A narrative inquiry into the identity making of black women in Canadian higher education.

By

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Abstract

Background: The voices and experiences of black women in higher education in Canada have largely been absent. When they do speak out against institutional structures or challenging issues of power, they encounter issues of colonialism, racism, gendering, silencing, and othering. Such experiences have created stories of humiliation and oppression which questions black women's integrity and shapes their identity The objectives of this research are to i) expand current understandings of the ways in which black women's is impacted by power structures in higher education; ii) contribute to responsive policies, practices and programs that create possibilities that identity-making in black women are shaped in higher education through equitable experiences. Methodology: A focus on experience is central to this research and has called me to engage in a narrative inquiry study. A diverse methods of data collection was used including recorded conversations with guiding questions, letter writing, memory box items, and journal writing to gain insights into participant's experiences. Outcome: Across the narratives participants narratives validated experiences of othering, invisibility, resilience and racism in Canadian higher education classrooms and campuses.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Kenchera Curlene Ingraham. The research project of which this thesis is a part received research ethics approval for the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, “A narrative inquiry into the identity making of black women in Canadian higher education”, No. Pro00095366, December 6th, 2019.

Dedication

This work and my life is dedicated to the love and grace of God. I also dedicate this thesis to my loving and supportive husband, Paul Anthony, who is my pillar of strength, encouragement, and faith. Throughout this journey you covered me in prayer and pillowed me with clouds of laughter to make challenging days better. Thank you for giving me the time and space I needed to focus and never allowing me to quit on my journey to continued greatness. It is without saying that my Grandmother has been the foundation and core of my drive to start and continue this work. Grammy, you continue to clothe me from birth in the fabric of love, joy, peace, patience, understanding, and gentleness. Who and what you mean to me could never be adequately expressed in words. So, I love you has to be enough for now. To my parents, thank you for your love and wisdom. Thank you for helping me spread my wings and allowing me to be the best version of myself within the purpose and will of God for my life.

Acknowledgements

To my supervisors, Dr. Vera Caine and Dr. Randolph Wimmer, thank you. A special thank you for the weekly meetings to keep me focus and guiding me through this work and life. Thank you for your support in countless funding application and always creating a safe work space for me during my graduate studies. You imprint on my life has been positively permanent. I am forever grateful. To my supervisory committee, Dr. Simmee Chung and My examiners, Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer, Dr. Ramadimetja (Shirley) Mogale, and Dr. Vicki Ross, thank you To my narrative family, I say thank you for being family. To the countless funding sponsors, thank you. Your financial investment into my educational journey made all the difference.

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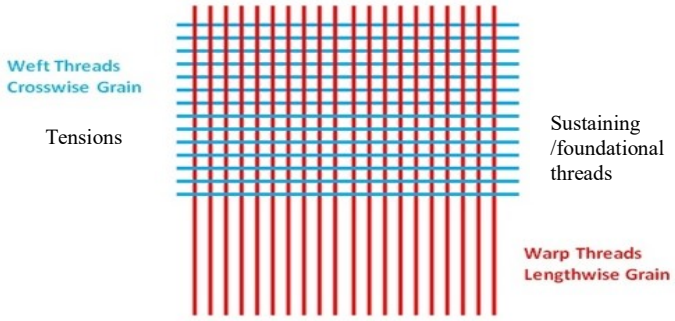
Reader's Guide

I see my life metaphorically as a fabric. A fabric is defined as a cloth produced from the weaving together of threads also known as fibers (Zurich, 2008). A thread is a thin piece of material used for the creation of a larger product such as a fabric (Zurich). Fabric from its French etymology (Fabrique) means to skillfully construct or produce (Partridge, 1966). The word thread is from a German etymology (thráwan) meaning to twist or turn (Partridge). I thought metaphorically about these meanings in relation to my life experiences. The fabric represents my life as a whole and the threads are the experiences weaved throughout my life.

Tortora calls me to understand in new ways the significance of using this metaphor. A fabric is the result of an intricate interlacing of threads (Tortora, 1978), where the most tedious process is weaving. The lengthwise threads are known as the warp, which is the foundation, thus providing strength and the core structure of the fabric (Tortora, 1978; Zurich, 2008). The warp represents the sustaining threads of my life which I inquire into throughout this work. The weft, are the crosswise threads, which are also known as the "filling threads" or "action threads" that fill the "gaps" in the fabric (Tortora, 1978; Zurich, 2008). I see the weft as a representation of the tensions I inquire into, which are woven over and under my sustaining narratives. The figure below is a visual representation of the wrap and weft.

Figure 1.

Warp and Weft Threads



Although, one might assume that the weft is less significant to the structure of the fabric, quite the reverse is true. These threads are critical to the quality expression (also known as the thread count) and strength of the completed fabric. However, it is important to know that the filling threads are not immediately strengthening to the fabric. In fact, the weft requires force by the weaver to transition them from loose fitting to snug for the uniformed strength and appearance of the fabric (Tortora, 1978). This process is representative of the force or energy that is needed for me to find ways of harmonizing tension-filled experiences into my lived narratives.

Through the work of Greene (1995), I came to understand the difference between 'seeing small' and 'seeing big'. 'Seeing big' as Greene (1995) describes are the inquiries we make into our life narratives that allow us to go deeper with "intentionality and concreteness" (p. 10) and to 'see big' is more comprehensive and includes life's uncertainties with a persons' integrity in mind. Greene further explains that to see small we view life threads form a "detached point of view" (p. 10). When considering the construct of a fabric, I 'see big' in the way Greene explained. The completeness I envision is not from a microscopic view or 'seeing small'.

As such, my narrative beginning is a way to examine the fabric of my life and the interwoven threads from a position of 'seeing big'. My understanding of my life fabric is not one

that is perfectly stitched, but rather is an intricate patch work where each addition to the fabric represents threads of experiences. Casey (1995) calls me to understand that the construction of identity is "to put shards of experiences together to (re)construct identity" (p. 216).

Carding is the processes by which threads are pulled apart and isolated from one another (Zurich, 2008). This process of pulling apart or detangling, captures the emotional challenge of trying to make visible the experiences of my life. The threads of my life experiences cannot be isolated without creating tensions[1] and threatening the fabric's integrity. Primarily, when I refer to threads in this work, I am inquiring into identities. These threads include identities of being a black [2] daughter, scholar and woman. Even in my greatest attempt to inquire into these threads separately, it was evident that their interconnectedness makes this impossible.

[1] Tension(s) is a narrative concept used to describe competing or conflicting stories. "Competing stories are stories that…live in dynamic but positive tensions with the dominant stories; whereas conflicting stories collide with dominant stories" (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber & Orr, 2009, p. ??).

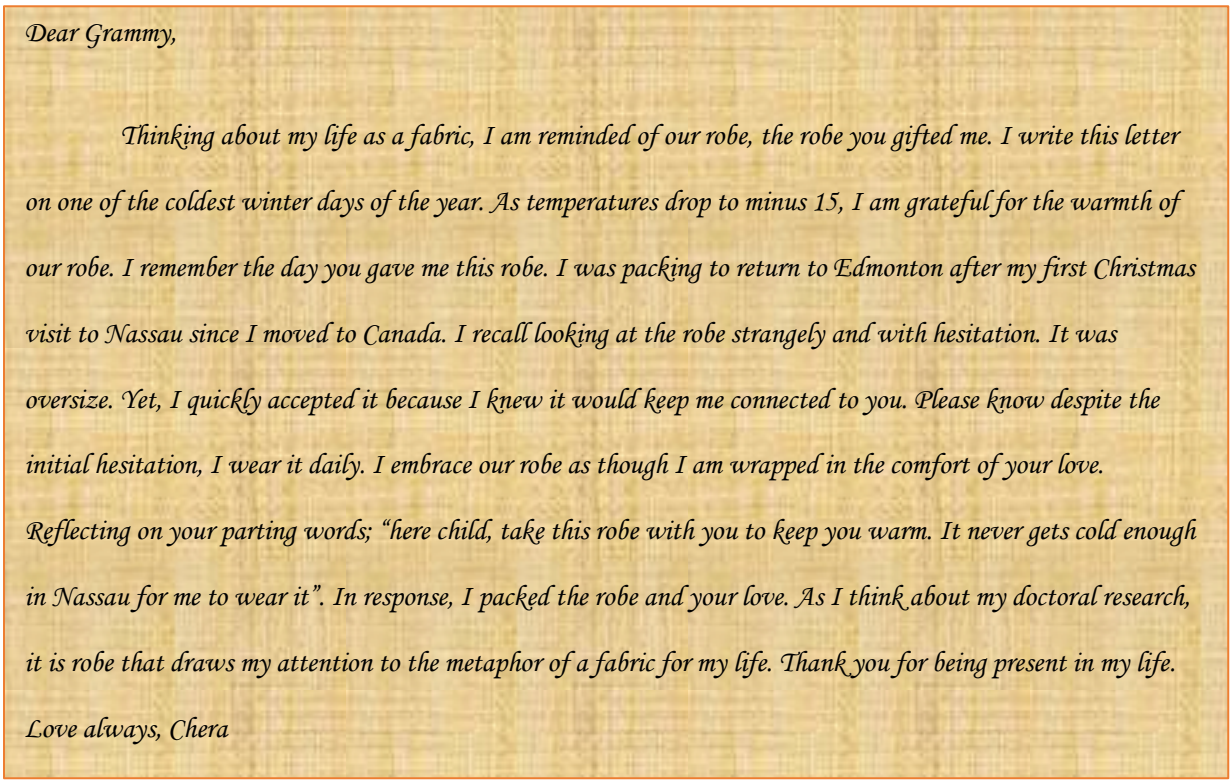
[2] Although the population for this work was situated with women of colour, I struggled with this term as my sole identity. Growing up in a racial climate the term "coloured" was only heard in association with a texted understanding of slavery. I have never referred to myself as coloured although I fully accept and embrace this label as a part of my identity. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this work I referred to myself as a black woman. Hooks (1981, 1992, 1989, 1986), a preeminent black feminist underpinned this multiplicity of racial identity in many of her writings by moving back and forth between identifying self and others as either black or coloured. However, I this work the use of both terminologies depending on what the author uses. When citing an author's work, I will use the terminology they used when referring to people of colour.

Chapter 1

My Beginnings

Figure 2.

Connecting threads: A letter to Grammy


Dear Grammy,

Thinking about my life as a fabric, I am reminded of our robe, the robe you gifted me. I write this letter on one of the coldest winter days of the year. As temperatures drop to minus 15, I am grateful for the warmth of our robe. I remember the day you gave me this robe. I was packing to return to Edmonton after my first Christmas visit to Nassau since I moved to Canada. I recall looking at the robe strangely and with hesitation. It was oversize. Yet, I quickly accepted it because I knew it would keep me connected to you. Please know despite the initial hesitation, I wear it daily. I embrace our robe as though I am wrapped in the comfort of your love. Reflecting on your parting words; "here child, take this robe with you to keep you warm. It never gets cold enough in Nassau for me to wear it". In response, I packed the robe and your love. As I think about my doctoral research, it is robe that draws my attention to the metaphor of a fabric for my life. Thank you for being present in my life.

Love always, Chera

Writing this letter to my Grammy was not an easy undertaking. I struggled to express adequately my gratitude for her presence in my life. When she gifted me the robe, it shifted who I was in relation to her. The robe now has become a way for me to think about shifts in our relationship and how these shifts would be narrated in my and my Grammy's identities. Our robe is light blue with patterns that appear roughened but soft to touch. Since I use it often, I have noticed that small thread fragments have become visible, warranting clippings and gentle washing. I reluctantly think about washing this robe, as to avoid damaging it. This fabric is a

reflection of my life and how I try to protect my identity; while recognising the efforts I make to preserve its integrity with careful attention to fragmented threads, my life at times appears fragile. The metaphor of a fabric, is for me a metaphor to think about my identity.

Identity

At the core of this work was an inquiry into identity and identity making. For me, identity is constructed through a continuous inquiry of "genomic and experiential factors", as well as our interactions with the world (Bruner, 1997, p. 146). For Bruner, the construction of identity is explained as the complex by-product of locating oneself in social and personal contexts (1997). In later writing, Bruner (2001) wrote that life as a construction should not be viewed as anything in and of itself, rather, it is in the constructing life "test or text making" where identity is formulated (p. 27). As such, I understood that my identity is ever changing. The evolution of identities through continuous interactions are conceptualized as experiences. Experiences expressed as narratives shape identity. Kerby (1991) and Carr (1986) helped me understand the concept of narrative and identity. Kerby (1991) offered this explanation in relation to narrative identity:

> The self, as implied subject, appears to be inseparable from the narrative or life stow it constructs for itself or otherwise inherits. The important point is that it is from this story that a sense of self is generated. […] Self-understanding and self-identity will be dependent, in certain important respects, upon the coherence and continuity of one's personal narrative. Understanding, after all, is facilitated by a clear presentation and development of material, and identity implies a certain continuity over time. (p. 6)

As I thought with Kerby's conceptualization of the relationship between narratives and self, I understood the challenge in my efforts to separate the threads of my life. Each thread has a

story which is dependent on another thread to generate a sense of self. These stories are how I came to understand and identify who I am in the context of my life. I considered Kerby's (1991) work about coherence and continuity of narrative identity. Humans need to be able to identify themselves in a coherent and continuous narration; experiences are interwoven in the fabric of our lives. Kerby and Carr (1986) emphasised that it is important to accept that the narratives of who we think we are, are not always coherent.

Carr (1986) called me to understand coherence by explaining that for a life story to be coherent, humans desire to 'live up and out' the narratives associated with the identities others construct about them or the narratives they choose. This idea of needing to 'live up and out' the narratives associated with our identities, resonated with my desires to 'be good enough' in almost every thread of my life. Living 'up and out' the grand narratives called me to inquire into what sustains and what causes tensions as I examined the fabric of my life. As such, I paused to be attentive to disruptions. Carr (1986) suggests that disruptions to a person's way of knowing and seeing themselves can result in "confusion and temporal disorder" (p. 96). And by its very nature, what is at stake is a loss of coherence of self, the unity and integrity of personal identity (Carr, 1986).

Life narratives can be fragmented when events of life disrupt the dominant narratives attached to our identity. This was true for me. The dominant narrative of who I was or am is primarily attached to relationships that are important to me. I could not conceptualize a time in my life when I did not identify with the narrative of being Mrs. Ingraham's granddaughter. As I thought of this identity I wrote this letter to my Grammy.

Figure 3.

Our robe: A letter to Grammy

Dear Grammy,

As I physically and metaphorically travel with our robe, I carry you with me. Although the robe did not make me your granddaughter, it gave me a tangible way to remember your significance in my life. When I gown our robe, I travel emotionally and spiritually to our home. I feel your presence in a comforting way. I feel the same sense of safety I often felt lying lengthwise in your bed. Although you are not physically here, our experiences and stories travel with me. I am attentive to the values you taught me about family, faith, and culture. You taught me that love and values travel with us. Just as your love sustains me, so do the values you have taught me.

Love always, Chera

As I sat with the words I expressed to my Grammy, I wondered about the other values and experiences that sustain my identity as a black woman. At the height of writing this work, these wonders became tensions as I faced told and untold truths of what it means to be black globally. Realizing that my narratives of what it means to be black were not just my stories. There were resonances of my sustaining threads being plastered on every news channel in the world. I watched in anger, dismay, fear and confusion as echoes of cries and pleas of black people were made to see value in our lives. These cries created reverberations of black history, racial injustices, social inequities and demands that black identity is not just the complexion of a person skin it is the sum of their lived experiences.

Black Identity: It Matters, We Matter!

My wakefulness to these sustaining threads made me increasingly attentive to the disruptions in the world and in my life. These disruptions called me to reflect on what it means to be a Black woman past and present. As I reflected on the current state of blackness or being black in the world, I felt and better understood Carr's (1986) meaning of how disruptions could result in "confusion and temporal disorder" (p. 96). My confusion became increasingly pronounced as the identity of what it means to be black shifted overnight, at least it did for me. The narrative of being and living in the identity of blackness intensified when I woke up to the news of a black man losing his life to the knee of a person who was designed by law to protect him. While social and institutional understandings of policing mean protection for many, for black people, policing has historically meant being a target of hate, accusations of wrong doing, and threat to life.

I came to a place of desperately wanting to make sense of this awaken state of my identity. Simultaneously, I was facing peers of other racial identities disparately looking to me to explain and make sense of my and their emotions, hurt, confusion, and identity disruptions. While I appreciated their concern and apparent desire and need to 'help', at times these gestures of goodwill presented as a checklist of 'doing my part' and 'checking my privilege' which often angered me more than helped. I came to a place of asking that they use their privilege rather than check it. It was in those moments, I realized they did not know how to use their privilege because it was often invisible to them. Ruffin (2020) called me see that to identify as black is not an experience that can be fully understood by mainstream society through popular culture and social media, which has increasingly commodified and appropriated African American history and culture within the corporate-neoliberal-performative frameworks of post-racialism and 'diversity

and inclusion' […] Nor can it be completely understood through the equation of another person's unique form of oppression.

It is important to note that during each period when Black humanity has been sincerely considered, it usually started with collective leadership within the African American community; it occurred within the American public when the struggle for Black lives was unavoidable, effective, and threatened to transform institutional oppression in criminal justice, education, employment, health, and housing. When this interest from the mainstream dies down, as it did in 1974 and 2017, Black people will have no choice but to continue to live to the best of their abilities, and against the traumas of alienation, isolation, implicit bias, poverty, and customary and legal racism.

