calling all the hospitals in Baltimore, trying to find out if they had admitted John "Cake" Lately. He had come up missing. He had been missing from her life for so long that she couldn't remember the last time she had seen him or what he looked like, smelled like, smiled like, or sounded like. He had been missing from her life ever since he left but now he was missing from whoever knew how to find him.*

*Peaches's feelings for her father were as complicated as her mother's. Without a word or reason he walked out on them, leaving Twiggy with five kids and not a dime to her name. All of the children had to grow up fast and learn how to fend for themselves because Twiggy had to find ways to keep food on the table. The children found ways to take care of each other—bartering food with neighbors, tending to each other's children, and carpooling. It would have been impossible to survive alone without a man in the house, but with a house full of women they got by. Men had come in and out of their lives over the years but you never really get over being abandoned by your father.*

*"He dead." Peaches's words were slow, angry words and she said them like she didn't believe them or understand them, like she was speaking in a foreign language, repeating words that she didn't fully understand.*

*“Where you get that from?” Twiggy wanted to know.*

*“The woman on the phone said they have his death certificate. He been dead two years next month.”*

*“Two years?” Bread was home now, stunned at the news she got when she walked in the door.*

*“They said he was just left at the hospital—and no one claimed his body. The records say that the woman with him didn’t mention family or children and she didn’t want to pay the costs for the body so she just left him there.”*

*“What woman?” Twiggy was surprised that even dead she was jealous over Cake.*

*“I don’t know, they didn’t say her name—only that it was his common-law wife in the state.”*

*Twiggy was fuming but for some reason she held her tongue and listened while Peaches gave her the rest of the information. She would need to get to Baltimore with proof of being his wife to get his death certificate and she would need his death certificate to claim his life insurance. She had been struggling with bills and at least this way Cake could give back to the household. A couple of hundred dollars was better than nothing.*

*They all, Twiggy, Peaches, and Bread sat there, not saying anything. And Bebe, opening the door, broke the silence. Then Little. Then Junior.*

*“Daddy dead,” Peaches announced, her eyes now red, snot gathering in her nostrils. Saying it this time broke her heart. Made it real.*

*“How’d he die?” Little asked.*

*“Probably drunk his fool self to death,” Twiggy said, trying to be mad and trying to find a way to blame Cake and not herself, for not having the opportunity to say goodbye.*

*“The doctor said he had liver failure,” Peaches said slowly. “He had drunk himself to death. Doctor said he was an alcoholic. They donated all of his organs, even his skin and his eyes. The only thing they couldn’t use was his liver.”*

*“Donated his organs where?”*

*“To people who needed ‘em.”*

*“So you mean to tell me there is somebody, somewhere with daddy’s eyes and daddy’s skin and daddy’s heart?” Bread looked around the room, thinking that Peaches was the only one in the house with Cake’s eyes, Cake’s skin, and Cake’s heart.*

*“Somewhere,” Peaches said finally. “At least he didn’t die in vain.”*

*“Where is he buried?” Junior wanted to know, crying.*

*“He won’t buried—he was cremated. Burned up.”*

*“So we can’t even give him a funeral?”*

*“Hell, he been dead two years, Junior.” Twiggy rolled her eyes.*

When I learned that my grandfather was dead I went numb. I made myself cry because that was what it seemed like I should do, mourn this man I had never met, who had not thought enough of me to meet me or to even know my name. I wondered if it was truly liquor that killed him, or if it was poverty, or loneliness or spitefulness. At the same time that I resented him leaving, I understood. If Sweetwater was pushing in around me, what might it have felt like for him?

Aunt Peaches was the most visibly distraught. For days she refused to eat or talk to anybody. Her siblings seemed only minimally affected by Cake's death. It was like hearing that someone died that you used to know a long time ago. You feel sad and sorry for them but your mourning isn't immediate, the hurt not as significant as if it was someone you were used to seeing. In every way that counted, Cake had been a stranger, absent from their lives for more years than he had been present and absent from my life altogether.

Several years after his death I found out that Cake Lately was not my biological grandfather. I overheard the truth in a whispered conversation. The man who was my mother's real father had lived in Sweetwater all along with his wife and children. I remember his face. I never touched it but it looked rough and dry—yet smooth. Bald head. Huge hands passing me wrinkled dollar bills after church on Sundays. Me, not knowing him, but grateful for the dollar and temporary attention. Toothless smiles on Tuesdays. Dirty overalls and fingernails on Thursdays. Work boots. Tired eyes behind bifocal glasses. He was dark brown. He had a nose like my mother and Uncle Little.

### *Insomnia*

I can't sleep. When I got back to Florida, finally finished with my formal data collection, I moved into a new apartment. I have lived alone for over five years but now, in this new apartment, the stories have moved in with me and I am filled up with questions and concerns. I fear the things I have learned from my research will continue to haunt me and make sleep sweet but infrequent. When I dream, I wake up feeling

guilty for having stirred the pot, not only for myself but for everybody else whose lives I collected.

The new apartment has a wall of windows and the sun sneaks up on me like curious hands. I can feel it against and underneath my skin, delicate and unassuming. It is barely daybreak but my eyes are open and they are not going to close any time soon. There is enough light to start the day and I am fully awake and fully conscious. The strangeness of my new apartment and the heavy air I am breathing brings memories to mind of sitting out in the open in Sweetwater. The unfamiliarity of Florida, the year-round heat, the traffic, and being seven hundred miles from family has become real again. It doesn't feel like home.

In the final chapter I contextualize what I have learned about myself as a result of studying the lives of rural black women.