Ruffin's (2020) explanation of black lives and black living created tensions for me as I faced the world. I began to see my identity as more than racialized. Black people are not just 'black'; we are human. The movement of *Black Lives Matter*, isn't a movement of race, it is a movement of humanity. Coming to this understanding provided new perspectives to my research and positionality as I lived alongside participants. Their stories became more about the narratives of humanity than narratives, of, or about, race. My sense of responsibility to honour their lived experiences increased as I reflected on the significance of this work. This research shows some of the experiences of black women in higher education in Canada. Experiences that are bigger than the colour of their and my skin.

It is a call for each of us to question why terms such as 'diversity and equity' are needed if justice for humanity was evident in *all* of our experiences. The lack of equitable experiences as humans creates experiences of injustice for people like me, the participants in this study and the George Floyd's of the world. As such, race at times becomes the focus of our conversations

because we are all desperately looking for the 'innate' difference between each other. Yet, we need to come to a place of realizing that racialized differences are not innate, instead they are cultivated and constructed by humans.

New Experiences, New Lessons

These cultivated differences produce and reproduce experiences that teach black people lessons of survival. And as we learn and teach these lessons to our children, we resist in our hearts the need to march as we chant "No life matters until all lives matter" because we face tensions of wondering do "black lives matter?" and if they do, then to whom do they matter? I was raise on a predominately black landscape, a landscape that allowed me to see black as ordinary. But my arrival to Canada taught me new lessons of the visibility of my blackness. It created 'disruptions' in the continuity of my narrative of black identity.

This awareness to my blackness did not just increase for me, it also become more visible to others. When the *Black Lives Matter* movement become increasingly vocal, black people around the world questioned their space and place as our lives were being stolen on the very roads we believed were paved for our freedom. It created a movement that made me question my past and future as a black woman, scholar, and mother. I wonder/ed and fear/ed for my children lives. I hate the thought of having, out of necessity, to create moments that will shift their narratives of being black as I teach them how to be and survive blackness in a world designed for whiteness.

Narrative Identity Making

As I began to think more about my narrative understanding of identity, I became wakeful to my responsibility as a narrative inquirer. As a narrative inquirer, I recognized that I was tasked with the ontological responsibility of examining my life. In examining my life, I understood, as described by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), that life "is a dialectical balancing act in which one strives for various perfections, always falling short, yet sometimes achieving a liveable harmony of competing narrative threads and criteria" (p. 8). Narratives allow us to tell of experiences, which reflects narrative identity making. This conceptual understanding is framed by the idea of the 'stories I live by'. "'Stories to live by' is a narrative term that reflects an understanding of narrative identity making" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 4).

Although the concept was developed in relation to teachers' identity making, I used the term as a way of understanding identity more broadly. Clandinin et al. (2006) explained that 'stories to live by' are narratives of human lives that are not fixed or singular, but that are continually composed and recomposed in multiple ways. Additionally, 'stories to live by' are lived, relived, told and retold[3] in the context of those spaces and people who live alongside us as experiences become the stories of our lives. The importance of narratives is beyond telling stories, it's about being attentive to how time, space and place shapes who we are and are becoming. In addition, I considered the people who lived alongside me in these experiences and how my retelling and reliving of these stories shifts across time; thus, creating shifts in my identity.

[3] In narrative inquiry, the use of the terms 'tell', 'retell', 'living' and 'reliving' of narrative explains how or relationship, meaning and understandings of stories are a reflection of our lived experiences. Clandinin et al. (2006) called me to understand that retelling and reliving is a way of re-storying our lives which sometimes creates shifts in the stories we live. Moreover, that in the process of telling and retelling our stories, we reflect on our experiences and learn new and different lessons from them each time (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999).

Identities are constructed with a connectedness to "knowledge, context, and identity" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p.4). Connelly and Clandinin in their conceptualization of the term 'knowledge' in relation to narrative identity making described knowledge as temporal (past, present and future) and as located in practice. As such, knowledge is understood as accepting an individual as a credible source of knowledge and knowing.

'Locating' is a term that narratively refers to context (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) and 'landscape' as a metaphor is used to locate understanding of context (p. 2). Landscape is the intentional situating of self and experiences with regard to "space, place, and time" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 4). Moreover, a landscape is expandable beyond the self by increasing its capacity to include "people, places, and things" (p. 5). In this work, it was imperative that I located myself as my landscapes shifted across space, place and time. As a broad understanding of identity, I returned to the term 'stories to live by'. Identity is narratively understood as the connectedness of experiences expressed as stories through context and knowledge which creates a sense of self (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Stories I Live By

King reminded me in profound ways that "the truth about stories is that, that's all we are" (2003, p. 2). King called me to understand identity as stories; each time a story is told it shapes and reshapes identities. Bacchilega and Duggan (2019) provided further clarity to King's understanding of identity by explaining:

> [t]o think with stories rests in part on the understanding that the storyteller or artist is "always one step ahead of the scholar" and also on learning *how* (even more than what) stories tell about human interactions in the world and with each other, and how we tell

> stories in different genres and cultures to overcome powerlessness, maintain privilege, or question accepted hierarchies. (p. 240)

My life stories at times are fragmented, unintentional and unavoidable. It is in told and retold fragments of stories, that I began to find a sense of harmony. As I puzzled over my childhood, I am convinced that it is impossible for humans to story their lives in the present without re-storying pieces of their past. I began by thinking about my early life experiences in the Bahamas.

Figure 4. [4]

Leaving home: A letter to Grammy

Dear Grammy,

Living in Canada gave me a space to think about my life as a Bahamian. It has given me a space to think about the stories you shared about my birth. I recalled you telling me about my slightly premature birth at the Princess Margaret Hospital. It was a warm mid-afternoon late November. You retold the story of my birth with attentiveness to my first two years being raised in my maternal Grammy's home. I thought about who I could have been and who I am, given that I was not raised solely by my mother. I wonder how our relationship would have been different if my mother had not married daddy.

As the years pass, each time you told this story there are threads that you recall with less ease. Yet, in your retelling there are also threads you are able to recall effortlessly – I think of them as sustaining threads. I think about the sustaining thread of the 'English Cast Iron Pan'. A pan you purchased one week after my birth over 30 years ago. It was purchase on your first trip to buy me newborn undergarments. I grew up with this pan. I reflect on the countless meals we shared from this pan. It grew to be my favorite cooking pan. You taught me how to prepare family meals in this pan. Using this pan marked our time of cooking meals together for a long time now. I wish I could have lived this story with my mother. And while this is impossible, I thank you for sustaining the ease of our relationship and for welcoming me into this world.

Love always, Chera

When I think about inquiring into birth stories, I assumed that one would turn to their mother or father as the first source of knowing who one is. Yet, I have always turned to the stories of my Grammy, when I wonder about who I am. For me, the ease of my relationship with my Grammy made her an obvious choice. Although my Grammy, time and time again, told and

[4] I wrote this letter thinking about the value of honoring those I love while they are alive. As such, I needed to honour my Grammy by reading these letters to her immediately. As I read to her, my emotions were overwhelming. She paused at the end, echoing words of appreciation and honour; while laughing to herself saying "it's true you are always in that robe".

retold me this story, it is only now that I begin to reflect on its significance to my life. I think about the purchase of the pan. I recalled my Grammy's narrative of walking into an old British store to buy this pan. This memory brought me joy, as I realized her love for me from birth and how she is central to my sense of family.

This random act of purchasing a pan shortly after my birth, became a thread that I could trace throughout my life. I am mindful of how when she told this story, she never described this pan without her displeasure of my younger brother breaking the handle. Yet, despite the pan's imperfections, it's still our favorite pan. Not once have we had a conversation about throwing this pan away after its handle was broken. Perhaps we all recognised in some way that the potential loss of this pan could mean the loss of past and future memories. I thought about this potential loss of memories and how it holds the possibility to shift the way we story our lives, and thus the possibility to shift our identities. Perhaps it is not that these narratives are lost, for they too might be embodied or 'misplaced'.

While some stories are in fact lost or 'misplaced' by suppression, others are 'misplaced' because they are too difficult to live, relive, tell, or retell. When stories are embodied it means that they live within our body, our skin. They remain woven throughout the fabric of our lives and identities. In thinking with my mother's stories and my stories of my mother, I am drawn to think about the silent and untold stories. In spite of the silent and untold stories, I continually attempt to situate myself in my mother's lived experiences of my birth. Yet, I found it difficult to understand her experience and the narratives of her and my relationship. The relationship with my mother remains fragmented. Many stories are 'misplaced' and shape my identity as a daughter. I feel compelled to inquire deeper, to see bigger, but the shifts in understanding my

mother through 'misplaced stories' created unease. Would knowing my mother's stories change who I see myself to be?

Figure 5.

Birthing Stories: A letter to Grammy

Dear Grammy,

In spite of my resistance, I used your encouragement to call mommy to inquire into the story of my birth. Our conversation started with great resistance on my part. I was unsure what to expect as a response. However, I was pleasantly surprised by her enthusiasm and willingness to share some of her memories. Although, my sense of unease faded, it did not disappear. Added to my surprise was hearing her say she had a book about my early beginnings. She had kept a record of me from birth to early childhood. Her retelling of my birth story was similar to yours; although she could not recall some of the same details you shared. Her willingness to share her memories with me had such a positive impact on me. During my conversation with her, she has offered me this book for my keeping. I am honoured, afraid and excited. Thank you for your encouragement.

Love always, Chera.

Knowing my birth story meant confronting tensions. Inquiring into them meant locating those 'misplaced' and suppressed stories of my relationship with my mother, a relationship in which I at times felt at dis/ease[5]. I located myself in feelings of dis/ease and fear, which are in large part shaped by the silences that fill the relationship with my mother. What will this sense of dis/ease mean when I hold my mother's early record of me? I wondered who I am in the eyes of my mother. How does my mother story our early relationship? How would reading these records shape my past, current, and future relationship with my mother? Is it possible that this picture book could shift the narrative of my relationship with my mother? I feared this shift as it created

[5] I return to Lugones (1987) work and her writings about her relationship with her mother. It was, like for me, a relationship filled with moments of dis/ease.

uncertainties. I was suddenly attentive to how comfortable I am with the relational tension between my mother and me. I was not sure if I am ready for this to change. Yet, I heard the need to be attentive to change, when Connelly and Clandinin (1999) wrote that identities are "composed, sustained, and changed" (p. 4).

Tensions in fabrics shift with time, much like tensions in relationships also shift over time and with new experiences. The tensions in my relationship with my mother continue to shift. It was important for me to remain wakeful to the reality that identity making is relational and that identities are never fixed. One tension I face is accepting that I had no control over how my mother tells our story or how others story our relationship. I am reminded of my surprise, when my mother told me she had kept those early records of my childhood.

I thought further about tensions in the stories I live by, and as I looked forward, backward, inward and outward, I was attentive to place. Huber et al. (2006) called me to inquiry into experiences in these four directional ways, noting that place and space are imperative to situating moments of tensions. I realized that the retelling of my experiences with my mother, until recently did not consider my mother's experiences. I am slowly becoming more attentive to the understanding that my retelling might have competed or conflicted with my mother's living, reliving, telling and retelling of our experiences as mother and daughter.

It is only then that I began to wonder, how my mother would have storied our relationship. I too wondered about my contributions to the tensions in her stories of being a mother. What was it like to raise me in the context of perhaps wanting more and better for me? I wondered if she too lives with stories of failure and fear like I do. I think about my willingness and unwillingness to live alongside my mother in the telling, retelling, living, and reliving of our narratives as a black daughter, woman, and for her, mother.

Lugones' (1987) work on loving perception called me to think about my mother. Lugones notes that "there is a complex failure of love in the failure to identify with another woman, the failure to see oneself in other women who are different from oneself" (p. 6)[6]. This failure is in part shaped by arrogant perceptions. Turning inward, I wondered about my arrogant perceptions of my mother. I can saw my unwillingness to inquire into her worlds[7], her narratives and her experiences. I wondered, if I were to have inquired into her experiences, would our relational identity shift? Would it change the way I tell, retell, live, and relive my early childhood experiences?

I do not see myself in my mother's reflection. Perhaps this was/is intentional, as I try to protect who I am and am becoming. Over many years my mother shifted my identity in ways that I viewed as detrimental to my self-worth as a scholar and as her daughter. The possibility that I could be like her, made me fearful of mothering my future daughters. I feared that I would pass on these feelings of brokenness and being unworthy. It was this fear of failing that has emerged as a strong thread that is woven throughout the fabric of my life.

Relationships, Perceptions and Privilege

As I began to think more about schooling, I was attentive to the difference between schooling and education. For my Grammy they are not equal. She believed that schooling is a process that is structured and, in most cases, produces predictable outcomes. On the other hand,

[6] I employed the use of Lugones (1987) understanding of failure to love on the context of the work around women and their relational identity as well as their willingness to truly love despite of what they see as an external sum of their being. Lugones' intent is not to imply that love is not present, but there is a failure to love in the absence of arrogant perceptions. Arrogant perceptions as adopted and modified by Lugones from the work of Frye (1983) who explains arrogant perceptions as when a person fails to be willing to enter into the "world" of another; yet creates assumptions about who they are without knowing them and treats them according. This perception is often a derivative of grand narratives composed to create an imposed identity.

[7] The used of the word "world(s)" as Lugones (1987) refers to the term as a presence of real human interactions, and a societal domination of a narrative that describes and constructs life, relationships, gender, and race.

education is learning. She told me that "You can be educated anywhere, at any time, and on anything". Grammy told me that educative experiences transcend from birth to death, they are constant experiences that are unpredictable and give preparation for life. Like Grammy, hooks (2003) too, saw schooling and education as different. hooks explained that schooling is a setting and education is the knowledge gleaned beyond those settings.

Figure 6.

Dear Grammy,

My early years of schooling were not filled with a sense of belonging. I was bullied from grade one through six. I sighed a breath of relief knowing that my middle school was closer to home. I knew that my attendance at my elementary school was a privileged placement because you taught there, but I was being bullied because of the existing perception that I was favored by you. I am in no way blaming you for the bulling but wanted to tell you a story I always feared sharing to avoid blame. These early experiences have called me to puzzle my worth as an adult and have shaped much of my life. I too think about relationships that have failed in my life and the ways in which I might have contributed to these. Why is my relationship marked with such love?

Love always, Chera

Thinking about my perceived and actual privilege throughout my life, called me to think about the ways in which I have contributed to relationships that have failed. Lugones' (1987) work called me to think differently about my identity in the many worlds I belong and feel a sense of belonging. Lugones noted that depending on our ease in the relational interactions, our identity in the multiple places and spaces (worlds) differs. I thought about this in relation to who I am with my mother and how my sense of being at ease is so different in my relationship with Grammy. I began to understand that our relational experiences shift the affinity and the tensions

in the narratives we tell and retell of our relationships and of ourselves. As such, when affinity and tensions change, so do the narrative and the fabric that reflect our past, current and future.

My Research Puzzle

Inquiring into my identity has challenged me to unravel threads within my fabric that created tensions. One of my tensions stemmed from my experiences alongside my mother and is reflected in my deep sense of not being 'good enough'. This sense has shaped so much of my life and I continued to recognise its impact throughout my life as a graduate student. My early childhood stories are reflected in my identity as a student and beginning scholar. In my research, I inquired into identity-making of black women in the context of Canadian higher education. My experiences in higher education with grades and the systemic pressure of making an 'A' have called me to inquire into identity-making. It is in the experience of or fear of receiving an undesirable grade and in appealing this grade, that I saw processes of identity-making at play that are critical.

Grades. Grades are the most permeable aspect of a student's educational experience as the triad of schooling consists of teaching, learning, and assessments. In fact, assessments penetrate the entire triad (Coles, 2004). Since the grading process is largely subjective, it creates uncertainties and fears among students (Walstad & Miller, 2016). Additionally, grades are a means of sorting and labelling students. The purpose of this sorting and labelling is multifaceted and includes funding allocations, and course progression for students (Schwab et al., 2018). At times, student's identities shifted from seeing themselves as successful to failing or failed.

Failing. A conceptual definition of failing for this study was not provided; rather, it was a student's pre-determined measurement of what they see as a successful or a failing grade. Yet, I am aware that the "term failure typically evokes negative connotations in educational settings

and is likely to be accompanied by negative emotional states, low sense of confidence, and lack of persistence" (Simpson & Maltese, 2018, p. 223). Success varied from student to student depending on the grade they desire. However, institutional structures also pre-determine the requirements of being successful in individual courses or programs. As such, a failing grade is a learner's inability to achieve a desirable outcome (Simpson & Maltese, 2018). The tensions that exist between identity-making, grades, and success are marked by a strong sense of judgement of who each student is and is becoming in the context of higher education. Like me, students might use grades for self-validation, thus, making it difficult to disassociate their self-worth from the grades they achieve (Crocker & Park, 2004; Simpson & Maltese, 2018).

Identity Making

Identity-making was a focus of this inquiry. I was interested in inquiring into the experiences of identity-making that are shaped by grade attainment and I was particularly interested in how identities unfold as women of colour challenge grades through a process known as 'appealing'. The appeal processes were the only legitimate process in the highly structured environment of higher education that students can use to challenge a very hegemonic and subjective process. The experiences of women of colour in higher education of appealing their grades highlighted issues of colonialism, racism, gendering, silencing, and othering; all of which are important aspects of identity making (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). I wondered if familial experiences for women of colour have influenced their experiences of fear and failing, much like the relationship with my Mother and Grammy have impacted me. hooks (1989) wrote that for women of colour experiences with grading and challenging power in higher education have created stories of humiliation and degradation, thus challenging their integrity and sense of self-worth.

I started my inquiry into the experiences of women of colour in higher education in Canada around identity-making through the grade appeals process. Historically, women of colour have struggled to have a voice and place in higher education, while having to overcome racial and gender oppression (hooks, 1989). I called forth my experiences of facing similar struggles which have shaped my identity of being worthy as a black female scholar. As women of colour, I questioned if we (black women) all face tensions with our worthiness as women, and scholars who are coloured? Do we 'misplace' our stories of trying to find a balance of 'being enough'? In 1989 Howard-Vital pointed out that few scholars were publishing work around the experiences of success of black women in higher education with grades and degree attainment. Almost three decades later, this gap persisted as I reviewed the literature, which made it almost impossible to understand the experiences of black women in higher education in Canada. I hope that this work helps to fill the gap.

Being a Black Female Scholar

As a black female scholar, my experiences with self-worth were shaped by the relationships that are woven into my life stories and by my experiences with failing grades in higher education. I think about other black female scholars and wondered if they too are attentive to how relationships shape our scholarly identities, when the grand narrative of who we are or expected to be may compete or conflict with who we wanted to be. I often puzzled about my ability to measure up against institutional and societal standards of being 'good enough' or 'successful' as a black female scholar. I questioned every grade, which in turn became the central focus of my learning experiences.

This focus shifted towards a fear of the grading process as I felt the weight of every grade and the significance it holds in determining my worth. This fear weaves itself into my

experiences and was present when I wrote a paper, received a grade, or challenged a grade. In thinking about my experiences, I saw that this fear was not arbitrary, it dated back to my early schooling experiences. It dated back to the time when I was labelled as a failing student and a poor writer by my teachers and my mother. I wondered who gets to validate the stories of failure in the lives of other women of colour. I wondered: What are the experiences of appealing grades for women of colour in higher institutions in Canada and how does this shape their unfolding identities?

A reflective turn

Thinking about my experiences with racism, silencing and being placed in the margins during my years of higher study shaped my curiosity about the experiences of other women of colour in higher education. Lugones (1987) helped me see my responsibility to 'world-travel' with my research participants as we lived alongside each other living, reliving, telling and retelling of the narratives that made visible our process of identity-making. In world-travelling with participants, I opened a relational space where participants and I inquired into our experiences as women of colour in higher education. In this relational space, sharing of our experiences of being in the margins both racially and gendered made this space powerful. How did understandings of our roles and expectations of being women of colour compete or conflict with our narratives in higher education? How did inquiring into these experiences of meeting the demands of each role and expectation expand the understanding of identity-making as women of colour in this context? Lastly, how did the experience of different cultural, social and familial upbringings, as well as institutional identities influence our narratives of identity making as women of colour in higher education?

Chapter 2

Identity Making: The interweaving of Race, Gender and Education

An inquiry into the educational experiences of black women is complex and shaped by questions of identity-making. Threads of race, gender, and education were often woven together, and to separate these multiple threads was difficult. These threads, can be fragmented, but can also provide continuity and coherence (Kerby, 1991). In this chapter, I called forward my identity-making in higher education as a black woman and a scholar; I did this, while also highlighting relevant[8] literature on the scholarship of race, gender and education. As I continued to move temporally backward and forward into my experiences of being a black woman, I became increasingly aware of my dependence on the less visible but sustaining threads of my identity. These threads consist of relationships, faith, as well as my cultural and familial landscapes. Although, these narrative threads were not always visible and maybe 'misplaced' for various reasons, they formed the 'stories I live by' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Situating Identity Making

As I contemplated narrative identity making, I turned to the theory of experience by Dewey (1938). Dewey's work provided a philosophical underpinning of the ontological and epistemological commitments of narrative inquiry which is "a way of understanding and inquiring into experience" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 38). Dewey explained, that through experience, identities are shaped and names two criteria: interaction and continuity. Continuity, a concept I will take up in greater detail later in this chapter, is the awareness that "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some

[8] The literature used in the study is focused on scholars that emphasis narrative identity making. Although the use of other literature such as critical race theory (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tate, 1997) in education is important, this work was taken up from a narrative framework.

way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). The concept of continuity in other words means that "experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2).

Interaction, the second criteria in Dewey's (1938) understanding of experience is "equal rights to both factors … objective and internal conditions" (p. 42). Dewey explained that 'interaction' between these two factors creates a "situation" (p. 42). For Dewey, as people experience life, the objective (or external) conditions are ones they have little control over. On the other hand, the factor of internal condition is often taken for granted in its contribution to experience. Together, these two factors influence each other and ultimately shape experience. Dewey (1938) wrote that:

> Individuals live […] in a series of situations […] and […] interaction is going on between an individual and objects and other persons […]. An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment. (pp. 43-44)

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) narrative identity making and Dewey's criteria of experience is linked to temporality (time), place (locating one's self) and sociality (social interactions) or the three-dimensional space in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through Dewey's pragmatist understanding of experience, I began to understand what he referred to as 'inexpressible' experiences (Dewey, 1938). From a pragmatist stance, no one experience can be fully known; some experiences are embodied or silent. People story their experiences often in fragments. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained that to understand life is to consider that it is "filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and

space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities" (p. 17).

While Dewey's thinking about experience is foundational in narrative inquiry, other pragmatist such as Addams bring an understanding of experience from a feminist stance. Addams's (1902/2002) work of advocacy for social change through the inquiry of practices and lived experiences are important to identity making. As a feminist pragmatist Addams practices of inquiry called for transformational thinking on the part of the inquirer. This transformational thinking requires openness to shifting priorities and closely examining values (Rosiek & Pratt, 2013). Moreover, for Addams, this openness means having an attentiveness to social relations, while inquiring into social problems that marginalize people by race, silence populations such as women, or accept institutional and governmental policies that hindered social reform.

Addams's work of addressing equity in education from a feminist pragmatist standpoint was inclusive of human rights in an era where women's experiences were less valued (Atkinson, 2013). In understanding the identity of women in the context of education, Addams's work helped me to understand that an environment shapes a woman's way of knowing self and others (Atkinson, 2013). This included uncovering and naming hegemonic male-centered epistemology, while taking into account cultural practices. Like Dewey, Addams's work focused on experiences, but drew heavily on the importance of making visible the struggles of marginalized population through race, socioeconomic status and gender (Atkinson, 2013; Rosiek & Pratt, 2013; Roskiek, 2013).

Turning to 'Stories to Live by': Contemplating Narrative Identity

Narrative inquiry is "a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2013, p.17). Clandinin added that this "knowledge is entwined with identity" (p. 53), or what has been called 'stories to live by' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). I understood that experiences are inseparable from identities. Building on the three-dimensional spaces (time, place and sociality) of narrative inquiry, I contemplated narrative identity making in these three spaces.

Time/Temporality. Narratively inquiring into the 'stories we live by' is a way of thinking about who we are and are becoming across time (Clandinin, 2013). The dimension of temporality in narrative inquiry is what "point's inquirers towards the past, present and future of people, places, things and events under study" (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 3). When humans tell stories about their lives they invite us to live with their stories by sharing "what it means to live in a particular place, its history, inhabitants […] challenges […] ways of life and obligations to that place" (Curthoys et al., 2012, p. 173). Frank (1995/2013) called me to think 'with' stories, rather than 'about' stories. Frank explained that "to think 'about' a story is to reduce it to content and then analyze the content" (p. 23). On the other hand, "to think 'with' a story is to experience one's own life and to find […] a certain turn of one's life" (p. 23). Basso (1996) helped me understand that stories begin to work on you when you live 'with' them; they begin to shift understandings of self and other; thus, shift identities, over time.

Thinking with the stories of my life, I turned to my stories as a daughter, granddaughter and scholar. I turned to the stories told and retold in the previous chapter of experiencing and recognizing shifts in my relationship with my Grammy and my mother. My identity with my grandmother and our robe created a relational space for me to 'world-travel' (Lugones, 1997)

which made visible in new ways her significance in my life. My relationship with my mother shifted while thinking about her documentation of my life in a book filled with pictures and memories as she retold and relived the early years of our relationship. These lived experiences for me continued to shift my identity in relational ways. They also created forward looking stories. These shifts required me to intentionally slow down, so that I can listen and live with stories and experiences (Clandinin et al., 2018). This intentional slowing down did not mean taking a pause from living, rather to be cognizant in my living to moments that created shifts in my perception of self and others. This pause gave space to stories across and within time and experience.

As I thought about time and experience, Carr (1986) called me to think about stories in relation to time and experiences. Carr wrote that in our ordinary telling of experiences, we rely on our memory which is situated historically. This lapse in time requires awareness on the part of the story teller to recognize that it is their reality and that this reality shifts across time and place. A person's identity shifts and evolves throughout their lives through different experiences; this is what Kerby (1991) referred to as 'temporality' in narrative identity making (p. 9). Kerby offered a more extensive definition of remembering and its correlation with identity; noting that it is a representation of the past. Therefore, if a remembering is a representation of the past, what is remembered may include "symbols, schemes or other tokens that can stand for the past" (p. 23). Thus, when we retell, and relive experiences, when we story our lives in new ways, our identity is a representation and one should expect that fragments of people, places and events are composed and recomposed in multiple and never-ending possibilities. I thought about retold stories as the stories used "to interpret lives as told in different ways, to imagine different

possibilities" and to "live out the new person" we are becoming (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 478).

Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) called me to understand that "conversation[s] in relationship with others influences identity construction" (p. 159). In and through the conversations with myself, my mother, my grandmother, relationships that reflect diverse and different social context, institutional interactions, faith, and cultures, my identity was always in the making. This continuous unfolding of identity created an uncertainty that was a place of discomfort for me. Carr (1986) explained the construction of self is a structure, which the narrator must understand. The structure of a narration is the narrator's attempt to 'hold together' all of the moving parts of a story as they remember it in the face of changed circumstances or experiences. Carr called me to think about these moving parts in relation to the other elements that keep stories evolving.

Our stories are reflections of our memories; that is how we recall experience. Like stories, memories are also fluid. Stories when told and retold, continue to re/shape our understanding of who we are and what we are about (Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin added that thinking with 'stories to live by' calls for an understanding that while others construct their sense of who we are, we too are constructing our sense of self and others in our lived context. In this same way, identity making is not fixed, rather it is constructed through experiences that travel with them and are re/shaped by their context, history, sense of self and others, their values, culture and heritage (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Moya, 2000/2002).

Place. I drew on Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) definition of place; by place they mean "the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place and sequences of places where the inquiry of event[s] take place" (p. 480). In my narrative beginnings I began to situate

my earlier stories to live by in my Grammy's home (our home) and a school space we shared as teacher and student. These places shaped my understanding of who I was as a student. Like Connelly and Clandinin, I see place as geographical landscapes, as the physical places that are situated in the 'stories I live by'. I was attentive to how each story I told of my past, present and future was situated in place. As I called forth my early experiences of schooling, I thought about how William Gordan Primary school, a place that no longer physically exists, continued to exist in my stories.

Places 'of' or in school were central to my inquiry. William Gordan was a place filled with multiple meanings; a place that shaped my identity. This school was a place I was bullied, creating feelings of insecurity and not belonging, while it was simultaneously a place of love and belonging. This place was significant to me because my Grammy taught there. Learning alongside my Grammy was relational, it was situated in her classroom, a place that held our trust and love for each other. I thought about the days sitting in class longing for the first break to share a 'hot patty' or warm cheesy bread from the *Just Rite* bakery across the street with my Grammy.

I learned in this place that meal sharing with my Grammy was and is foundational to our relationship – it was and is a mechanism by which Grammy told stories, taught life lessons and in tangible ways showed her love. Yet, despite all the love I felt from my Grammy at William Gordan, when I thought about the school hallways, they always seemed too long, too narrow and too dark. I could never get to my Grammy's classroom quickly enough. For me, place has always been a reminder of who I was, am, and am becoming. Place for me was and is strongly tied to the relationships I held in particular places. School was always a place of friendships that bring joy, while simultaneously evoking fear of being bullied.

King (2003) called me to think about places by explaining that stories, when told make visible the nature of the world we live in, and our place in it. For King, place was also significant as it helps the story teller to determine when and where stories can be told and retold. King helped me to understand that when I told/tell stories, places are woven throughout the stories I told, they made visible the geography of my life. I often returned to stories of my early life told by my Grammy. Thinking with the stories told by my Grammy, allowed me to travel emotionally and relationally to places such as schools and my childhood home. The places in which I told my stories also shaped my ease and comfort in sharing the stories I live by.

Arnold and Silko (1998) wrote about place as shaping a life over time. They explained that time shifts how we think about and understand place in relation to our experiences and of who we are. I too can see how my stories of school have changed. It is only retrospectively that I can see school beyond the confines of hardship, as also a place of privilege. Over time I have recognized that school, has become a significant part of my identity. Some of the most significant relationships in my life are storied in schools and as such attached to particular places.

I think about how the time spent in my Grammy's classroom shifted who I was and the relationship I have with my Grammy. Her classroom looked like every other classroom, but it felt different. It was different. The longer I had to play on her chalk boards, erased her lessons for the day, or helped her rearrange her classroom in the quietness of the afternoon after a long school day, the more it became like home. I loved her classroom; I ate there, napped there, cried there, we shared stories there, but best of all we laughed there. It was in my Grammy's classroom that, like Silko (2013), I understood place in a relational way.

Sociality. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained that the personal and social conditions of narrative identity making are understood as "feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic

reactions and moral dispositions of […] the inquirer. By social conditions we mean existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise that form the individual's context" (p. 50). The childhood experiences with my mother and Grammy made visible the personal and social conditions of my identity making.

Kerby (1991) explained that "narratives and narrations give meaning to what we usually call the self" (p. 1), in other words, our identity. Kerby added to an understanding of self-identity by explaining that "self-understanding and self-identity is dependant […] upon the coherence and continuity of one's personal narrative" (p. 6). Kerby and Carr (1986) clarified that identity is shaped by continuity of time, place and our interaction with our social context.

Carr (1986) called for a deeper inquiry into the understanding of self and the coherence of life in identity making. Carr stated that the coherence of a person stories is dependent on human's desire to 'live up and out' the narratives associated with the identities others construct about them or the narratives they choose. I thought about my identity making, and how challenging it still was for me for understand what identity I am trying to 'live up and out'. McIntyre (1981) explained that "we understand our own lives in terms the narrative that we live out […] and stories are lived before they are told – except in the case of fiction" (p. 197). I slowed down, as suggested by Clandinin et al., (2018), to listened with attentiveness and to look at the unity and interconnectedness in my stories. In these moments I could see common threads of fear, insecurity, and safety in my stories.

As I inquired further into 'coherence' the concept of 'narrative grasps' helped me to understand the need to "hold the story together" (Carr, 1986, p. 75). Carr (1986) wrote that for a present and future to be coherent there needs to be consideration of the past through active reflections; as this creates the 'narrative grasp' essential to narrative coherence. Carr explained

that the "past is still viewed in light of its connection to present" and becomes the autobiography of our lives (p. 98). We are constantly composing and revising these narratives; thus, they are never complete.

Why education and identity?

Chung (2009) called me to understand through her personal narratives of identity making that we compose and live multiple identities. I continuously moved forward and backward in the telling and retelling of who I am. These stories of identity making are shaped by what Connelly and Clandinin (1999) called secret stories, cover stories and for me was reflected in 'misplaced' stories. Many stories I carried, are what Dewey (1935) calls inexpressible, they are 'misplaced'; they cannot be understood or told in a coherent way, they are embodied, fragmented and unspeakable.

Weiler (2000) explained that little is known about how social and other forces are interlaced into the "schooling process and how they contribute to the shaping of identity" (p. 4). The importance of understanding the experiences of how identity and education are interconnected holds the possibility to better prepare students and educators in the educational context. "While every student's self-definition is shaped by genetic predispositions, family norms, cultural traditions and experiences as a member of a majority or minority ethnic group, little research has been done on minority student development" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 188), particularly among women (Weiler, 2000). Decades later, the research on black student identity development in higher education remains scant (Griffin & McIntosh, 2015). While there has been a vast increase in this research in the United States of America and Europe (Bhopal, 2016), the research from a Canadian context for black women remains inadequate (Mogadime, 2002; Neeganaqwedin, 2013; Wane et al., 2002). Although there has been a recent uptake in

black lives research on all issues of being and living black including black experiences in education (Lopez, 2020). This recent uptake has been credited to the recent attention and focus on injustices on black people which was the catalysis for the resurgence of the movement *Black Lives Matter* (Leitch, 2020; Oleksiyenko, 2020). Despite this recent uptake, the evidence still shows scant focus on the experiences of black lives particularly women in Canadian higher education from a student lens. This is significant because lived experiences shape identity for all people including black people.

Understanding education and identity is important. Inquiring into the experiences of black women in higher education holds the possibility to make visible the unspoken, hidden, suppressed, and oppressed stories that shape their identities (Henry, 2015; Robinson et al., 2013). Henry (2015) wrote that these stories are "the unspoken histories of institutions and … pains of people's lives" (2015, p. 591). Marginson's (2014) work on student self-formation made visible that "identity is ambiguous" (p. 10). Marginson's understanding of identity making of students allowed me to return to a narrative understanding of identity making and its continuity. Identity is not just a sense of self, but it is also about the identities other impose on us. Marginson wrote:

> There is an awkwardness about the idea of identity, a certain brittle inflexibility. It freezes a moving target. People evolve. Their chosen labels do not. Though these labels may take different shades of meaning they are tied to common use, accumulate baggage, and are not infinitely elastic. People need the security and certainty promised by identity, but labels are not a substitute for a holistic description of the person and their relational characteristics. Identity is only one tool that people use when forming themselves. It is only one of the markers whereby international students [and any person] may be understood. (p. 10)

As I thought about Marginson's work of student identity, I found the less visible labels (thread) of my life, such as faith, race and cultural identities. They helped me to understand the 'stories I live by'.