## Chapter Five: Coming Full Circle

In this chapter, I want to discuss what I have learned from this project about doing research with intimate others, about rural black women, and about myself and my relationship to my family and community. First, I will start with the ethical implications and limitations of internal confidentiality among participants.

### *More Ethical Issues*

I am indebted to the participants for letting me tell their stories and I wanted their approval and consent. Though I intended to mask their identities as much as possible, I realized that there were risks associated with telling their story and telling mine. As Ellis (2007) explains:

When we write about ourselves, we also write about others. In so doing, we run the risk that other characters may become increasingly recognizable to our readers, though they may not have consented to being portrayed in ways that would reveal their identity, or, if they did consent, they might not understand exactly to what they had consented (p. 14).

As I reflect on the choices I made as a researcher and writer, I question if I made the most appropriate decisions. I also wonder if, as an autoethnographer, I could offer my family and community members the kind of protection and anonymity I had promised and intended.

### *External and Internal Confidentiality*

Martin Tolich (2004) distinguishes between what he calls internal and external confidentiality. He says, “External confidentiality is traditional confidentiality where the researcher acknowledges they know what the person said but promises not to identify them in the final report” (p. 101). Sweetwater is an obscure place, yet I still tried to protect its identity from outsiders by using pseudonyms and changing details and place names. Of course, I am aware that, similar to other ethnographic studies (Ellis, 1986, 1995), anyone who wants to find out the location of Sweetwater can do so, in my case, simply by figuring out where I was born. I also am aware that my relatives might be identified by their relationships with me. However, I felt that I addressed those issues by fictionalizing details and merging the experiences and stories of different women.

A more problematic issue for me was internal confidentiality, which is “the ability for research subjects involved in the study to identify each other in the final publication of the research” (Tolich, 2004, p. 101). As members of a small isolated community the participants would be more concerned and implicated by being recognized by each other (insiders) than outsiders. Internal confidentiality problems could hinder relationships among community and family members who feel betrayed by the stories told about them. Additionally, participants could feel embarrassment or shame as a result of personal information being available for a public audience of their peers. Even though I changed details and collapsed characters, I understood that complete protection could not be achieved and some participants would be able to recognize themselves and each other. I

took the stories back to participants who I felt were readily identifiable and got their permission to include them in the final draft<sup>23</sup>.

In addition to the possibility of participants recognizing each other's stories in the final manuscript, I was also concerned about how they would respond to the representations I developed, namely those that were stereotypical. In order to write a story that was ethically responsible I knew I would have to embrace stereotypes as well as challenge them, especially those parts that I found to be close to the truth. This meant exposing the positive and negative aspects of rural black women's lives. Since I knew that so many of the issues I would be bringing to light about rural black women were stereotypic, I feared what these declarations of lived experience might mean—for them and for me.

### *Moving Beyond Stereotypes*

The images of Black women in literature and popular media are problematic, offering one stereotype after another. The image of black women in general is connected to mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mamas<sup>24</sup> (Collins, 2000). Black women are surrounded by myths claiming that they are inferior, physically and emotionally impervious, unfeminine, criminal minded and sexually promiscuous (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). As a castrating matriarchate, Black women are presented as superhuman (Ladner, 1971), strong (Danquah, 1998; Morgan, 1999), and grossly independent (Wallace, 1978/1999). In addition, for women in the rural south the

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<sup>23</sup> See "Mama's Story" and "Grandma's Story" in the methods section.

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Hill Collins specifies these "controlling images" and stereotypes in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. A theme of Black Feminist thought is to challenge and defy these assumptions and labels, which are used to justify the subjugation and oppression of Black women.

stereotypes deepen with layers that include ignorance, laziness, lack of opportunity, and backwards thinking. Labeled unsophisticated, unstable, and stuck, these women are presented as unable to leave or better their situations. This is similar to the stereotype of white women in the south, except their class, rather than race, becomes the primary indicator (Abbott, 1998; Allison, 1995).

The typical representations do not allow for a variegated experience of black womanhood so I sought to expand, not limit, the representations. I joined Alexis DeVeaux<sup>25</sup> (1990), a black woman writer, in wanting to say something and write something about the Black woman as a three dimensional human being. DeVeaux (1990) states:

I want to explore her [black women's] questions, strengths, concerns, madnesses, love, evils, weaknesses, lack of love, pain, and growth. Her perversities and her moralities. I draw on my own feelings as a source of material, and then I try to flesh out these feelings in characters who may or may not have had my particular experiences but who certainly reflect my own concerns, politics, philosophies, etc. (p. 176).

When rural black women write about themselves, their depictions are more complex than stereotypical representations convey (Angelou, 1993, 2004; hooks, 1996, 1997; Walker, 1970, 1973). Like these writers, I find that some of the typicalities are found in black women's lived experience, but I have tried to understand why and how that might be the case, how these stereotypes play out and are communicated in daily life,

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<sup>25</sup> In a personal interview printed with selected works, DeVeaux explained connections between her personal life and the things she writes about (see Washington, 1990, p. 173-179).

and how in spite of them (or maybe because of them) these women are able to incorporate these elements into a life that has meaning.

When I read and witness stereotypes in motion (see Boylorn, 2008), I feel a combination of disgust and embarrassment, connection and resonance. While I fear that people will read my stories as an indictment of all rural black women, I hope the complexification of their lives, their feelings, and their choices will motivate readers to withhold judgment and lead them to see rural black women's lives in a more complex way. I know I cannot control how people read and interpret these stories and I have to be content with knowing I have at least given representation to rural black women from an insider perspective, which is something I can build on in future research. For now it feels like enough to have a representation of rural black women at all (Bobo, 1995; Boylorn, 2008).

I feel I have succeeded at developing a story that we (rural black women and I) can live with by telling what goes on between the lines, in the midst of poverty and loneliness, and in spite of limited education and resources. What we often don't see is these women's humanity and resilience, which has been missing from the scholarship but ever present in my life. I think about women at the church slipping me \$10 when I come to visit, my grandmother preparing home-cooked and soulful meals--through back pain and arthritis--for her children and grandchildren, my aunt rising before the sun every day to go to work and volunteering for holiday shifts to get time and a half pay, and my mother going to church three nights a week (for choir rehearsals, bible study and intercessory prayer) and on Sunday morning. I also think about my mother co-signing a lease on an apartment for me alone that was as big as the trailer we had lived in with as

many as eight people at one time. I have learned everything I know about strength, survival and self-sacrifice from them.

I remain conflicted about the impact the stories may have on participants and I worry that they will not tell me if they are bothered by my depictions of them, in fear of hurting my feelings or damaging my chance at getting a Ph. D. Still, the dissertation is useful because though it exposes stereotypes it also takes the reader underneath the stereotypes and normalizes the experiences of black women. The stories help rural black women—my family in particular--understand and have a new sense of themselves. The stories helped them connect to each other and see the commonalities in their lives. The stories also helped them to recognize the value of their everyday experiences and see their lives as flawed, but nonetheless, beautiful and meaningful.

As this chapter demonstrates, I negotiated ethical struggles and writing strategies to tell the most cohesive and coherent story I could, which left me a new way of seeing myself as a rural black woman. When I wrote rural black women out of pigeon-holed stereotypes, I was writing myself out of them. I learned to love the women for who they were, which helped me love myself for myself. The stories reminded me of who I was—jogging my memory and showing me parts of myself in the women in studied. Writing and later reading the stories and analyzing them was like looking in a mirror in a well lit room. I saw myself fully and accepted what was in front of me, and appreciated the culture and the community that helped shape me. The self-acceptance was like oxygen after held breath.

*Learning to Breathe On My Own*

My mother answers the phone smiling. I can sense the smile in her voice, which in addition to being soothing and kind, seems in good spirits. She recognizes the out of town number on the caller ID and knows it is me calling from Florida.

“Hello my sweetheart,” she says in her mama’s voice. No matter where I am in the world my mother’s voice calms my spirit. As I lay back on the oversized pillows on my comfortable couch in my oversized apartment, I can picture her sitting at her desk at work. The desk is immaculate in her tiny cubicle with pictures of me and my sister in expensive frames decorating her space. Despite the chaos of our household, my mother has always managed to keep her space neat and clean. She likes order and organization, and along with her generosity and occasional mood swings, I inherited that from her.

“Hi,” I say. My voice is somber. I have felt unbalanced lately. The weight of the dissertation and the worry of the job market is heavy on my shoulders and I have had a difficult time bringing everything to a close and making sense of what the project and the findings mean. I am tired and discouraged but I don’t want to tell her. I never know what to disclose to my mother because she is so far away and I don’t want her to worry about me. I also worry that she won’t understand how to relate to me anymore, that the issues and concerns that I face because of graduate school won’t make sense to her and that it will magnify our differences. She can sense the sadness in my voice, the same way I could sense the smile in hers.

“How is everything?” she asks, not pushing.

“I am really overwhelmed,” I admit, holding back tears.

“I know,” she says, and I know she does. “I have been praying for you.”

“I need your help. I am trying to figure out how I have changed, or if I have changed during the process of writing my dissertation,” I say. “I wonder if I am still the same rural black girl I was before I came here. When I look back at the stories I wrote about my childhood I feel so connected to them, so grateful for them. But at the same time you know the idea of living in Sweetwater at this point in my life terrifies me.”

“You don’t feel like you have anything to come back to?”

When I visit home now, the once-familiar, once-comfortable environment sometimes feels foreign to me. The first few days I feel out of place and guilty for wanting no part of Sweetwater living on a permanent basis. By the third day I grow used to the limited space and closed-in air and marvel at how we breathe each other in and breathe each other out, like when I was little. I am more relaxed and at home with myself when I am in Sweetwater, but I also feel trapped if my visit extends beyond a few weeks.

“Maybe I have too much to come back to,” I wonder. “Don’t get me wrong, Sweetwater is my refuge and sanctuary, but it is also my greatest fear. I don’t want to feel like I can’t get out, like I can’t breathe.”

I worry for a moment that my words sound like a rejection of my mother’s life, but then I remember her telling me that she used to pray over me and my sister every night when we were little. We slept on both sides of her brown body without a room or a bed of our own, swallowing each other’s air. While we slept she would beg God to help her make our life better than hers. She prayed that her daughters would get out of Sweetwater, get an education, and be able to get for ourselves the things she was unable to give us. My ambitions are my mother’s prayers—answered.

“I know you say that you don’t feel like you could thrive in Sweetwater, and I think you are right. You have outgrown it.”

Sweetwater nursed me through adulthood, and even though the community had been instructive in my life, I got to a point where I had gotten everything I could from it.

“In a way I think I have, but that sounds so bourgeois and I’m not high siddity<sup>26</sup>.”

I lay back reflecting on my words. As a child I hated family members who left Sweetwater and came back acting and thinking they were better than us. And I was glad that by nighttime, brown liquor and soul food would bring them back to earth, back to life, making them one of us again, easy-going and relaxed, breathing in and breathing out each other’s air until morning came. “Mommie, do you think I am different?”