Experiences of Identity in the Making: A Reflective Turn

Thinking with my personal stories and experiences of identity making, I was attentive to the stories I enter/ed the teaching and learning context with. I recalled my first day as a student in Canada. I was filled with fear, anxiety, feelings of unworthiness, excitement, pride and a sense of fulfilment that I was about to start a new journey. A journey that I hoped would lead me to attain my Master of Nursing degree. I remembered walking around campus and think just how big the campus felt.

As I entered the University classroom for the very first time, I remember thinking that the classrooms were so clean. The tables were fixed in a rectangular shape with awkwardly designed green chairs neatly pushed into the table. I wondered if this sense of order with the fixed tables indicated the rigidness I would encounter and if this was a way to manage students and expectations. It was the 5th of September 2015 when my first class was scheduled. I quietly sat in the green chair at the fixed table and felt the need to 'fit in'. As the classroom filled with strangers who only over time became peers and friends, I eagerly searched the room for anyone who looked like me. I looked for people who too were black – perhaps I was looking for someone who I assumed would share my experience of being from far away in a place where I felt out of place. I was one of two black women in the class.

As the course instructor entered the classroom, with a bright smile, I recalled feeling a sense of relief. Perhaps, my experience in this new place, would not be as bad as I was starting to imagine. The instructor began to speak about the course objectives and her expectations. As I

listened carefully, I heard her invitation to refer to her by her first name. I stopped, and an uneasiness began to settle in me. I never called a teacher by their first name. Yet, as I stopped and looked around me, I did not sense that others were uneasy – it appeared 'normal' address an educator by their first. Questions began to form, and I wondered: What would Grammy think of me addressing an educator by their first name? Would she see it as a sign of disrespect? Despite my uneasiness and the questions that lingered for a while, I soon accepted it as normal. It was a way to fit in – perhaps the educator saw herself as a friend, rather than a person in authority. Feeling out of place, I welcomed this, while at the same time this practice challenged me.

The experience of calling the educator by their first name forced me to contemplate, acknowledge, and address issues of power and authority that were part of my life and part of my position as a student in higher education. I became attentive to an apparent notion of 'equality'. Yet I continued to be puzzled: was it really possible for me to assume that I was equal or that hegemony was not at play in the educational context? Was it not as equally visible to me and my peers that the instructor still held power over us? For much of my life, I have been fearful of the power instructors have held over me, particularly the power that is part of grading. Entering the Canadian higher education landscape, I saw the experience of addressing a teacher by their first name as an invitation to see an educator as less 'powerful'.

Yet, it was weeks later when I understood that this experience was an illusion. The illusion of equality, in the way I had understood it in the moment of calling the instructor by their first name, came to light when I received my first grade. Over the course I had become so comfortable with the illusion that the threat of a failing grade seems less imminent or probable. I recall reminding myself, "She is too nice. We are friends, I can't fail". I was wrong, I failed!

Marginson (2014) called me to understand that I was experiencing what most international[9] students experience when they enter their host countries: a process of "adjustment or acculturation" to the requirements and habits of the host country (p. 8). I think back to my first few hours in Canada. I landed in Edmonton without any sense of my new geographical landscape. Directions of North, South, East and West made no sense to me and I felt so very much out of place. I had no place to call home on this new landscape, in this strange place. All I knew was that I was a student of the University of Alberta. I struggled to gain a sense of place and it seems that for a long time I was looking to find food or hair products that I used in the Bahamas. I found myself in the midst of an overwhelming number of unknowns. I quickly realized that my survival was dependant on my adjustment. This sense of being out of place also shaped my experiences in higher education.

This adjustment was a teaching and learning experience of social, institutional and perhaps cultural expectations; these expectations conflicted with my sense of self. I was faced with the danger to silence the stories I lived by. I felt such a strong need to fit into my new landscape to avoid making visible my differences – differences that marked not only the colour of my skin, but the ways in which I came to know power and authority.

School, Race, and Identity

Any attempt to disrupt the "nature of power and positionality […] in systems of oppression which produce structures [of] inequalities in our society and educational systems conjures discussions of race" (Sheared et al., 2010, p. 167). While the authors assume a given connection between power and race, this was not something I considered at the outset of my

[9] While this study was about black women, it was not a study of immigrant black women. Although some cited scholars used in this chapter bring an immigrant perspective because of the immigrant history of many black people, being an immigrant is not an inclusion or exclusion recruitment criterion for this study.

work. Only over time it became a thread that was difficult to ignore in my stories of schooling and the stories I heard from others. While there were multiple other threads, including gender[10], for now I will focus on race.

My inquiry into schooling[11], race and identity are grounded in my experience of being a black woman with 28 years of schooling, 10 of which are situated within higher education. Until recently, my attentiveness to the color of my skin had been minimal. I was very much aware that I was black, and 'othered' or 'marginalized in some ways by being called 'yellow or red/mango skinned'. Yet, because my schooling experiences were situated in a racial context that was predominantly black, I did not connect education and race intuitively. Being part of a predominately black group of students gave me the illusion that our struggles as black students were the same or similar. I did not feel the need to highlight my struggles as racialized experiences.

Slowly, through a more reflective and perhaps critical lens, I began to see my early schooling experiences differently. What was once normal, became questionable. The questions and wonders that formed were further shaped by reading the work of Willie (2003) and hooks (1992; 2000). Willie and hooks, helped me understand that the experiences of black people in higher education are historically situated and not well understood by other black people. I think about my Grammy's often gentle reminder, that '*if you do not know where you have come from, you would not know where you're going, or have an appreciation for the progress you have*

[10] It is difficult to pull apart the thread of gender in the discussion of race, schooling, and identity. These threads are woven together in my experiences. As I explored the work of thinkers such hooks (1992;1994a, 1994b;1998; 2000), Willie (2003) and Hill-Collins (1998, 2000, 2009, 2013, 2016), I found it even more challenging to separate experiences of schooling for black people from gendered experiences in higher education. However, in my attempt to make visible each of these threads, I discuss gender in the latter parts of this chapter.

[11] I returned to my earlier thoughts about schooling versus education in chapter one. This section although about schooling has many stories that has educated me along the way.

made'. As I read Willie and hook's work, I began to see that I am indebted to others for the space I hold in higher education, as a black woman.

Looking backward, I remember when I was 13 and preparing to enter Secondary school. My parents, in particular my father[12], were strong advocates for education. My parents placed great importance on education[13] and my father made significant financial sacrifices to ensure his children got the best education possible by sending us to private schools. My siblings and I understood that the cost to attend private school during elementary school was too great and that we were only able to transition to private schooling during our transition to secondary school. For my father, and many black parents, education was/is seen as key to freedom. Okoe (2017) and hooks (1996) explained that for many black people, education was the only means through which to access professions, economic stability and a desirable social status. Although I agreed with Okoe and hooks, I would be remised to not make evident that my access still leaves me with feelings of not belonging.

As a child, I recalled questioning and challenging[14] my father about the need to attend private school. I smile, as I think about myself then. I always had something to prove or at least that is how it felt. As my father's middle child and middle girl, I often struggled to find my place and my voice in the midst of being in the middle. I was my mother's first child. But, being her first did not change my positionality in my family. Looking back, my father always tried to treat his children equitable, while being attentive to our differences. My father and I share/d a relationship of ease, much like the relationship I share with his mother, my Grammy. Looking

[12] Although the stories of my father are not predominately visible in my writings thus far, the stories we share as father and daughter live in every story I tell. Our relationship has always been protective, and even now, I struggled to make visible these stories. Our stories are 'misplaced', but visible in my familial curricula making.

[13] I wondered if schooling and education held different meaning for my mother and father, as it did for my Grammy.

[14] Although I could not name it then, I always challenged structures of power and inequity.

back, I thought about the lessons my father taught me. His lessons were unique and intentional. My father taught me the importance of family, faith and education. These educative experiences continue to sustain me. Thinking about my father and his strong belief in the importance of schooling, I wondered if he consciously attended to issues of race. I wondered if he thought about how the colour of my skin shaped my experiences of school.

As I continued to move forward and backward in my familial stories of schooling and education, I recall my protest, and my attempted to challenge the schooling system I attended. I remember asking my father if I could attend public school. After stating my case with a list of arguments that favored my attendance of a public school, including arguments of cost and proximity to home, he agreed. I needed to prove to myself, my father, my siblings and the schooling system that the quality of education was the same and that academic success was not only granted through private schooling. Looking back, I recognized that these early experiences shaped my need to constantly measure up and prove myself in my schooling experiences. Perhaps this has shaped my feelings of fear and unworthiness, and how I interpret experiences such as failing grades. I drew on the work of hooks (1992) as I thought more about my fears. hooks (1992) helped me see that the:

> [c]ollective black female experience has been about the struggle to survive […] It is the intensity of that struggle, the fear of failure (as we face daily the reality that many black people do not and are not surviving) that has led many black women thinkers, especially within feminist movement, to wrongly assume that strength in unity can only exist if different is suppressed and shared experience is highlighted. (p. 51)

The intent of my research is not to suppress differences and only highlight similarities in the shared narratives of being a black female student, rather, it is to make visible the threads in

our stories as we inquire into our experiences. These experiences may include the fear of failing, schooling, and familial curricular making and how they shape/d who we are and are becoming.

In retrospect, I can see that attending private school was an attempt to earn status, privilege and access to advanced education, which was not afforded to the Bahamian student, whose parents, like my parents struggled financially. My parents, like parents of other students, made choices between text books and groceries. Although, my familial stories of school were situated within moments of hardship, my experiences of schooling with Grammy gave me unique privileges. My Grammy's classroom was a safe place for me and a place of privilege.

I did not have the same sense of privilege as I entered high school and university. As my landscapes of schooling shifted, power and race became visible in my schooling experiences. During high school I, alongside my peers, lived with the understanding that the schools located on the edges of our geographical landscapes were expensive, exclusive, and beyond our reach. hooks "attributes student alienation in schools to discriminatory racist, sexist, and classist policies and practices in educational settings and the wider society" (cited in Florence, 1998, p. xvi). As a child I had a sense that there were differences, but I could not clearly name them.

I knew that the students in schools that where are at the edges of our geographic landscapes looked different, dressed differently, and spoke differently. While we all wore uniforms, theirs were notably better in quality. The students who attended private schools very rarely spoke with a local dialect and for the most part they were white Bahamians or children of expats. These differences left me with an unsettling feeling of injustice and inequality. Mickleson and Smith (2010) explained that the hope for many black people is, that education would eliminate race, class and gender inequalities, but in fact, "education helps legitimate, if not actually reproduce, significant aspects of social inequality" (pp. 408-409). Walkington (2017)

added that particularly for black women in higher education as educators and graduate students, a complex set of social inequalities when experiences of identities intersect including racism, classism, sexism, and ableism, becomes visible.

Even though I left high school 'long' ago, I could see similarities in my experiences within higher educational institutions. The feeling of being different, of being somehow not 'from' here persists. Hill-Collins (1998) describes this as a feeling of being an '*outsider-within*' through her experiences in academia. She states:

> for my own survival I chose the term outsider-within to describe the location of people who no longer belong to any one group […] individuals like me who appear to belong, because we possess both the credentials for admittance and the rights of formal membership. (p. 5)

West (2020) added to Hill-Collins concept of outsider-within by explaining that:

> [b]lack women in academia who continue to be intellectually marginalized often adopt a posture of resistance, which is characterized by being both within-and-invested in the work they find meaningful and outsiders-and indifferent with respect to the disciplines and institutions that systematically disregard, devalue, and discriminate against them. (p. 371)

For me, it seemed impossible to erase the experiences of feeling less-privileged in the context of school. This calls me to return to hooks (1996) experiences of feeling less privileged. hooks helped me see that my experiences of being black did not begin in higher education. Like hooks, I recalled childhood experiences where:

> Parents and teachers were always urging us to stand up right and speak clearly. These traits were meant to uplift the race. They were not necessarily traits associated with

> building female self-esteem. An outspoken girl [as I am often referred to] might still feel that she was worthless. (p. xiii)

Pulling forward my childhood experiences, my Grammy an English teacher for over 45 years placed value on posture and speech at school and home. Looking back, I wondered if her intentions were to uplift our race. I wondered how these experiences influence my past and present feelings of being less-privileged. I was attentive to my use of the word less-privilege rather than unprivileged. It is not that I believe that I did not benefit from privilege based on the school I attended or the family I was born into. Rather, my intention here was to reflect on my reality of feeling less-privileged, at certain times, places and social contexts. hooks (1996) writes, that to consider notions of privilege as black women requires thinking about privilege as separate from being "materially privileged" (p. xiii).

Like hooks, I too contend that there is "no one story of black girlhood" (p. 50); as such, it was important to attend to diversity. As I thought more intently about the idea of what is means to be less-privileged as a black woman, Buchanan (2020) called me to understand how in exercises of understanding of race, privilege and identity "participants with a prominent marginalized identity often realize that they also experience privilege related to another identity" (p. 402). However, unlike white participants this realization of privilege "can contribute to compassionate understanding of one another's experiences, strengthening of alliances across groups, and a commitment to ally-ship" (p. 402).

This enlightenment helped me to recognize and appreciate the privilege of being the first doctoral student in my family. Yet, as I contemplated my current situation as an immigrant black student, it is difficult to ignore my struggle to gain access to scholarships and employment because of my immigration status. I find it even more challenging to separate these experiences

from my racial identity. Yet, in relation to others as Buchanan (2020) suggested gave space for me to be compassionate to the experiences of others.

Gendered experiences of schooling

"Black women college students are a group whose voices and experiences are often lost in the larger narrative of college students" (Commordore et al., 2018). As I attempted to make visible my/our voice as black women students'[15] in higher education, Patton and Croom (2017) called me to understand the significance of this work. They explained that the black female student populations in higher education is often found at the intersection of race and gender. This intersection creates space for silencing voices, or mass grouping with a marginalized population of people without a distinct place. Gendered and racialized experiences place black women in a unique position of having to negotiate their place in the midst of sexism and racism, while often facing class oppression (Howard-Vital, 1989; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). "Negative racial stereotypes affect women of color, particularly black women, disproportionately, and in ways gender discrimination alone cannot explain. Black women faculty and graduate students face a double-bind of racial and gender discrimination at every level of academic life" (Walkington, 2017, p. 52).

Looking back on my experiences of schooling, I was attentive to threads of sexism, racism, and class weaved throughout the stories I live by. These threads became increasingly visible as I entered middle school. Pulling forward my first day of seventh grade, I was asked to select an option for my study focus. I recalled my anxiety with this decision. I felt the weight of

[15] It is important that I make very visible that this study focused on black women in higher education who are students as this was a gap in the literature at the time of this study. Much of the literature about black women in higher education focuses on women who are educators/researchers in higher education.

it. It was presented as a life altering decision. I left school that day undecided, but with the weighted pressure of knowing the next day I had to make a decision, or it would be made for me.

I thought back at this moment puzzling the need for such pressure on a child transitioning from elementary school. I thought about, how no one explained that my choice then would be permanent for the next 6 years of my schooling experience. I returned home that evening with a face of concern. My Grammy, in her infinite wisdom and care inquired into my concern. We sat at the dining table[16] and contemplated my options. My mother and father weighed in and in unisons with my Grammy, they agreed that 'home economics' would be the best choice. I agreed. I was 10. I was always the youngest in my class since I began grade one at 4 years of age (a 'privilege' of having my Grammy as a teacher at my elementary school). I depended on my parents and Grammy's wisdom to direct my path.

Looking back, I believed this choice was based on my abilities and my parent's wisdom and not my gender. I did not question this part of my early schooling experience. I grew to love what I was told I ought to love. I excelled. It felt good. It was a space I was less afraid of failing. For six years I was convinced that this was my career destiny. It is difficult for me to convey my parents' understanding, motivations, and thinking in helping me make this choice. But as I situated myself, I drew on my other experiences such as my shift in higher education to the profession of nursing. I was attentive to the continued encouragement from my parents to enter a gendered career path. My protest to culinary arts when I was 16 years old, led to my father's encouragement to become a nurse. I entered into the profession of nursing with great hesitation[17].

[16] The dining table was and still is a place in our family for sharing, decision making and learning.

[17] This hesitation was familiar. It reminded me of the hesitation I felt when my Grammy first gave me her/our robe. And much like the robe, I grew to love and appreciate nursing as a part of my identity.

Perhaps, my parents did not recognize these professional and scholarly encouragements as gendered. I wondered: What would have happened if I was a boy?

Many black women when considering a career choice, are faced with the challenge of overcoming traditional role conflicts such as home-maker, mother, and submissive wife (Perkins, 1983). “For black women, the Modern Mammy construction expects black women to give deference to their white and male counterparts, allows for students along with colleagues to question their professorial competence” (Walkington, 2017, pp. 55-56). Walkington added that there are so few black women graduate students in higher education that their white peers pay little attention to the lives they live, burdens they carry, and their histories.