“Yes.”

That was not the answer I had hoped for. “How?”

“You are more confident,” she says. “You don’t depend on your peers like you used to. When you were here you were a people pleaser, so desperate to fit in, and you are not really like that now.”

“I am sometimes,” I admit, “but definitely not like when I was younger or in Sweetwater.”

“And you are so much more independent. Your sense of direction, both physical and mental, really surprises me sometimes. When you were younger you had no sense of direction and would get lost easily. Now you just go wherever you want to go and find your way back to where you started. I mean how many times have you flown on an airplane?”

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<sup>26</sup> stuck up or conceited

I mentally try to count on my fingers the trips I have taken by plane, having only started traveling distances that would require it at age 24, six years ago.

“You can stand on your own two feet and find your way. I don’t have to worry about you. I know you can take care of yourself.”

I think about my fear of airplanes and how until I decided to go to graduate school I never had any intention of traveling anywhere I could not get to by car. I have relatives that still think that way.

“And you’re a mentor now,” my mother continues. “I watch you reach back to bring people up to where you are, guiding people and seeing people’s potential. You use where you come from to be approachable. I think that is probably why you are such a good teacher.”

I suddenly feel better as I jot down my mother’s words. She continues, “And you feel better about yourself. You grew up feeling like an ugly duckling because of your dark complexion and your hair. When you were in Sweetwater people made you feel self-conscious because to them there was always only two or three different ways to look or be and you didn’t fit what they called beautiful or successful. But now you know you are beautiful and other people see just how beautiful you are, and have always been, inside and out. You are more comfortable in your skin and that is important.”

“You’re right,” I agree. Though I sometimes still have moments when I am self-consciousness, I am more accepting of my flaws.

“And then there is your intellect,” my mother continues. “Your wisdom and knowledge from books and experience is overwhelming sometimes. You have learned a lot. You know about a lot of things.”

There is a difference between book sense<sup>27</sup> and good sense<sup>28</sup> (LaPaglia, 1995), and even though many of the women in my family did not seek formal higher education, they know so much that I hope to one day understand. Life has taught them what books have shown me, how at some point the healing and hurt we experience comes together so we can keep moving forward, carrying the benefit of experience with us in the process. As a scholar, I try hard to remember that intellectual profits do not swallow the knowledge inherent in lived experience. I value so much what I have learned from the lives of rural black women.

“Do you think these changes are because I left?” I ask.

“I do. You needed to leave to grow. Some people are fearful of leaving a place that is familiar and you were brave enough to leave. And now you know you can go anywhere and build a life there. You have grown and matured *because* you left.”

“I don’t know who I would be if I would have stayed,” I admit. I feel judgmental because I am relieved that I got out of Sweetwater before getting pregnant or complacent.

“Well, even though you left, when you come back you are still you. When you come back, it is your time to be yourself without having to put on airs. When you come home you can just be yourself. You appreciate people for who they are—they may not have a doctorate but you respect and appreciate them for who they are and not necessarily what they did or didn’t do. You know that a person can be great being who they are, wherever they are, whoever they are. It may be a mother who had fourteen children by different fathers but you still recognize that woman as a good person. Or they could have been in an abusive relationship or dropped out of school, but you know they still

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<sup>27</sup> Educated knowledge

<sup>28</sup> Common or everyday knowledge

lived a good life, a happy life, on their own terms. Some people, I believe, are supposed to be that person in the community who is known for the good they did for people.”

As my mother is talking I am reflecting on the interviews I had with women in the community and how inspired and impressed I was with their stories and resilience. I was inspired by their ability to create meaningful lives and be at home with themselves and at home in Sweetwater. Their stories helped me be proud of who I was as a rural black woman and a Sweetwateran. I wonder if that is not what my project was about, merging our stories and experiences so that collectively we can

*teach our daughters to learn from our mistakes*

*find inner strength*

*recognize beauty in ourselves and our stories*

*learn to love ourselves*

*reconcile the past and live in the present*

*rely on codes embedded in black culture*

*and rural landscapes*

*and listen for the language*

*and be strong enough to stay*

*or brave enough to leave*

“They may choose not to do what you did,” my mother continues, referencing my leaving, “but sometimes people don’t pursue things because they don’t want to and that is all right. If they are happy, if they are raising their children to go to school because they didn’t, or to have what they didn’t have, then that is their success.”

“You’re right.” I am amazed at how brilliant my mother is. She has taught me so much, in conversations and through her love over the years. I witnessed her heartbreak from failed relationships and loneliness and then watched her pick up the pieces and sew them back together again so that my sister and I would learn, as her own mother had shown her, how to love and want a man but not need one. This lesson was echoed in other stories I collected (i.e., Aretha, Patience, Twiggy and my own).

“You left to pursue your career but that doesn’t make you any better than anybody else. You realize that even if people don’t leave the country or make a lot of money they are still important and you still love them.”

“And I do.”

I realize, however, that it took me some time. Like other working class academics I struggled with creating my own identity, which sometimes meant I rejected my old one (see Dews & Law, 1995; Ellis, 1995, 2009). But through the research not only had I shown participants the value and beauty of their stories, I recognized it for myself and learned to love my own rural black womanhood in new ways.

“And you’re down to earth,” she laughs, “and that is what people like. It’s important to be nice rather than important to be important.” My mother pauses for a moment to reflect on her words, “What is the need of being a millionaire if someone needs a drink of water and you won’t give it to them?”