This lack of focus or care often left black graduate females women feeling the pressured expectation of serving as black spokespersons, even when there is no desire. I thought about the tensions I faced as I was conflicted with feeling the need to identify with what is seen as being a black women’s work. This was not to say that the same was not true for other women of different races and ethnic background. I speak from my understanding of ‘womanhood’. As a black woman, I came to this study with the guilt of pursuing a PhD. with aging and ailing parents and grandparents. I understood and ‘accepted’ my traditional roles and expectations as a black woman. My inability to live in these roles were difficult for me negotiate. Calling home daily and facing this reality easily serves as a distraction and added tensions. While other women may have different social, cultural, and familial understanding of ‘womanhood’, and may not be able to conceptualize these experiences as valid, it is my reality. A reality that often drove me to the point of quitting. However, I maintained that these experiences have unique understandings and implication on the identities of black women in higher education. Reynolds (2017) wrote that socialization attitudes and behaviors influence women’s decisions about education and career.

hooks (1989) wrote that any research that gives a platform to talk about the experiences of black women in higher education is necessary to the fight against structural racism, sexism and class that infiltrates blackness, or what it means to be a black woman studying beyond 12th grade. As I continued to contemplate my responsibility and privilege as a black woman engaged in schooling and education in Canada, I puzzled over the effects of the mindset of seeing my positionality as privileged. I wondered, if this plays into the ideologies of not challenging power systems and structures in higher education. I wondered about places that sustain or nourish a sense of power.

Wane (2002) a black Canadian feminist helped me to understand that the victory of other black women's struggle for our space in higher education does not mean our fight does not and should not continue. Wane explained that as black women there should be a consciousness of our privilege from a historical lens. However, this conscious privilege should not eliminate our need, desire and responsibility to make visible and challenge power dynamics in higher education. Commordore et al. (2018) explained that power structures are meant to create boundaries for marginalized people in higher education. These visible and invisible boundaries often produce feelings particularly for black women of being unable to challenge or push back against hegemony. In turn, marginalized people, in particular women, became satisfied with their 'privilege' of being 'allowed' in places and spaces of higher education and are inclined to conform to the grand narratives in the hopes to not disrupt their path to success (Mogadime & Wane, 2002).

hooks (1989) experiences in higher education of challenging or questioning policies, practices and behaviors was recognized as unnecessary by white student peers. Yet as hooks reflected and inquired deeper, what became visible was 'white privilege', patriarchy, and class

that were at play. These made it unnecessary for white students to appeal anything, as they did not have to experience humiliation and degradations of having their integrity and sense of self-worth as scholars continually questioned (p. 58). Johnson-Bailey (2001) explained that as a means of surviving, black people did not and generally do not question or challenge authority. It is the multiplicity of these inequitable experiences through race and gender in higher education that creates wonders about the experiences of black women students to challenge power structures expressed through grades and its influence on their identity making.

Chapter 3

Narrative Inquiry: Methodology, Phenomena and Method

Experience, as the core focus of this proposed study called me to narrative inquiry. I was particularly interested in the experiences of black female students in higher educational institutions as they engage with formal systems of power, in this case the grade appeal process. I imagined that the encounters with formal systems of power shape their identities. Narrative inquiry, a qualitative research methodology, is situated in understanding and inquiring narratively into people's experiences (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained that narrative inquiry is both a "phenomena of people's experiences" and a "methodology for inquiring into experience" (p. 166). In their very first descriptions of what narrative inquiry is, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explained, that:

> Narrative inquiry is increasingly used in studies of educational experience. It has a long intellectual history both in and out of education. The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories […]. It is equally correct to say, "inquiry into narrative" as it is "narrative inquiry." By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method. […] To preserve this distinction, we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon "story" and the inquiry "narrative." Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives. (p. 2)

Clandinin (2013) further explained that narrative inquiry is a methodology of "people in relation studying people in relation" (p. 141). The emphasis on the relational in conducting research creates a space for researchers and participants to share life stories which shapes ways of knowing and being known; fore fronting relational engagements also draws attention to the importance of relational ethics (Clandinin et al., 2018). This relational understanding reflected the ontological commitment of narrative inquiry. Unlike other qualitative methodologies, narrative inquiry allows participants and researchers to live alongside each other, to engage in ways that pays attention to each of their lives, as well as the relationships they form. This too means that we do not turn away from the difficult stories participants or we each carry. Caine, Estefan and Clandinin (2013) wrote that:

> A relational ontology requires that we do not turn first to the inquiry as a way to make these stories fit. Representation, as the act that arises from our relational ontology, necessitates our living with the unfitting story rather than with attempts to tame, sanitize, or analyze. As narrative inquirers we attend to difficult stories and experiences, we stay with them; we dwell alongside participants in possible ways to retell them. (p. 581)

Nested in the epistemological commitments of narrative inquiry is the understanding that experience is and holds knowledge (Dewey, 1938; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These ontological and epistemological commitments guide my approach and understanding to inquiring narratively into the experience of black female students. Narrative inquiry is grounded in the understanding that participants who engage in narrative inquiry studies are part of inquiring into the wonders that guide the study – in many ways we become co-inquirers during the process of the research. As such, my experiences are also part of the research. Through my narrative beginnings I situated myself in relation to my wonders and tensions (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000; Connelly & Clandinin 1990). Through writing narrative beginnings, I not only acknowledged my experiences, but understood the danger of projecting meaning-making of similar experiences on participants (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). As a narrative inquirer I am called to stay wakeful and to attend to the experiences that shape my identity making (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin 1990; Lessard, 2015).

King (2003) called me to understand that "the truth about stories is […], that's all we are" (2003, p. 2). Yet, I have come to understand that the stories we live by are never complete. Caine et al. (2013) write "that each story is partial, contextual and offers new possibilities as the stories are retold" (p. 577). In order to understand each story and experience, it is important to attend to the personal, social, institutional, cultural, familial, and linguist contexts. Each story is always in the making and continues to be composed long after we leave the relationships of our research (Huber et al., 2013). I wondered, about new possibilities, counter stories and how the stories told may be retold. I, too, wonder how I might learn to retell my stories in new ways. These wonders kept me wakeful to being in the midst of lives and living.

As I narratively inquired into my own experiences, Clandinin's (2013) work helped me to understand that narrative inquiry is a way of "honoring lived experiences as a source of knowledge and understanding" (p. 171). Before coming to this work, I did not see my educative and schooling experiences as important to my identity making as a black female scholar. Through this research, I was able provide a space to engage with students and to hear their familial, institutional, and relational stories about education and schooling. Such stories impact how students shape their identities in academic and social contexts (Coles, 2004; Hipkiss, 2013).

As I continued to situate my experiences in this work, I drew on feminist scholars, such as Addams (1902/2002) and Lugones[18] (1987) who helped me to reflect on my experiences. Feminist theory offered/s an opportunity to create spaces for voices which may otherwise not have the opportunity to be heard (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I draw on black feminist such as hooks (1992) and Hill-Collins (2016). These feminist thinkers helped me situate my wonders in relation to race. Drawing on both feminist and pragmatist ways of knowing has situated my understanding of this work. West (2020) explained that feminist standpoint is strengthen by the contributions of pragmatist scholars as consideration is given to the social context of people who are often marginalized in complex social hierarchies reflective of race, gender, social/economic status and sexual identities. West added that "from a Black feminist perspective, this stance empowers Black women to proliferate ways of thinking and being that contribute to disciplinary creativity" (p. 372).

Philosophy of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry draws on Dewey's (1902, 1938) work on education and experience; particularly his focus on experience and life are significant. Dewey's early work in the 20th Century, as a pragmatist scholar, lead to social and educational reform (1938). The affinity of narrative inquiry to Deweyan's theory of experience is meant to "sharpen distinctions within the field of narrative inquiry" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 38). For Dewey (1938), a human's ways of knowing is transactional, this led to the view that ways of knowing are grounded in experience. Dewey's understanding of experience helped narrative inquirers to understand that an experience cannot be known or represented "in a single statement, paragraph, or book"

[18] Lugones (1987) whose work I drew on heavily in chapter one kept me mindful of the pluralistic identities we hold, as well as the stories we tell of ourselves. I returned to her work, again thinking about the 'worlds' I live in. Lugones (1987) wrote that "we inhabit 'worlds' and travel across them and keep all the memories" (p. 1).

(Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). Dewey applied two criteria to experience: interaction[19] and continuity. These criteria also provide conceptual footings for the three-dimensional[20] spaces *temporality, sociality, and place* in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) explained:

> Narrative inquiries explore the stories people live and tell. These stories are the result of a confluence of social influences on a person's inner life, social influences on their environment, and their unique personal history. These stories are often treated as the epiphenomenal to social inquiry - reflections of important social realities but not realities themselves. (p. 41)

Dewey (1929) wrote that when people and things interact, it is this interaction that quantifies as an experience. For Dewey these interactions are indefinite, as such they can be stretched. Therefore, while inquiring into experience, the inquirer should not underestimate or ignore the significance of social interactions with people, as this is how experiences evolve.

Narrative Inquiry Framed within 12 Touchstones

In 2013, Clandinin and Caine identified 12 qualitative touchstones (tenets) used in narrative inquiry to draw attentiveness to the "streaks or marks that might become visible" through the use of narrative inquiry (p. 169). Stones are often different in their shape, presentation, and composition, the stories we live by are no different. As such, a touchstone is a metaphor used to assess the quality and nature of a narrative inquiry study. According to Clandinin and Caine (2013) touchstones are not a checklist that researchers use to demonstrate

[19] Dewey's criteria interaction and continuity are discussed in depth in my earlier writings on chapter two.

[20] There has been previous discussion about the three-dimensional spaces in chapter two. Here, I briefly highlight them again.

the rigor of their inquiry. Rather, it is used as reflective measures throughout the inquiry to keep researchers attentive to hallmarks of a narrative inquiry study.

Relational Ethics

Ethical issues are central to each narrative inquiry study. In particular the touchstone of *relational responsibility* called me to be attentive to the ways in which I will live in relationship with participants. In this relational space I imagined that we will "co-compose and negotiate the living, reliving, telling and retelling" of stories (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 169). I am called to create spaces of belonging "marked by ethics and attitudes of openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity and care" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 169).

Although narrative inquiry in the past has predominantly focused on Nodding's (1984) work as a guide to ethical care in teaching, in recent years narrative inquirers have come to think about relational ethics (Clandinin et al., 2018). Relational ethics alongside an ethics of care marks the meaning of "sustain[ing…] narrative relationships" with research participants (Caine et al., 2019, p. 4). Noddings' (1984) helped narrative inquirers to understand, that to be in relationship with others, means that there is an ethical responsibility to care. For Noddings' central to caring ethics are people. We lived in relation with people not the issues we perceived as needing to be solved. As such, care is mutual, reciprocal, and essential to research relationships.

Over time, narrative inquirers have continued to build on an ethics of care to further developed ideas of relational ethics. Clandinin et al. (2018) identified what they call five interrelated dimensions of relational ethics in narrative inquiry. These five dimensions embody an understanding of what it means to live with and alongside participants and include:

- the necessity of engaging with world-traveling with imagination, improvisation, and playfulness;
- the necessity of moving slowly in ways that allow for listening and living;
- the necessity of ethical understandings as always in process, in the making, with wakefulness to the ongoingness of experience;
- the necessity of always engaging with a sense of uncertainty and not knowing that acknowledges living ethically as living within liminal spaces that position us in places of dis/ease;
- and the necessity of understanding that ethical relations are always lived embodiments, that ask us to be still and to attend carefully to, and with, silence and contemplation.

These dimensions are woven together,it impossible to live them separately.

Narrative Beginnings

My *narrative beginnings*, another touchstone that was identified, helped me better understand my *personal justifications* for this study. Through writing my narrative beginnings, I was able to establish a reflective and reflexive process that grounded who I am and am becoming as I engaged in this study. As I situated myself in my earlier experiences, I recalled my difficulties in reliving, telling and retelling[21] my stories. Overtime, I came to see this vulnerability and openness that is created through inquiring into my own experiences as critical to my study, in part this has shaped how I think about ethical commitments. As I continue to

[21] The terms tell, retell, living, and reliving of narrative explains how or relationship, meaning, and understandings of stories are a reflection of our lived experiences. I discussed them in greater detail as a footnote in chapter one.

contemplate the stories of who I am and the stories I live by, I am more wakeful that participants are always *in the midst,* just as I am.

In the Midst

As I continued to contemplate the touchstones identified by Clandinin and Caine (2013), I was attentive to what it means to be *in the midst*. I wondered about participant's lives in motion as I entered and exited the field, and I wondered about my own unfolding life. I came together with participants in the midst of experiences, relationships that are embedded in social, political, and cultural contexts that shape us and the relationships we formed. I wondered what will be going on in participant's lives. I wondered how their experiences of grade appeals continue to shape their on-going lives. I wondered who they were long before they entered higher educational institutions. I wondered how over time their stories of their grade appeals have changed and have been retold in new ways. I thought about how the relational space we will form as part of this inquiry, will shape how they story and re-story these experiences. I felt the weight of how significant our interactions can be to their identity making.

Negotiations

Being in the midst of relationships required continual negotiations of the purpose of our interactions. Clandinin and Caine (2013) explained the ongoing negotiations are situated in the purpose, transitions, intentions and text of the research. Like other relationships there was a reciprocal exchange. I wondered, about the ways in which I could negotiate my helpfulness to participants as part of my relational commitment to them. What were the professional and ethical implications of these commitments? How might participants understand notions of helpfulness? It was important for me to situate these negotiations within a relational space.

As I wondered, how these relationships would change and evolve meaningfully, I considered Dewey's (1935) transactional understanding of experience. Reflecting on my relationship with my Grammy, a relationship that continued to sustain me, I thought about its transactional nature. Our relationship has changed and evolved. Our shared experiences have shaped our ways of knowing and how we know each other. The negotiations that were part of our relationships are not always explicit, they too live within the silences, long geographic distances, as well as the gentle touch. I imagined, that the relationship shared with participants would continually evolve and that we will find ways to negotiate who we are and are becoming within this research and in the midst of our unfolding lives.

Three-Dimensional Space

The three-dimensional space reflects Dewey's criteria of continuity and interaction and was a framework that is embedded within all phases of the research. Pulling forward an understanding of these term Huber et al. (2013) wrote that temporality draws attention to the past, present, and future. Sociality draws attention to interaction between the personal and the social. Place draws attention to the geographic place where experiences are situated. I learned that geographical places live in each of our stories (Caine, 2010, p. 1305). Attending to the three-dimensional spaces was important throughout the inquiry. It shaped how I attended to the experiences of participants, it too was reflected in the narrative accounts I wrote, as well as in the resonant threads.

Personal, Practical, and Social justifications

Each narrative inquiry study is shaped by questions of so what? And who cares? These questions draw attention to the justifications of each study. In narrative inquiry attention is paid to the personal, practical and social justifications. My personal justifications, were made visible

throughout my inquiries and writings. My personal justifications for this study were shaped by my personal experiences of being a black woman in Canadian higher education. My experiences of schooling and education had always created stories of unease, misplacement and unworthiness. Yet, I too lived stories of love and attentiveness within the stories of school.

Clandinin and Caine (2013) helped me to understand that each narrative inquiry study also has practical and social justifications. Clandinin and Caine (2013) wrote that "listening deeply and inquiring into our changed lived and told stories calls forth the possibility to attend differently, to shift practices, and to create possible social–political or theoretical places we can impact as narrative inquirers" (p. 171). I was called to think about my work in relation to my academic practice and higher educational institutions. I could see that the practical significance of my work was shaped by my desire to attend to issues of equity and justice, as well as an attentiveness to diversity that reflects inclusion.

I hoped that this work allowed for the experiences of black women in higher education to be seen and understood as stories of people rather than stories of problems. Although the reverberations of my lived experiences made visible stories of sexism, power and racism, this work does not forefront these issues rather I focused on experiences. I did assume that there will be sameness in experiences, although, I did wonder if I will hear stories that resonate with my own. I wondered how these stories may create possibilities that influences policies, practices and programs in higher education for black women.

Lastly, as a thread of the social justification for this work, I hoped to make theoretical contributions to an important area of study. I hoped that through this work I could show the interplay between pragmatist theory and feminism and how we might find new ways to attend to the lives of black women. I hoped that through this work, by fore fronting experiences, that we

could see how power structures that are evident in issues like grading, have long lasting impacts on the lives of people. We could not understand these structures and processes in isolation, or purely as mechanisms of assessment.

Field Text to Interim to Final Research Text

As the research process unfolded the field text transitions to interim and interim to final research text. This transition was a "complicated and iterative process" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 173). This transition was also a part of the ongoing negotiation.

Field Text. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote that "field text aids the inquirer to move back and forth between full involvement with participants and distance from them" (p. 80). They explained that the distance was needed to allow for participants and inquirers stories to be seen as well as to make visible the "larger landscape on which they all live" (p. 81). The field text included transcripts of our conversations, as well as journals, letters, and memory box items. Memory box items included forms requesting appeals, documents and notes about the appeal, as well as artifacts that allowed participants to tell their stories. Multiple field texts allowed us to gain different entry points into the experiences. I also took notes to reflect observations and conversations that were not tape recorded and transcribed. I encouraged participants to write and share reflective notes with me. Clandinin and Caine (2013) reminded me that "artifacts serve only as triggers for telling stories," and might not become part of final representations. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote that field notes/text are composed in the moment and should be a representation of what the participant and researcher did, what was around them, where they were, their feelings, current events and remembrance of past time.

Interim Research Texts. The transition between field texts to research text is marked by the writing of interim research texts. This is often a difficult and complicated, yet important

undertaking (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It marked the phase of the research where I as a researcher stepped back and inquired into the field texts created for each individual participant and together with participants began to show the experiences. Together with participants, I co-composed narrative accounts that reflected the research puzzle, with an attentive to the three-dimensional spaces, as well as the relationships we formed. Clandinin and Caine (2013) wrote that the interim research texts and the potential "telling and living of additional field texts" through "further experiences to be told and lived" (p. 172) as participants and I co-compose the text. Conversations about the co-composition also shaped talk about ownership, as well as creativity. These conversations were underpinned by a commitment to relational ethics. Each narrative account was negotiated with participants.