I smile, thinking about how much like my grandmother my mother sounds, and wondering if I will one day sound like both of them, or if I do already. We understand and decode countryspeak between each other and I love the lessons and morals embedded

in the words. To give or offer someone a drink of water is to show respect and empathy, even and especially if you don't know them personally.

"I like that you are still the kind of person that would get that water," my mother says finally. "Does that make sense?"

"More than you know. You have said everything out loud that I have been thinking about."

I feel reassured that the way I had made sense of the stories and the project as a whole was no different from how my mother, a participant and rural black woman, was making sense of it.

"Everything is going to be all right," she promises, "God did not bring you this far to leave you. And I am so proud of you. I know I don't say it enough but I am. We all are."

The collective 'we' my mother refers to is our family, but I personally envision the participants in the study and rural black women in general alongside them.

"I know."

"Weeeellllllllll," the exaggerated tone of my mother's voice signals me that she is about to bring our conversation to a close. "I need to get back to work."

"Thank you. I love you," I say quietly as I listen to her voice, still smiling, and she hangs up the phone.

### *Conclusion*

The stories the women told "made claims on me" (Conquergood, 1985) and as I move forward, having grown from the experience, I am taking their stories with me. I carry Twiggy's dogmatism, Patience's lack of complaint, my mother's unfailing faith and

wisdom. I also carry the kindness, generosity, and resilience from all of the participants who shared their lives with me through interviews. I feel stronger and I am grateful.

I began this project out of a need for a fuller story about the lives and lived experiences of rural black women. The goal of my project was to look at rural black women's lives and to try to understand them. A byproduct, by necessity, was that I came to understand myself better. Goodall (2005) describes narrative inheritance as the stories given to children by and about family members. He says further that "what we inherit narratively from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs" (p. 497). The stories I have collected and re-collected about the women in my family and community have helped me recover myself and make sense of, even recreate, my own narrative. I now realize the beauty inherent in the struggles I have endured as a black woman as well as the capacity for love and faith in the lives of black women. I feel like I have come full circle.

*Full Circle (A Poem)*

I have worked hard at learning  
how to stand strong  
in between  
tired arms and sagging breasts  
heavy with waiting  
voices like balm  
healing the broken places  
and mending what was lacking  
not believing

those who said  
you ain't shit  
because of what people see on the outside  
and what you got between your legs  
and where you come from  
but then my soul stood up  
with feet firm on the floor  
and outstretched arms flailing  
proud of dirt roads and water streams  
proud of living far away from everything  
and working with my hands  
proud of simplicity and broken English  
proud of rising out of poverty  
proud of owning a piece of the land  
where people used to be slaves  
proud of motherwit and herbal healings  
proud of tolerated tantrums and tainted tongues  
proud of brownredyellowbeigeblack skinned people  
one no more beautiful than the next  
proud of women who could count money  
but not read long words  
outside of their own name  
but insisting their daughters "get" an education

and “get” the hell out of here  
be somewhere else besides up under me  
and be something else besides  
another mama  
or another worker  
do something different  
be something different  
they left room in the open places  
and pieced the bones together  
half-crazed, half-sisters, half  
telling me  
when will you learn  
how to keep your mouth closed  
and your eyes open  
I never knew them like I know them now  
writing about them and me  
and our lives together  
and how we loved  
and laughed  
and ate collard greens smothered in vinegar  
and homemade biscuits before arthritis set in grandma’s hands  
we had good times  
mixed in with the bad

until all of our days felt like  
goodandbadandgoodandbadandgoodandbad  
but mostly good  
because we got used to not having much  
and not needing much  
and I grew up in that space  
half-resenting, half-understanding, half  
knowing  
that trouble don't last always  
and it would not always  
be this way  
hard living  
and struggling  
and crying when the lights went out  
over that no count black-ass, no good, sorry ass man  
who left because he didn't know how to stay  
and who couldn't fill us up if he wanted to  
not before we learned how to fill up ourselves  
and we went about the learning  
sharing rooms  
and eating off the same plate  
uhm, uhm, uhm  
and making sense of things that just don't make sense

I asked them for their story  
to give me their voice  
so I could put it out there  
and put their voices  
into the discussions  
that had been focused on men's voices  
and citified living  
sifted through white people's imagination  
of what nigga life is like  
those one-sided stories  
that only echoed what people know about the hurting  
but not about the living and the surviving  
I told them I wanted to show  
what their life is like  
I wanted to be able to  
tell the story I should have been able to read  
And seeing me full-grown  
& old enough to ask questions  
they broke the silence  
I'm feeling grown up for knowing grown up things  
but still feeling somewhat broken<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> December 19, 2008: As I read this last chapter for the last time my eyes stay on the word broken. A colleague asked me what it means to still feel "somewhat unbroken" at the end of this journey. She wondered if once I defend the dissertation if I will feel whole or fixed, and if the brokenness is a temporary

*Full Circle (A Reflection)*

Until I finished writing my story I had been unwilling to admit my own vulnerabilities as they related to this project. I had to return to the initial objectives of the research in order to identify my own prejudices and ask myself some poignant questions. Did I, in some ways, see myself as different and/or better than the women I studied? Was I judging them and their choices in the same way and for the same reasons that I had critiqued earlier studies of marginalized populations? Was I qualified to essentialize the rural, black female experience, especially since I had deserted it? How could I reconcile the feelings of abandonment and guilt I feel for leaving?

Hearing the stories of the women in my study and writing my own has shown me how congruent our lives are and how complementary. Black women negotiate a combination of self-reliance and relying on each other. Like Russian nesting dolls<sup>30</sup>, which fold into one another, black women hold each other in each other's wombs. My research confirms that.