Final research text. Once narrative accounts were written and negotiated, I transitioned to writing final research text. During this phase, I laid the narrative accounts alongside each other and began to look for resonant threads. Resonant threads are the echoes and reverberations that become visible across narrative accounts (Clandinin, 2013). These threads made evident interconnections, gaps, silences, and dissonances in co-participants' experiences through cross-account analysis (Clandinin et al., 2010). Identifying these threads helped to compose the final research text. During the writing of final research texts, it was important for me to be attentive to the personal, practical and social justifications (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). The final research text marked a more final transition in the relationship between participants and myself. Final research texts are intended for public audiences and called forth multiple contemplations about how best to represent research findings. Research findings will need to be situated within other writings. Often during this phase, researchers return to scholars whose work has shaped their initial

research puzzle. In final chapters re-visited the work of scholars such as hooks, Dewey, Addams and others.

Relational Response to the Community

Thinking more with and about my responsibilities and the challenges each narrative inquiry study brings, called me to attend to my relational response community. Relational response communities were important as they provided an ongoing space to talk about my work and life as a researcher. Response communities are composed of diverse people, who listened and thought with our unfolding work. Building and sustaining response communities was critical to my work. One of the communities, in which I experienced a response community is at the research issues table, which is part of the Center for Research on Teacher Education and Development (CRTED). Each Tuesday people gathered around the table at the CRTED. Steeves (2006) wrote about this space and place, which is affectionately known as the 'table' and an academic homeplace to many narrative inquirers at the University of Alberta and across Canada. The 'table' has been forced to be a virtual space given the impact of COVID-19.

This new way of experiencing the table is not all bad as it expanded the table's capacity across the world. Steeves wrote that the table is a "voluntary gathering each Tuesday […] called research issues," where conversations "moves in fluid ways to honor those attending and what is on their minds" (p. 106). At the table "we might consider narratives and story, imagination, identity, embodied knowledge, or dominant plot-lines found in educational institutions, for example". "At the table there was encouragement, listening, and asking questions, while responding gently and carefully […]. Sharing stories aloud, inquiring into them in this improvisatory nested way […] give space for each person to gain new insights and affirmation"

(p. 106). For me this table was/is part of my response community. As my study unfolded, I sought and built a new response community alongside other graduate students.

Attentiveness to Audience

The final two touchstones were integral to my understanding of this study. I gave much consideration to representing diverse voices, and signatures of this work as I hoped to address larger historical, political, social, institutional, and cultural narratives that shapes stories to live by of black women. Contemplating the significance of voice to this work, created tensions for me as I considered the importance of representing the lived and told experiences of participants and myself. I anticipated the complexity of doing so and needed to be mindful that the voices of others are heard and that I did not smooth over our differences. With this in mind, I thought about the potential complexity of telling and retelling the co-composed narratives in ways that honours the diversity of our experiences. I too needed to be mindful that others, those who listen to or read this work, would bring their own experiences to this work. Care was taken to leave open possible spaces to come alongside this work for others.

Lives in Motion

I came to the study with the understanding that the final text is not the end or beginning of participants or my stories. Our lives continued during, around and after the study has ended and relationships evolved in negotiated and meaningful ways. Clandinin and Caine (2013) called me to understand this as seeing "lives in motion" (p. 175). Understanding lives as being in motion is particularly significant during the time of creating final research texts – great care was taken not to foreclose a life. I called forward my understanding of seeing life experiences with intentionality, without taking for granted that there is no "single stand of humanness" and as such

the researcher-participant relationship cannot conform to the expectations and needs of the researcher alone, but to consider the lives I met in motion (Greene, 1993/1995).

Study logistics

I invited three participants to engage in this research study alongside me. Inviting a small number of participants allowed me to facilitate and honour the relational commitments I held. This study had participants who were currently living in Edmonton, Alberta and experienced being a graduate student and self-identified as black and female. Participants all formally appealed grade(s) as a graduate student. Participants were both Canadian residents and/or citizens. Some participants held a Canadian student visa.

I engaged in several formal research conversations over the course of at least four to six months with each participant. The number and length of conversations were negotiated with participants. We met at places that both participants and I felt comfortable. I anticipated that I might travel to places that held meaning for participants, such as places within the University, and pre-COVID-19, the living rooms of participants.

For the recruitment of participants, I formally contacted the Dean of Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research [FGSR] at the University of Alberta to disseminate an invitation to participants who were current and/or alumni students of the University. FGSR had access to students' names who have previously engaged in an appeal process. I asked if students could be sent a flyer to inform them about my study. I also left flyers and information cards in places where graduate students gather – each faculty has a graduate student association, as well as an association for graduate students existed that is not faculty dependent. The Dean of FGSR was approached, as FGSR facilitates the final stage of appeal grades for graduate students. In the end, the participants were recruited by personal interest expressed after hearing about the study from

other graduate students. The exclusion criteria for this study were a) male, b) women who do not identify as black or ever being a graduate student who appealed a grade d) people who do not speak or understand English, e) people who knew in advance that they would move outside of the city within six months to a year of the study.

An information letter about the study and participant consent form was prepared (Appendix A). In conjunction with face-to-face communication, I maintained contact via a mobile phone and emails to arrange meetings. During COVID-19 ethical and safety consideration were made, and methods of meeting shifted to virtual platforms negotiated with participants. No unidentified issues emerged throughout the course of the study which required me to direct participants to the appropriate resources and supports. Additionally, my ethical commitments of this work were guided by the Research Ethics Board approval and Guidelines at the University of Alberta. At the start of the study, I applied to the board through the Research Ethics and Management Online [REMO] system for approval. Throughout the research process, alongside attending to relational ethics, I also carefully attended to the requirements outlined by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human* and University's Policy, in addition to any local, provincial, federal legislations and regulations. I also submitted amendments with the REMO system to approve amendments to approaches to participants' conversations including use of virtual platforms.

Shifting to Research

At this point my study, I shifted from research planning to research in motion. After ethics approval, I swiftly began conversations with participants. Now in the dissertation I honour the stories of each participant as individual chapters. Then I looked across their experiences and stories in the narrative threads chapter and then finally concluded this dissertation.

Chapter 4

Narrative Accounts

Hanna's choice to honour and trust me with her stories began early January 2020. As conversations started the world as we knew it was still 'normal'. However, about two conversations into our inquiry, the world shifted rapidly as the novel Corona Virus became more than a news story in international headlines. It became a local story. This new life experience shifted the relational space for me and participants. After revising my application to the Research and Ethics Board, we quickly shifted from in-person conversations to virtual conversations and virtual meal sharing. This rapid shift was challenging but we maintained our commitment to the research. Over the course of 8 months, Hanna shared stories and pictures which helped me live alongside her in meaningful ways.

Living Alongside Hanna

To tell and learn from stories provides an intimate and caring space to be known and know others. For Hanna, our first few encounters with each other were situated in a cold, and older classroom during the first semester of our doctoral degree. While our journey towards friendship was not immediate, it was natural. With a few exchanges of stories about our place of origin and who we are, what emerged was a loving friendship of storytelling. Hanna, tells of her life and heritage through oral traditions. She also tells stories of her life through her attire and makeup. I recall early in our relationship when others tried to describe Hanna to me, at the forefront of their descriptions were Hanna's attire, jewelry, and makeup. Each selection tells stories of Hanna, her family, their experiences, and Hanna's experiences traveling the world. Wakeful to the importance of these artifacts in shaping the stories Hanna lives by, I will use images of various artifacts shared by Hanna during our conversations. I hope each artifact helps

you and me know Hanna better in relational ways and that it will bring her told and untold stories to life in intentional and loving ways.

Hanna's Life Beginnings

Figure 7

Cloth by Ayeeyo

Note. "Cloth by Ayeeyo" Artifact shared by Hanna

Hanna was born in Somalia. Of seven children, Hanna was the second born. She was one of five born in Somalia and her two youngest siblings were born in Canada. In our conversations, Hanna recalls with a bright smile her early familial relationships and experiences in Somalia:

> *In Somalia, I live more alongside with my father's father, my paternal grandfather, God rest his soul. Once the war happened it was more my maternal grandfather because we lived with him in Egypt. Then we came to Canada and he went to the (United) States. He had moved to Canada temporarily, but moved back to the States because his children, my*

aunties and uncles, settled in the States. There were a lot more of them and they were single. (PQ[22], February 27, 2020)

Hanna's beginning story was an invitation to see the significance of men in her family. She shares of her maternal grandfather's care for his children but also the cultural significance of being there and with children who are not yet married. I wondered early in our conversations about the significance of gendered roles in shaping Hanna's understanding of self, family, culture, education, and schooling. While Hanna's early experiences in Somalia involved her paternal and maternal grandfather, she adds to the familial story by sharing stories of her grandmother. The earlier image shared is a photo of an artifact made by Hanna's grandmother. Hanna returned to her early memories of this loving piece and its significance to her:

There is this cloth or something like a cloth that my grandmother made. She made it here in Canada. So, it's not something that I had from back home [Somalia]. But it does remind me of Somalia actually. It reminds me of my family and culture very much because my grandmother made it and it's something she used to make when she was young. (PQ, March 28, 2020)

As Hanna shared, I am attentive to her *subtle smile and focused facial expressions as she reflected on the care and love woven into the cloth made by her grandmother* (FN, March 28, 2020). Simultaneously, I am wakeful to legacy and generational experiences being passed on as Hanna's grandmother makes and shares something with Hanna. I have a sense that the narratives of being a young woman have shaped both Hanna's and her grandmother's stories. Hanna noted:

[22] Participant quotes and reflections of my field notes are distinguished in the text with italic font, dates of conversations, and field notes, as well as "FN" or "PQ" for field notes and participant's quotes respectively in parentheses.

> *My maternal grandmother is the only member of my family who is a Nomad whereas the rest of my family are city folks. So, she did not go to school and she even learned to read and write. But she is so crafty! She can literally make anything! So, it reminds me of home even though I've never been or lived in a Nomadic land. I haven't seen a lot of Nomads either. We just stayed in the city, but it really reminds me of my grandmother, culture, family, and background more than anything I have from back home. I don't have anything from back home. We left very quickly because of the war. So, there was not a lot of time to grab anything.* (PQ, March 28, 2020)

Thinking with Hanna's experiences of fleeing Somalia I inquired into Hanna's memories of what was left behind in Somalia. I also wondered about her return to Somalia years later. As we enjoyed our rotisserie chicken meal, Hanna showed me a photo of her return to Somalia several years later. In the search for the home Hanna's family had left behind, Hanna found only fragments of the fractured structure near the place she called home. Unable to name this structure, Hanna held on to memories knowing that home was nearby.

Figure 8.

Somalia: Fragmented Structures

Note. "Somalia: Fragmented Structures" Artifact shared by Hanna

As Hanna reflected, her mood became somber. Hanna's words stuck with me as she described the identity of people from Somalia as she knew it. Hanna shared, *when I think about Somalia as a place I think about my culture, destruction, and gold system* (PQ, March 28, 2020). At that moment, *I sat in my sadness to hear Hanna associate the word destruction with Somalia. I began to reflect on my place of identity (The Bahamas), and the adjectives I use to describe my home. In stark contrast, words of joy bump up against Hanna's words of devastation* (FN, March 28, 2020). I found myself trying to refocus on moving forward with our conversation in the hope to not dwell or trigger memories of Hanna's past. But I also found myself trying to find a balance of honoring Hanna's stories and giving her space to share. Yet, Hanna's words of *gold system* piqued my interest. I was confused. *What did she mean by gold system? Was she talking about gold or was it a metaphor for something else?* (FN, March 28, 2020). After a short period of silence, the silence was broken by my wonders. Hanna shared:

So, your money basically was in your house, there was no banking system. Gold is a valuable thing anybody could exchange that for safety. You could have exchanged it for a plane ticket out or a ride with somebody. So, it was money basically. Before the war women always kept gold. It's usually when you get married, your in-laws give you a wedding gold set, a massive set of gold necklaces, rings, or earrings, and it costs quite a bit. So, gold is something that is of value because you could wear it and when we going to weddings you wear a lot of gold and it shows your wealth right. So, it's something that you wear to be beautiful to show off your success and it's also a safety. (PQ, March 28, 2020)

With a clearer understanding of the gold system in Hanna's culture, I became wakeful of the cultural and economic significance of gold for women. With this in mind, I wondered about Hanna's understanding of these two factors and the importance of gender. *Why women? What made gold so significant for women?* (FN, March 28, 2020):

Culturally, we have a saying that goes "gold never drops". So, it doesn't go down in value. You could wear it, you could give it to your daughters. It serves multiple purposes. I always saw a lot of gold in my family because like I said we invest a lot in gold. (PQ, March 28, 2020)

I was reminded of generational understandings, traditions and the significance of passing forward memories and wealth for women culturally within their families:

But when I think about these gendered roles at play … in my culture I think I've come to some understanding that men are considered to be providers. Women are considered the mangers of the house and having to take the responsibility of saving for a rainy day but, women are always in the most vulnerable situation. If you are married and you have

> *children, the man could leave you and often the man are the ones working. They [men] always make more money in my family. But I come from a long line of working women, including my mother and grandmother. They taught me that if a man leaves you he's not obligated to continue supporting you. But usually his family or his clan will help the woman. But women can't just leave and walk away with no financial responsibility. So that's why women were taught to always safeguard their money. In most cases [this safe guard] was gold which is equivalent to money.* (PQ, March 28, 2020)

It is this shard of Hanna's narrative that helped me to have a more complete understanding of why gold has a gendered significance. In addition, I came to understand the values placed on women who have child-rearing and financial responsibility in the home. Gold represented wealth, beauty, and social class but it also represented freedom particularly in hard times such as escaping war. For Hanna's family, this representation became a lived reality as they fled their home in Somalia and became refugees in Egypt and later Canada. She shared that gold symbolized freedom for her family as it allowed them to have the resources to escape quickly. Hanna's family left all their physical possessions behind, but the mental torment of bombs and guns crossed oceans and seas with them. As Hanna began to shift in our conversations, she showed me a piece of family jewelry.

Figure 9.

Gold Never Drops

Note. "Gold Never Drops" Artifact shared by Hanna

Fleeing her home as a child, shifted a lot of understandings for Hanna. It impacted Hanna's familial connections and connections to schooling and education. The geographical shift also reshaped identities for Hanna and her family. In earlier conversations, Hanna explained how becoming a refugee forced her to take on a stronger maternal role for her younger sibling. It also forced her mother to take on more responsibilities at home such as teaching and cleaning. The war and leaving home resulted in significant shifts in their socioeconomic status. Hanna shared how elders in the family struggled to understand her parent's decision to ensure her education was a priority even after becoming refugees. Hanna shared that:

After the war, when we were in Egypt, family was saying "Well you guys are refugees, so what's the point of Education right now" or even "She is a girl, she should really help around the house. (PQ, February 27, 2020)

I am wakeful to a gendered understanding of a girl's place in the home and her access to education. Yet, the tension between cultural and familial understanding differ as Hanna explains:

My parents would support me by just saying she is our daughter. She's going to go to school. Whereas other people were discouraging them from sending me to school but for my parent there was never a question. Even if there were only like two or three spots in the school and not all the children could go they would go by order of age, so my oldest brother than me. They wouldn't skip me to go to my brother's after me. I think that was their biggest thing, sheltering me from strict gender roles that my culture reinforced and not treating me any different than my brothers when it came to school. (PQ, February 27, 2020)

While Hanna expressed appreciation for her parent's advocacy and the value placed-on education she and her siblings noted the tensions of gendered expectations for schooling. Hanna knew that formal education did not change the gendered expectations at home. Hanna added that while her parents were supportive of educational goals, the responsibilities at home hindered her to achieve her full potential at school:

My parents were very encouraging of my schooling and education. They supported me in what I needed to do to pursue my educational goals. Still there were a lot of expectations especially when we moved to Canada. It was challenging. My mom and father had to work, then, I had two more siblings born in Canada. So, I had a lot of the housework to get the kids to and from school and help them with their homework. I didn't cook but I did

like a lot of the cleaning and babysitting. I taught the youngest four how to read and write. I even went to parent-teacher interviews when I was in high school because my parents couldn't do it. And so even though they encouraged me, I felt that all these other responsibilities I had in my family and in the house were a hindrance to my education. It hindered me from getting the grades needed or doing extracurricular activities which could have open doors for me. (PQ, February 27, 2020)

Here, stories of familial sacrifices reminded me to stay with and think with Hanna's stories of education. Having access to education was a primary concern for Hanna's parents. Yet, situational changes in her family called for Hanna and her parents to rethink approaches to making sure Hanna had access to education. I also thought about the responsibility on Hanna as she navigated not only her learning but also helping her younger siblings learn to read and write. Hanna recalled memories of arriving in Canada as a child and struggling with English as an additional language:

Coming to Canada in grade 6, 7, and 8, I was really just learning the language. So, I really did not part take in school. I would skip school. I used to go to the library to learn English because I wasn't learning anything in the classroom. Literally, it was the worst two years of experience in middle school. I was just there. They would just make me sit in the classroom and nothing was happening. I would just sit in the end row and I had a buddy who did not speak my language. So, how was I supposed to understand them. I got nothing. So, I use to say I have to go to ESL, which there was no ESL, and go learn English on my own. That is how I learned English and by high school my English got better, especially speaking, reading, and writing. (PQ, February 27, 2020)

As I sat on the couch with Hanna, sharing homemade Chia tea, I made note of my admiration for her strength, resilience, and commitment:

> *I wondered, how does someone who is struggling to learn a language for themselves, teach others. I recognized it was Hanna's passion, and love for family, as well as the desire to shift the narratives of schooling for her younger siblings that motivated Hanna.* (FN, February 28, 2020)

I pause to note that not all of Hanna's early experiences of schooling in the Canadian system were bad. Yet, I could not help but think about how institutional and social systems can create barriers for people who do not speak English. I was puzzled by the decision to pair Hanna with a buddy who did not speak her language. How was this seen as beneficial? Or what would have happened if Hanna was not a determined, strong-willed young girl who made learning English a priority. Perhaps Hanna's survival and success in the Canadian educational system what not be what it is today. I wondered, about the educational experiences of her siblings born in Canada and how they differ and align with Hanna's experience.