The findings of my study are not atypical of black women's experiences, particularly black women from small and rural communities. In addition to the themes highlighted in the dissertation are more specified accounts of dealing with discrimination,

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state or something more permanent. Her question led me to question what it means to be broken. I think a part of me will always feel "somewhat broken" because I left Sweetwater, and in that leaving, left behind the rural black women I write about and the part of myself that most resembles them. They are still a part of me, they still live in me, but perhaps it is the everyday exchanges and the lived-in spaces of the women that I am missing. I don't feel empty, just not completely whole. I would still feel "somewhat broken" if I lived in Sweetwater and abandoned my outside goals. I am straddling the fence, fitting inside and outside of Sweetwater, and that self-division is perhaps what this entire dissertation journey has been about. I am "somewhat broken," somewhat divided, somewhat conflicted—but I am finally okay with that.

<sup>30</sup> Russian nesting dolls have also come to represent fertility, motherhood, and family. Because the dolls are stacked inside each other and decrease in size, beginning with a larger female and ending with a small or "infant" doll, it in many ways represents the matriarchal and nurturing structure of the black family.

issues of abandonment, domestic violence, nontraditional families, poverty, and limited resources. I came to this project with a curiosity about rural black women's lives and how the realities of their lives compared to the generalities and platitudes that are portrayed as commonplace in society. When we begin with what we already know about black women, which is largely based on personal experience and societal representations and expectations, the project elaborates and extends our knowledge by introducing individualized illustrations of what it can mean to be a rural black woman.

Academic scholarship neglects the texture of black women's lives, instead focusing on stereotypes (Bobo, 1995; Boylorn, 2008; Collins, 2000, 2004). Black women are often typecast into stock characters based on historical labels ranging from the hypersexual and lascivious Jezebel to the asexual and hyper-religious Mammy. I wanted to show, through my dissertation, that black women are more sophisticated and complicated than contemporary representations suggest. Black women are often maligned because of misrepresentations. A more holistic and accurate reflection of black women as flawed but not irredeemable is necessary to counter the effects of longstanding and commonplace oppression against black women. Framed by socioeconomic, political, educational and spiritual influences, black women's representations are constantly challenged because they are not white, not rich, not male. I wanted to collect stories that would speak for themselves. Black women's lives talk back to them and to us like echoes resounding their self-constructions. There is a lot to learn from that.

This project divulges how rural black women see and think of themselves, rather than what is constructed in the white imagination. Their stories speak of breaking down walls, fighting injustices and stereotypes, and rejecting the assumptions and analyses that

have dismissed their own views of their own experiences. I wanted to present their lives as contradictions to stereotypes, while at the same time acknowledging that those conceptualizations are based on some truth. I also wanted to show that in some instances black women embrace stereotypical portrayals because those are the only images of themselves they are familiar with, sometimes progressing from Jezebel (in their younger years) to Mammy (in their later years), or negotiating the roles throughout their lives.

I think it is important for studies about black women to look at how the experiences black women live influence their relationships with other black women and how hegemonic ideals impact their vision of success, happiness and normality. The women in my study identify their lives as successful, not because of their own lack of struggle, but because of the paths of escape put in place for their children. They also recognize that each generation has benefited from the sacrifices of others, just as black women in general have progressed as a group because of the yielding of those before them.

Of particular relevance, from the study, are the generational and thematic influences of poverty, religion, motherhood and the complex relationships with men. A closer investigation into these subjects, I believe, demonstrates how black women, collectively, respond to everyday issues and how these issues inform their experiences. Rural black women, for example, use religion and faith in God to respond to life's circumstances (Frederick, 2003; Gilkes, 2001). They also oftentimes focus on their roles as mothers when aspirations to achieve the white canonical fairy tale with a black prince charming diminish (Franklin, 2000).

Black women are not a homogenous group so it is problematic to make claims about black women in general without considering the exceptions. However, as many scholars have noted (Bobo, 1991, 1995; Collins, 1999, 2000, 2004; Giddings, 1984; hooks, 1993; Houston & Davis, 2002; Ladner, 1971; Scott, 1991; Scott, Muhanji, & High, 1999) there are generalizable experiences black women share. Therefore, by exploring how black women produce meaning in their day-to-day lives and the myriad ways they interpret those meanings through relationships and language, this dissertation offers an opportunity to respond to the negativity of black womanhood that is pervasive in our culture. The most reliable information we can collect about black women is from black women. Black women need to have the opportunity to determine what is meaningful and significant in their own lives. I offered them a space and opportunity for the kind of self-examination and culpability offered through the telling of one's own life.

This dissertation was a marriage between theoretical frames of black women's lives and black women's actual experiences. I was concerned not only with the ways that black women's lives are portrayed in our culture but also with the ways that black women make sense of their own lives and frame their own experiences. Even without the sophisticated jargon of academia, black women can interpret and create meaning in their own lives (Bobo, 1995). Studying black women's lives has challenged me to question and redefine how I see and construct myself. Like Kesho Scott (1991) I took my experiences and words and those of the women I studied to "make a language" out of our lives. Their stories, my legacy, answered and instigated questions that speculate about what it means to be a rural black woman and what our lived realities say about black women in general.

Finding the answers to my questions about who I was and where I came from helped me to identify insight about the strong black women I had grown up admiring, fearing, and mocking—and I recognized that there were things I both wanted to emulate and separate myself from. The recognition that I could reconcile my life, as a rural black woman, in my own way and outside of the confines of the rural community was an awakening. I realized that I had learned everything I needed to know from them and then, after watching me stand before them full grown and capable of standing on my own, they encouraged me to seek my success outside the confines of the rural community. Though passing pain and strength down from generation to generation was the only legacy we, as black women, could afford at one time in our lives, it is no longer enough. And though relevant, collecting the stories of silenced black women is only the first step (Scott, 1991). With my arms outstretched and my eyes opened wide, I am taking those next crucial steps.