Oral Traditions and Education

Figure 10.

Where knowledge begins and ends: The Quran

Note. "Where knowledge begins and ends: The Quran" Artifact shared by Hanna

My conversations with Hanna gave space to understand that her upbringing, ways of knowing, and being are grounded in her faith. The significance of Hanna's faith was fundamental to the formal and informal education (oral traditions) she received. In fact, Hanna's first learning experience in a school setting was learning the Quran and the alphabet in Arabic. She shared that:

> *We don't have preschool or kindergarten in Somalia. But from a young age I learned how to read and write Arabic, so you could read the Quran. In Somali, this was an emphasis is on reading and memorization from a young age. You learn the Arabic alphabets and then you know learn how to read Arabic.* (PQ, February 18, 2020)

For many communities, a child's first learning are the alphabets and the same was true for Hanna. Yet, Hanna made visible that the importance of reading and writing was not about

meeting worldly understandings of why children should read or write. Hanna's understanding was that reading, and writing gave access to wisdom, knowledge, and understanding of life grounded in faith-based principles. As our conversations continued I wondered about her family's understanding of the importance of informal education (oral traditions). I also wondered if there was a balance between informal and formal education. I proceeded with caution in my wonder as I recognized that balance does not mean equally weighted. Hanna's Ayeeyo (grandmother) made sure she *"emphasized knowledge in all its forms"* (PQ, February 27, 2020).

Hanna's grandmother's words reminded me that knowledge is attained and achieved in known, unknown, formal, and informal ways. To limit one's understanding and openness to knowledge forms can be a disadvantage. With this in mind, Hanna knew that all forms of knowledge were valuable, she also knew the value of familial support:

> *They [my family] have been very supportive of me going to school for higher education. Although some of my grandparents did not lived long enough to see me go to higher education. But my parents and grandparents always supported me and taught me the importance of higher education and schooling. They also emphasized religious education, knowing God and the scriptures, as well as knowing my purpose in life.* (PQ, February 27, 2020)

Hanna reminded me that while books have the power to teach a lot, oral lesson are equally as powerful. Oral lessons as described by Hanna often takes place and were educative. Hanna invited me in loving ways to experience oral traditions passed down by leaders and elders from her home and community. Hanna shared that it was through these teachings that she learned that her purpose in this life is not and should not be based on earthly credentials. Rather, life's purpose is connected relationship with God. Hanna made these lessons apparent by sharing;

> *They [my family] have always advocated for me and my siblings to gain both schooling and religious knowledge simultaneously. I was taught "in the interest of gaining one, don't lose the other". In essence, in the interest of gaining worldly knowledge, do not lose or forget your religious knowledge.* (PQ, February 27, 2020)

For Hanna, being raised in Canada did not rob her of familial lessons. While she faced her fair share of challenges in the Canadian education system, I wondered about Hanna's early educational beginnings and understandings in and out of school. Hanna reflects by sharing:

> *I come from a very oral tradition and oral society, where people did not do a lot formal education. So, a lot of our leaders and Elders were illiterate. Yet, they were still seen as wise and educated because their lived experiences were valued. And just because they could not read or write did not mean they were uneducated. They have a lot of knowledge which is passed down orally. So, yeah, schooling institutions are not necessarily, the only place where you can get an education.* (PQ, February 27, 2020)

Listening to Hanna, I could not help but smile as she reflected on her understandings that lived experiences are valid sources of knowledge. As Hanna begins to share these understandings, she made visible the difference between schooling, education, and being educated. Hanna's traditional understandings of what it means to be educated is not based on credentials such as degrees but on life experiences. I was attentive to how Hanna did not name age as a criterion to the value placed on experience as a valid source of knowledge. Rather, it was that life experiences added value. For instance, in Hanna's earlier narratives of helping her younger siblings, I learned that Hanna's age was not a factor in placing value or validating the wisdom and knowledge she passed on to her siblings. While oral traditions impacted Hanna's

life and living, personal experiences with family[23] also shaped much of her formal education aspirations and passion for religious education. Although women played a significant role for Hanna, men also shaped her ways of knowing. Hanna shared:

> *My dad came from a long line of religious scholars. All of my grandfathers and great-grandfathers were religious Scholars. They were literate before most of the Somali population. Even today, we're not really a literate population. But there is more emphasis on reading and writing now than before. However, oral traditions are still the number one means of transmitting knowledge even with the rise of written text.* (PQ, February 27, 2020)

Education in Hanna's family was generational and paramount. As I thought about this, I returned to my earlier wonders of *balance* between religious knowledge and formal education. I am called to see that there can be a balance within these formal and informal ways of acquiring knowledge. Hanna's grandparents demonstrated this balance to her by becoming religious scholars; they were teaching through oral traditions. When Hanna enrolled in schools her perspectives of education and being educated changed:

> *School has always been a priority in my family. Both of my parents have post-secondary education. My dad has a master's in the 70s, this was unheard of. My dad was telling me most people were like "what is a master's degree?" because a bachelor's was the highest at that time. I'm sure the percent of people Somali that had a bachelor's degree at that time with less than 1%.* (PQ, February 27, 2020)

[23] Hanna's cultural and familial understandings of immediate family included her grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. While this understanding resonance in my personal and familial understanding of immediate family, in some societies around the world immediate family refers primarily to parents, siblings, a spouse or children.

With this familial understanding of educational aspiration, I am better able to situate Hanna as a person and scholar who aspires for educational greatness as she pursues her doctoral degree. While a PhD speaks to one aspect of Hanna's educational passion, I see the balance in the commitment she has to principles of faith. As a woman, Hanna repeatedly acknowledged the traditional gendered expectations of women in the Somali culture. At the same time, she lived with exceptions of familial liberation of women. Hanna shared that

> *My mom also knew how to read and write. Education is very important for her, so, she went into education herself. Culturally, women were not just homemakers even though we have some strict gender roles. We [Somali women] have a lot of freedom in terms of gaining an education and working outside the home.* (PQ, Feb 27th, 2020)

Hanna's mother, an educator herself, shaped Hanna's identity by removing limits of what she could and could not do. This identity was further shaped in Hanna's home when she saw the support that existed between her father and mother in their educational aspirations. As Hanna noted in earlier conversations, the experiences she had in and with school have not always been easy. Hanna's educational aspirations were not easily attained as she faced issues of failing which shaped and reshaped her identity.

A Reflective Turn: Education from a Canadian Landscape

As Hanna and I took a more reflective turn towards her experiences of schooling and failing within a Canadian landscape, I wondered more about Hanna's early experiences of schooling, perceptions of failing, and identity-making. Hanna's experiences of schooling in Canada were met with tensions of transitioning from another place, space, and language. These tensions created challenges for Hanna in the added context of trying to overcome the mental and physical trauma of escaping war, becoming a refugee, and moving twice within her early

childhood. Adding to this, she carried the responsibilities of helping her parents around the house and her siblings — all while still trying to find space to be a child and discover her evolving identity. I was reminded that many of us [black women] always have to balance multiple roles and life changes. This is 'natural'. Yet, as I reflect on the weight of these roles for Hanna, I sit in awe at her resilience, strength, and determination. These adjectives describe Hanna throughout her schooling experiences, particularly, in Canada. Hanna started by sharing her first experience of feeling a sense of belonging and hope in a Canadian classroom.

> *It was a home economics course. She [my new teacher] taught sewing and cooking. I remembered it was a good class because I got to participate. My home economics teacher was so friendly and welcoming. I just felt at ease*. (PQ, February 27, 2020)

I recalled my smile as I sat with Hanna as she shared this story.

> *I reflected on Hanna's past narratives of feeling hopeful and filled with joy that the narratives of schooling in Canada were finally shifting positively. I was grateful to know an educator was creating shifts in the stories Hanna lived by as a Canadian Scholar. This shift also seemed to bring resonances of joy for Hanna as a smile emerged on her face in this retelling of experiences with the Home-Economics teacher.* (FN, February 28, 2020)

As Hanna continued, she quickly shifted the narrative from this teacher whom she did not name to her Science teacher. *Hanna's smile got even brighter as she adjusted on the couch and crossed her legs underneath her* (FN, February 28, 2020). This teacher was named. It felt personal and meaningful to Hanna to name this science teacher. I felt the significance in this naming as she storied experiences with Mrs. Flight[24].

[24] The name Mrs. Flight is a pseudonym.

I think the teacher that had the most effect would be my grade 9 and 10 science teacher Mrs. Flight in high school. She made science fun. Mrs. Flight was so encouraging that I just felt like I could do it. Like, I could do any course if I could do this course and I get it. It wasn't until then I studied science. I haven't really studied science before this class.

(PQ, February 27, 2020)

Thinking with Hanna's story and experiences with Mrs. Flight, I was wakeful to the significance of this moment for Hanna. While the science class was fun, what made the shift significant to Hanna's identity was the encouragement received. This encouragement helped Hanna see and feel potential in other classes. Hanna was empowered to see herself differently as a student. Hanna went on to validate this significance,

I just felt really motivated. She was the first teacher to speak to me about post-secondary and university. I did not think I was going to get to go to university. I thought college was the best shot I would have just because I was never encouraged in school. No guidance teacher or anybody encouraged me to go to university. So, I hadn't thought about university or post-secondary until then. She [Mrs. Flight] sort of got me thinking about it.

(PQ, February 27, 2020)

I sat in silence for a while reflecting on how a single moment or experience can shape and reshape a person's identity, aspirations, and life trajectory. *My silent reflection was broken as Hanna asked, "You okay?" I replied "yes" briefly sharing the reason for my silence* (FN, February 28, 2020). I was honoured to have this story shared with me as it shifted my ways of thinking and knowing as a teacher. The weight of responsibility of being an educator sat with me for a very long time after this conversation. It called me to reflect on my teaching practice. I thought twice about my words and interactions with students. I wanted in the most intentional

ways for my teaching practice to shift the stories of the students I taught in good ways. Hanna added to this reflection by sharing,

> *I remember this science teacher in grade 11 and after that, I dropped science, Mrs. Flight was the best [Hanna's smile widens]. It was my favorite subject. I wanted to be a teacher not just because of Mrs. Flight but I always felt like teaching was a good profession. It had a more profound effect than any other profession. Mrs. Flight Grade 9 and 10 was so encouraging I got an A plus in everything. I did in that class because I was so motivated. She made me love science*. (PQ, February 27, 2020)

As I reflected and made notes on my conversation with Hanna, I wondered about narratives that were not as positive for Hanna within the Canadian context. In stark contrast to the positive experience with Mrs. Flight, Hanna shared an experience of failing that again shifted her identity as a scholar.

> *By grade 11 I had Dr. Something [unable to recall teacher's name]. I guess he had a PhD He used to go too fast and everybody was afraid of him. It was 360, 360 literally in terms of science. It was a nightmare. I remember going after class to ask him something and he was so impatient, and he said to me "Maybe you should consider the general class to this science class". There is like a general and advanced class. If you are in the general, you can only go to college and you can't get into University with general courses. You had to be in the advanced classes to go to university and I was in the advanced stream. Dr. Something then told me that I am too dumb for this class, I don't get it and maybe I don't belong in this stream.* (PQ, February 27, 2020)

At the time of our conversation, Hanna could not name the effect of this experience on her identity-making, yet it was a part of the stories she lives by. Looking back on Hanna's more recent experiences in University, Hanna shared that:

> *Even now in this PhD program, I had teachers that made me feel like maybe based on their conversations that I cannot do this. You know, those feeling of doubts about my ability to succeed.* (PQ, February 27, 2020)

When talking about failing or challenging grades in higher education, Hanna shared that culturally she was taught to accept grades. And if Hanna did go to inquire about a grade that was perceived as failing by her standards or standards of the school, it was with the expectation that the grade she had received would not be changed. When Hanna did find the courage to challenge or question a grade, it was to figure out how to do better the next time. Hanna recalled one instance of inquiring about a grade that she perceived or named as failing in her higher education experiences as a Canadian scholar. She shared that:

> *During my doctoral studies, in my first term there was a small assignment. It was worth 5% of the assignments. An extension for the assignment was given, but I did not take the extension. I just needed to submit the assignment. After, there was a note that we need to add something, so I quickly did that while I was at work and resubmitted the assignment. I didn't want to take an extra week because I had other assignments to do.* (PQ, April 2, 2020)

As I listened to Hanna in her early telling of this story, I sensed the confidence she felt in submitting this assignment:

> *But something shifted in her stance and tone as she continued to talk about this experience. Hanna's posture shifted to a less confident one. I wondered about the*

potential triggers this story was having on her sense of identity and self-efficacy as a scholar. (FN, April 2, 2020)

Hanna went on to share that:

I got an email with some feedback [about the same assignment] which I thought was confusing. Again, this is like a two-page assignment. Anyhow, I went to see the professor. I made an appointment and he gave me back the physical copy of the assignment and I'm telling you, there was red pen all over it. Every element of it [the returned assignment] had red pen. I was just so confused by why there were so many circles and underlines. So, I just took back the assignment. I was confused by how many red markings were on the paper. I felt like it was very unprofessional. (PQ, April 2, 2020)

Hanna's stories resonated with me. This narrative took me to a place and space of seeing red ink on assignments. Assignments I was confident I had done so well on before receiving feedback. I recognized the confusion in Hanna's voice as she reflected on this experience. This red ink has become a part of both of our narratives of failing grades. It was a reminder of our highlighted mistakes and ignored successes. But this experience went beyond an assessment of Hanna's work. This professor made it about Hanna's worth as a student and human being. I sat in sadness as she shared:

This Professor went on to say that "this assignment was not great. You should really consider what you are doing. Like he went on a personal attack. Essentially saying, I should reconsider what I'm doing. He noted, I should talk to the writing resource office and get additional support for my writing. He also stated that he sees this a lot with international students who are trying to learn their writing. And I responded, "I am not an international student. English is literally my primary language and the other

languages I speak are not even at a high school level with my reading and writing, so I don't know what you are talking about. (PQ, April 2, 2020)

In that moment of being othered and placed in a category of being an international student, Hanna's narrative of who she was as a person and student was being storied without her consent or consultation. Her place of belonging was presumed. To presume she was an international student left me with wonders. Did this professor make this presumption based on the colour of her skin, an accent, her physical appearance, and/or her style? It also made me wonder about the influence of this presumption as a bias when assessing certain students who are perceived as not belonging within Canadian higher educational institutions. As Hanna continued with a tone of disbelief:

That was like the worst experience when it comes to like grades. And it was the first time I was challenging a grade and never got to the point of challenging it because I felt so defeated. I did not understand what was happening. I did not see the mistakes. It did not warrant this professor saying I should be getting all this support and commenting unnecessarily. (PQ, April 2, 2020)

Hanna's reflections on her work and her sense of worth were difficult to hear. I felt tensions being called forth within myself. Tensions that often turned to frustrations when I began to think of the systemic, institutional, and individual barriers we both faced in higher education which impacted our identities as scholars. While resonances existed, there were also differences in our narratives. Before this experience Hanna identified as a strong writer while I always struggled with that identity. Yet, I could not help but wonder, if there was a time before my 7th grade experience of being labeled as a poor writer, where I too saw myself as a strong writer.

Despite my efforts and desires, I am unable to pull this memory forward. Perhaps, it is clouded by my years of holding on to an identity of being a poor writer. I wondered; how long will Hanna hold on to this identity? As our conversation continued, I came to understand that this experience has been long lasting and has influenced Hanna's ability and desire to challenge any other grade in her higher education experience:

> *I did not feel the need to push the issue of this or any other grade any further. I wanted to, but where do you go to push further? It was like, how much more can I challenge this? And it was the beginning of my PhD and so I thought maybe he was right. Writing had always been my one strength in my academic life. This experience gave me very low morale. But it was worth like 5%, so I thought even if I got an F it would not make a big deal in my final grade. But also, I was very confused and questioning myself and my abilities.* (PQ, April 2, 2020)

To cope and survive Hanna found a way to move forward.

Chapter 5

Elizabeth's Account

Elizabeth[25] came to this study bursting with joy and excitement. She joined the study a week after I had received ethics approval. Although she and I were further along in our conversations than Hanna and I were, the Novel Corona Virus also had an impact on our experiences as co-inquirers. We too shifted to virtual platforms for conversations and virtual meal sharing. After several conversations, we transitioned to the interim research phase of our co-inquiry where Elizabeth and I co-composed her narrative account to reflect the research puzzle. In this co-composing, we remained attentive to the three-dimensional spaces as well as to the relationship we formed. These transition periods from December 2019 to June 2020 created countless opportunities to tell and retell our stories.