## **Appendix I: Poetic Biographies**

## The Women of Sweetwater

Included here are relevant and poetic biographies I wrote from field notes and observances during my experience in Sweetwater. Focusing on the details of each woman's voice, mannerisms, body, and character, I introduce the main characters poetically (including myself), using our first formal "interview" encounter to introduce them to the reader. Originally included within the manuscript, I felt these biographies were use ful to the reader, but distracting within the text.

### **Patience**

The house where I would interview Patience is small and added on. Once a four room structure, over the years, rooms have been added on and porches closed in to make room for a growing family and overnight company. The yard is generous and open, family land she inherited as the only living child of a white-looking black man who knew how to bargain with white folks. The house is well kept but weeds and elephant ears climb up the sides of the wood and paint-chipped exterior. Patience responds to the first knock and greets me with a wide smile and empathic eyes. She invites me into her home by stepping away from the threshold and making room for me to enter the cozy and warm space, the aroma of closed-in and antique things hanging in the air like smoke. I am spending the night and drop my bag at the door, feeling welcome but uncomfortable making myself at home in a home that is not familiar. I carry my tape recorder and

questions in my hand as I follow her to the kitchen where a home-cooked meal awaits me.

I have discovered through research and curiosity that Patience and I are distantly related. She and my grandmother are second or third cousins. When she tells me about her life story, she is telling me about my heritage. I welcome her stories with open ears and open arms.

### **Patience (Part One): Losing**

*her name called forth perpetual peace and calm waiting*

*but she found herself too tired*

*& too proud*

*& fed up with herself*

*she loved that man so much she almost died around it*

*but then found herself loving*

*with fists as well as hands*

*and feet that would carry her back and forth and away and back*

*he had become so much of her life that she could hardly stand*

*without him*

*mama had told her*

*how to fight difficult battles*

*racism and hate*

*how to love a black man  
& tolerate his harshness  
brought on by how  
racism and hate  
had stolen his manhood  
but no one said  
how to love yourself more  
than you loved the man*

*it never occurred to her  
that he would hit her*

*she learned that on her own*

*patience*

*losing her husband*

*losing her child*

*and losing her mind*

*and her self*

*somewhere in between*

*she felt cursed somehow*

*and threw her whole self into becoming  
the kind of woman  
who would not be known  
for shooting her husband*

*a church woman*

*she gave herself to god  
right before she lost everything she had  
like Job  
her womb, like Hannah<sup>31</sup>, closed  
and her only living seed,  
dead from the residue of her choices*

*people felt sorry for her  
because it is so unnatural  
for a woman to bury her child*

*she collected the hair from her comb  
and her toenails on her nightstand  
saving them  
because if she threw them out*

---

<sup>31</sup> Hannah was the fourth woman in the Bible who was barren and mourned her inability to conceive. After prayer and a demonstration of faith her womb was opened and she conceived six children.

*and a bird got a hold of them  
she knew she would surely go crazy  
and lose what little piece of her mind  
and peace of mind  
she had left  
which was little  
but enough to get by*

*after losing everything she ever had  
she fantasized about another child  
and how she would raise it  
with values  
to respect his elders  
choose good company  
refrain from wrongdoing  
always do what is right  
tell the truth  
read the Bible  
stay in church*

*she would tell her child about  
growing up in a wooden house  
with wooden stoves*

*beds made of straw*  
*and lunches of*  
*molasses, peanut butter or*  
*fat back*  
*biscuits*

\*

Patience is distantly related to most of the black families in Sweetwater, though, she admits, they did not claim each other growing up. The evidence of their biological link was hidden beneath illegitimate children, incestuous marriages, disputes over family land and other life choices. Patience explained that Sweetwater was segregated twice. In the first, Black people were located in the Bottom, and white people lived near the center of town. The second separation happened among the Black families, who separated themselves based on color, education, and class. There were exceptions.

**Twiggy: a mother, a woman, a wife (in that order)**

*“People made me mean”*

*Self-taught*

*Self-raised*

*With a mother who died too young*

*And a father who loved liquor*

*More than anything*

*As hard as she tried she couldn't make herself love*

*Want or need anything from anybody*

*Damned if she would beg some damn body for something*

*She figured there were two or three things a man was good for*

*And love won't one of 'em*

*Looks won't everything*

*But money was damn good*

*She had chullen to feed"*

\*

To look at Twiggy is to all at once be hypnotized by her eyes. They are intimidating, mysterious, full of light, full of fear, full of worry. They are tired eyes, with tiny lines on the edges, where her vision comes full circle. When she looks at me with no glasses I notice how her eyeballs are tinted blue and the cataract film over her right eye looks like a thin layer of tissue paper. I put drops in her eyes, a treatment the doctor promises will protect her vision. Twiggy values her sight as much as anything.

Her eyes hold back the images she has seen and memories she has repressed, but her face holds the evidence of her survival. She has a scar just below her left eye that only those who are intimately acquainted with her see. There is an indentation on her scalp, in the back of her head, slightly visible through her thinning hair. Few people get close enough to her to notice it. Both marks were left by her husband.

Twiggy has lived in Sweetwater all of her life and tells me she is uninterested in leaving. She has grown accustomed to living a simple life, she says, and Sweetwater has always been her security. Sweetwater keeps her close to her roots, close to her heart, close to her memories.

Sweetwater is where her parents are buried. We go, together, to visit the graves. Her mother's headstone is a homemade, uneven, hand-sculpted mass of concrete. Her name is written in careful print with meticulous care and strong hands, engraving the stone before it dried cold. "Daddy made her headstone," Twiggy shares, "we didn't have money for a real one."

I see the headstone and fall in love with her father, also named Twiggy, who she so favors that they share a name. She describes her father to me as I lean down to see his grave, only footsteps from his first wife and the mother of his children. "He was a mean son of a bitch," Twiggy says, meaning it, "and he loved to drink." Twiggy cannot describe her mother to me. She never saw her, never saw a picture, never heard stories about her. Her mother died before she could remember her, on a cold table, having a baby. There were eight in all. Stair steps. One of them, a boy, who died as a toddler from eating too many raw potatoes, lay somewhere between the bodies of his parents. The rock that once marked his gravesite has been long moved by rain and time.

I ask how her father died. "That bitch he married after Mama died put a root on him."

**Bread: a (rural) black girl's blues**

*when I asked her about*

*a black girl's song*

*she started quoting Motown records*

*& singing the blues*

*carrying on her shoulders the weight of everything*

*saying she was born all wrong*

*but she don't mean just poor or just black*

*but talks of her too-kinky hair*

*plaits wrapped up like knots*

*so tight you can't pull a comb through*

*she spent her formative years*

*calling the wrong man daddy*

*and spent her latter years*

*loving the wrong man who was her husband*

*her children were her salvation*

*gifts from god*

*and reasons to keep moving*

*and not stay in a broken marriage*

*or a broken home*

*or become complacent*

*having sacrificed her dreams*

*her children became her dreams*

*living legacies of what she might have been*

*if born under different circumstances*

\*

The middle daughter of five children, Bread tells me she was always in the middle of things. In the thick of things. She and her brothers and sisters looked just like their daddies, all of them different except two and her features (humble on the man she would later learn was her father) were too strong for a little girl—too striking those eyes made of coal and that skin made of clay. She never wished for yellow skin when she shut her eyes at night to pray, forehead pushed against bent knees. She wanted long hair that flowed forever down her back, dancing like grown folk grooving at jook joint and card parties, drunk off wine and a good time and forgetting for the night about unpaid bills and triflin' husbands and hungry children at home.

She tells me color was never an issue for her growing up, which is why my color consciousness (I have always been hyperaware of my darker complexion again my sister's light skin) baffles her. For Bread it was always her hair that she despised (see Golden, 1995). But her other memories are skewed. She does not recall with the specificity of her sisters or the calm distance of her mother. The fighting and cursing makes her uncomfortable. She says it is almost like those things happened to someone

else. "I guess I blocked it on purpose," she says, and then talks about her obsession with fairy tales (happily ever after stories).

***Bird (a rural black girl's blues, part 2)***

*I often kept my thoughts  
and words to myself  
wrapped around brown skin  
and hurt feelings  
a small frame  
two hands  
hidden behind my back  
and tears too stubborn to fall*

*I often held my words  
in the back of my mouth like  
unchewed food I refused to swallow  
pain I refused to feel  
like desperation that numbed my senses*

*the white lady psychiatrist  
costs  
\$75 an hour  
and I spend the first hour*

*crying and contemplating shattering the glass  
of her fancy, clean office  
with my broken body  
& indescribable feelings  
of isolation  
and displacement*

*self-consciousness and shame-filled  
all blame  
is assigned to me  
in this place that swallowed me up  
& whispered taunts of entrapment*

*mean just like grandmamma  
seeking sanctification, just like mamma  
but grieving like somebody else's child  
depression is white woman's shit<sup>32</sup>  
i am supposed to be strong*

*this sadness, these blues  
don't make sense  
i don't belong here*

---

<sup>32</sup> (see Danquah 1998)

\*

I was my mother's second child. I was born two years after she fell in love with a man who didn't love her back. My father's infidelity shattered her dreams of a fairy tale while my own perception of life, love, and womanhood was tainted by the reality of loneliness, isolation and confusion I often felt as a child. The women in the country were strong and independent, and so were their daughters. I didn't seem to belong, even though we had the same manner of being. My feelings, my hands, and my heart were not strong. I grew up feeling out of place and being told that I would not amount to much. Not much was expected from the average-looking child of a single mother in a matrifocal household. I didn't know any different or any better and I grew used to the way Sweetwater swallowed dreams. Everyday I would look outside our cracked window at deferred dreams walking around in the form of men whose only time away from home was when they were drafted into the military and served in one of the world wars or Vietnam. The women are usually not outside, but are peeking from behind shaded windows and occasionally on porches, waving at each other, or sharing gossip across broken down fences. I loved these women but at the same time fear becoming them. I followed the first opportunity to leave.

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### About the Author

Robin Michelle Boylorn studies the lived experiences of black women, focusing on their strength, resilience, and capacity for love. She earned double bachelor's degrees in English and Communication Studies, and her Master's degree from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. As a teacher, womanist, scholar, creative writer, poet, and mentor she uses the power of language and words to discuss black women's lived experiences. Beginning with her own life and experiences as a rural black woman, she uses autoethnography to grapple with taboo issues and subjects such as race, class, and sex. A dedicated scholar and teacher, she has won numerous creative writing awards, leadership awards, and teaching awards for her commitment in the classroom and the community. She will be joining the faculty of the Department of Communication at The University of Alabama in the fall of 2009.