Living Alongside Elizabeth

You've got; no sorry *I've got the power*[26]

You've got the power
I see it in your stance
This stanza is mine
You have created in me
A radical mind, day and night all the time
they gave you the power
I am not sure you knew what you were accepting
What they gave to you
I'm taking it back
It's a *quality I possess...when my voice goes through the mesh*
Yes, I've got the power

[25] This participant chose not to use a pseudonym.
[26] Words in italics are taken from Snap (1989). Weaved throughout this study and these narratives are inquiries of interpretations of power, power imbalances, responsiveness to injustice, use of power, and the racialized difference of power and how privilege shifts power dynamics in social, institutional, and cultural contexts. As I began to compose the text of this poem I was reminded of a popular late 1980's song by Snap called "I've got the power". As I returned to Lugones' (1987) work, I was reminded of her call to remain playful in my imagination of inquiring into the lived experiences of the stories we live by, which creates space for me and participants to lovingly travel into each other's worlds. This poem is imagined as having a mirroring effect of what it would feel, and sound like to acknowledge the power we don't have in the classroom as students. As I write this piece of work, I find myself in the midst of grappling with my need and desire to take back power.

You've got the power
You also have the knowledge
But here's one thing I know
My word and work, they are *Copywritte*n
They have to be, *so they can't be stolen*
I have been robbed to long
With knowledge, I say and know
I've got the power
Do you know the saying 'knowledge is power'?
Have you ever wondered what it means?

You've got the power
It's in the title
Not just in your name
they organized the class,
Yes, they all look the same
It reminds us of the present and past
It's not an easy fight
It has required sleepless nights
I know that *to try to save them, your voice will cease*
So please, stay off my back, or I will attack, and you don't want that
That you've got the power.
I am taking it back
Tring to save them all, stanza at a time
My voice is not your call
On *the microphone [pen and paper] that I hold*
here's to you and you too
I've got the power, this I know is true.

Understanding Power in Time, Place and Space

Looking Back: Understandings of Power

Prior to graduate school, it was not always easy for me to name stories of power. Looking back, I can see how I was unable to recognize or differentiate experiences of power – power was not always the same, it did not come in just one color or shape. As I became attentive to different forms of power, I began to wonder if experiences of power can be differentiated in relation to harm. As I sat more intently with the idea of harmful/harmless power, I was attentive to the role of relationships and my perception of power. For instance, my relationship with my Grammy is

certainly a relationship that embodies power. I was raised to understand and respected her role as a parental figure. Her words and actions were powerful in shaping my understanding of myself and the world. However, I never gave any significant thought to the power embedded in our relationship as potentially being harmful[27].

As I contemplated my understanding, I needed to better understand and articulate the context I am referring to in this writing. Parenting styles and schooling experiences for children are imbued with interactions of power. For example, my grandmother's response to me receiving a failing grade was encouraging and filled with words of affirmation. I now understand this powerful response as unharmful. As I returned to the lyrics of Snap (1989), I was called to understand harmful power as one that pushes the need to legitimize ownership of voice, space, and presence. The frustration and vulnerability that is produced in the absence of being validated created experiences of harmful power. Looking back, it was becoming easier to distinguish between harmful and unharmful power.

For me, relationships have always been a place where power was visible and masked simultaneously; particularly at home and school. While my relationships both in and out of school were shaped by power, to name power was not innate or taught. As I reflect on my schooling experiences, I took some time to pull forward lessons on the Bahamian history. Lessons I learned inside and out of the classroom. I recall the history lessons that were part of my social studies classes. This class was designed to provide history and context to the Bahamas pre and post-independence.

[27] I understand power in relation to ethnicity, race, socioeconomic standing, words, and actions. As such, by harmful power I am referring to power that may or may not be connected to any of the before mentions and re/produces experiences of vulnerability, silencing, hate, oppression, and segregation.

It was in those four bright yellow walls of my social studies class with green and yellow chairs that pulled out from the wooden or metal individual desk that I recounted lessons of pirates from including "Black Beard and Mary Read". Thinking about these lessons, my memories of being fascinated about hearing the heroicness of the first known female pirates and how the history of piracy in the Bahamas brought wealth and growth with the illegal means being portrayed as "not as bad as it is made out to be". As I now draw on my fragmented memory, I can only recall the history of slavery being taught in relation to piracy and through the experiences of "Arawak"[28]. These experiences now made me wonder about the masking of slavery history. Was it intentional? Is it my memory that is failing me? Or was the lesson too subtle for me to recall?

Looking back, as a child, it was difficult to fully understand the history of being raised in a colonized country. I did not understand how the Bahamas came to be, or the active influence this history had on the Bahamas and the identity-making of its people. It was challenging for me to recognize and name the continued influence colonization was having on the everyday experiences including school systems and structure as well as the overall governance of my Bahama land. As a child, I was taught to honor and appreciate the British influence. The history I understood was laced with hope, pride, resilience, and triumph. While all of this remains true, the harm of colonization on the identity and power of black people in the Bahamas was masked. The production of 'masked' power was subtle and overt at the same time.

[28] An Arawak are a group of indigenous peoples of South America and of the Caribbean.

[29]For Elizabeth, inquiries of power intersected tightly with her experiences at home and school. As I look across Elizabeth's stories, I was attentive to how stories of school and familial relationships and experiences were often told in relation to each other. In turn, I came to understand that they were stories that could not be retold in isolation. To do this would create fragmented stories with a lost understanding of the significance of how Elizabeth's familial experiences shaped stories of schooling. For Elizabeth, the relationship shared with her step-father and mother were understood from perceptions of educational support which Elizabeth directly associated with love[30]. Elizabeth once said,

> *As I mentioned to you the last time when I left my mom's house and went to live with my dad he took [put me into] me to the public-school public. I interpreted love with the type of school I was being sent to. I felt like my stepdad and mom loved me more that is why they took me to a private[31] prestigious boarding school. And my dad who didn't love me as much, as I interpreted, took me to a public school were students did not do well and did not have a good reputation.* (PQ, January 30, 2020)

[29] The conversations Elizabeth and I shared were often presented as parallel stories and/or competing stories that lived in harmony alongside each other. So, I found it purposeful to present our stories and reflections in different fonts. Elizabeth's stories are noted in Calibri and my reflections are noted in Times New Roman. Field note will be differentiated in this narrative account in Calibri light.

[30] As I inquire more into Elizabeth's stories and how she perceived love from her parents I return to my field notes and recall my hesitation and perhaps narrowed understanding of her perception of love as being directly associated with school. Over time and sitting with Elizabeth's stories I have come to the understanding that although this was a direct association, it was not the sole association. Of course, she knew and associated her parent's care, support, and efforts as displays of love. However, in the context of this conversation, she storied her perception of their love through stories of schooling.

[31] Nested in perceptions of love for Elizabeth were perceptions of power. Although Elizabeth has never named power explicitly, when I return to Elizabeth's telling of attending a prestigious private school and having to finish her schooling in the public sphere, it shifted her perception of her worth. When Elizabeth described how the public school did not have a "good reputation", I wondered how she may have transferred this perception onto herself as a student. Did she see her reputation as a scholar shift from good to not good?

As I think with Elizabeth's story and her understanding of love and schooling, it helps me to understand in deeper ways how and why stories of schooling for Elizabeth are nested within stories of family. As I pulled forward Elizabeth's stories and perceptions of power in and through schooling, I became wakeful to her perceptions of sacrifice and harmfulness. Elizabeth understood the financial, emotional, and physical sacrifices of her mother and stepdad. In their parent-child relationship there were voices that gave Elizabeth the *power* to have an educated voice.

This voice gave opportunities to increase Elizabeth's social and economic positioning, and the confidence to fight against forms of oppression through education. On the other hand, Elizabeth's reflections and stories of her father as previously recounted were perceived as harmful power because of what she describes as his unwillingness to send her to a *prestigious private school.* As I think with this story I wish I had the opportunity to inquire further and puzzle with Elizabeth's father's decision to send her to public school. Was it a decision with harmful intent? Was it the result of a lack of financial means? Did he have the ability to make the same or similar sacrifices her mother and step-dad made?

Thinking more with this story of school, its connection with financial power and sacrifice I turn to Elizabeth's stories of relationships in school, and perceptions of power in this context. Being in the midst of the stories Elizabeth lived by, made me more attentive to how stories about family relationships are complex. Although they may be told in single narratives, they do not live in isolation from other stories. They are fragments of other stories and experiences that work together to shape an understanding of who Elizabeth was/is and her perception of the relationship she held with her biological father. So, for me as the inquirer, I

am drawn to ask more questions as I think with their relationship. Was it just the sole experience of being sent to a public school that led Elizabeth to story her perception of her father's love in this way? I wonder.

Stories told by Elizabeth about relationships at school between teachers and students made visible experiences of harmful power. As I continued to think with Elizabeth's stories I was prompted to proceed with caution in expecting that all of our stories and experiences should and will resonate. I see, feel, and hear Elizabeth's warnings to me through her stories that our experiences of being raised in a blended family can and will be storied differently. For Elizabeth being raised in a home with a step-dad and step-siblings created experiences that I could not identify with. At the forefront of our conversation, I expected that there would be tensions between her and her step-dad, but the reverse was true. The relational tension Elizabeth faced existed with her biological father. It was not until I began to think more intently with this tension that I began to puzzle other possible tensions in Elizabeth's perception of her biological father's sacrificial love for her education.

Elizabeth shared how her parent's (mother and stepdad) financial sacrifice was perceived as love. But she simultaneously shared how her parent's financial status in comparison highlighted inequitable learning experiences. This was illustrated in the consequences of harmful power produced/used by teachers. Elizabeth shared that at one point she came to a crossroad. She was forces to accept her parent's inability to send her to private paid French classes. Elizabeth explained she always felt powerless to change her financial situation, even so she desperately wanted to attend these classes.

Elizabeth reflected on the injustice that her teacher was holding extra paid classes outside of school hours. The teacher would use the private content to evaluate the learning of all students during regular in-school classes. These experiences made Elizabeth vulnerable to failing, exclusion, and the oppression produced in this teacher-student relationship.

> *With my peers, it was some kind of shame in my mind that I was a disadvantaged student like financially. When it came to peers, I could not have what they could afford. It made me so afraid of the instructor. It made me afraid of the instructor because I could not always answer the questions he asked. Obviously, I was not going for the [paid] class and I did not always have the answer. And he would always beat me up and verbally assault me.* (PQ, January 30, 2020)

In this story, Elizabeth described how her socioeconomic status reproduced power dynamics that were harmful within the context of a student-teacher relationship. It too was harmful to her identity as a student and member of her family.[32] As I think *with* Elizabeth's story, I want to acknowledge that I named this relationship as abusive and manipulative, but I am attentive to Elizabeth's right to name her own story. I reminded myself that it is not my story to name. I wondered if Elizabeth were to name this story what would she say. Would she

[32] Although Elizabeth and I were raised in a colonialized context, we story and name experiences differently. Here again, I proceed with caution as I inquire. I am reminded that she has the power to name her experiences and stories. I do not have the power to rename her stories as I see it or as I hope she would see it. I proceeded with caution to not invalidate her experiences by making them fit into my worldviews and narratives of being raised in a colonized context.

be able to retell this story as a story of an abusive person or an abusive action? Can the two be separated? Is it possible that a person can abuse their power and not be labeled as abusive?

What I came to understand through the stories told by Elizabeth and my reflections are that stories are not just about power. Rather they are also about perceptions and expectations of how power is[33] mis/used in various relations. It too has helped me understand how harm is produced and shapes our identity.

While some teacher-student relationships can be harmful when power is misused,[34] Elizabeth storied one experience with a female teacher in positive ways. She shared that,

> *Throughout my education, I was taught by only one female K through 12 and that was in senior high school. She taught me chemistry. I felt like she was brilliant. She's a smart woman.* [Kenchera: You smile when you about thinking about her]. *Yes, it is because up until that time I had no female educators. And thinking about science, it is something that is time-consuming. In my culture, men are given the luxury to go to school, compared to females, cause they [females] they have other family commitments like cooking, taking care of the house, helping your Mom in a house. So, to see her in the position, I was*

[33] Elizabeth's French teacher was in a powered position. But this is not to say that every teacher uses their power in harmful ways. I think about other stories told by Elizabeth about teachers who used their positions of power as teachers to inspire.

[34] Looking back at the conversation and reliving it with my field text, I recall my interest to inquire into this experience further. I wanted desperately to understand what it must have been like to be schooled in an environment that was predominantly taught by men. The reverse was true for me in my schooling experience, I had very few male teachers. As Elizabeth talked, I found myself relating in some ways to her stories of being a girl with the commitments of cooking and home-making. As I sit with the work, I wondered about the significance of the word commitment. The understanding that it was more than an expectation. There was an obligation attached to her gendered roles and contributions. The resonances in her story made me wonder about female teacher role expectations. It was unusual for Elizabeth in her experience to see female teachers let alone a female science teacher. I wondered how this cultural context in Elizabeth's early years shaped her identity and career choices as a female.

happy! And I was also in the science class, so I was inspired that I could do more. (PQ, January 30, 2020)

Experiences of schooling for Elizabeth were not just storied in harmful ways. They were storied with an understanding that stories can be balanced. Elizabeth's stories like the stories of most people are complex and require attentiveness and care when unpacking. While Elizabeth joyfully shared stories about this female teacher, she helped me understand that power was still at play. Although she admired, respected, and was inspired by this female teacher, Elizabeth knew that their relationship could only be experienced from a teacher-student lens. Elizabeth called me to see this in explicit ways,

At the time it was a classroom bond type of relationship. You could only interact with her at the time of seeing her in class. I never could to see her outside of class. (PQ, January 30, 2020)

Elizabeth went on to help me see how over time and in new contexts, relationships can shift. As years went by, Elizabeth's relationship with this teacher transitioned. She explained[35]

My only time of seeing her again was when I completed my university education. I was working as a nurse. My science teacher had become a pharmacist and working on a unit. I was transferred to that unit as a nurse and I got to work with her as the pharmacist. I was so happy when I saw her. I introduced myself and said I was your senior high school student. "You taught me chemistry!". She told me "I am happy to see you here" and that

[35] As I think about these two schooling relationships shared by Elizabeth, I engaged with her words and her physical responses in telling these stories. As Elizabeth told stories of her French teacher *her demeanor shifted. Elizabeth's posture was closed as she held her arms across her body. Her smile vanished. Elizabeth's presence became saddened. It was almost too heavy to describe. As our conversation shifted so did Elizabeth's presence. She was delighted to talk about her science teacher (FN, January 30, 2020).* The joy she experience/d was evident. Elizabeth's smile became contagious again. Her body moved to an upright proud position. It was obvious she was okay with the relationship boundaries even as the relationship shifted to a friendlier one over the years.

is when the relationship became friendlier… I could really talk to her as a colleague at work, so I did not feel the tension of talking to an instructor. The power dynamics changed drastically. I was more comfortable with her and there was nothing in my mind that restrained conversations with her. Yet, she didn't open any communication that invited a conversation. It was basically about what was happening in the current situation at work. (PQ, January 30, 2020)

Reflections of Playful Lessons

Thinking about lessons I learned outside of the classroom, I recall the fun and joy associated with singing and chanting ring play songs that honored the legacy of British influence including *London Bridges*, famous pirate *Christopher Columbus* and how he lost his shoe in 1492, and *Brown Girl in the Ring*. These ring play songs, while they admittedly still put a smile on my face and bring me great joy, they are ways that remind young boys and girls of their history and racialized place and identity. While ring play songs like *Brown Girl in the Ring* did not explicitly talk about colonialism, it told stories of gendered roles and sexualized 'brown' girl's identities. While as a child I sang and danced to the lyrics,

There's a brown girl in the ring
Tra la la la la la
Brown girl in the ring
Tra la la la la
She looks like a sugar in a plum
Plum plum
Show me your motion
Tra la la la la
Come on show me your motion
Tra la la la la la
Show me your motion
Tra la la la la
She looks like a sugar in a plum
Plum plum
All had water run dry
Got nowhere to wash my clothes

All had water run dry
Got nowhere to wash my clothes
Boney M. (1978) [36]

It was not until I came to this work that I began to question their influence on shaping my identity and role as a black girl. I wondered, why is it that only I, a black girl, was concerned about where to wash my clothes? Did others not have clothes to wash? Was my identity as a black girl central to my ability to show my emotions while being described as a sugar in a plum? What does *sugar in a plum* even mean? Is *sugar in a plum* intended to describe the physical attributes of a 'brown' girl as 'sweet'? While it can be argued that in the context of the time when this song was written it may have provided a space for 'brown' girls to see themselves pleasantly, I wonder about the perhaps unintended consequences of seeing themselves pleasantly from a sexualized standpoint. I also wonder about the power in this song as portrays a girl growing up in the west indies as being unable or unwilling to name their skin as black and the need to describe it as brown and as a sexual being, as 'brown' girls are prompted to show their motions.

Coming to know and live alongside Elizabeth has helped me to see that she is young at heart.[37] Elizabeth loves to laugh. She has this ability to make you feel like you are the funniest person she has ever met. Her smiles are innocent and warm. She invites you to be gentle,

[36] As Elizabeth and I explored childhood play, we both recalled many memories with a fondness and joy. As I continued to reflect on particularly childhood play, I began to unpack lyrics and the physical movement associated with play. As I made notes in my field text, I recall noting my inquiry into sameness of play for me and Elizabeth. Although she danced in play, she did not name or associate this dance with racialized, gendered, or colonialized threads.

[37] In my adulthood, I came to understand through experience and wisdom of others that a child's work is play. As I have come to appreciate this as being true as I attentively observe the children in my life at play. I am compelled to inquire through Elizabeth's narratives how play is understood and expressed in adults. Is play seen as being an experience that is limited to childhood? How is it expressed and acknowledge in adult narratives? Thinking with both Elizabeth's and my stories of play as children, they are told within settings of schools. I wonder about the experiences of play for black women in higher education. These inquires make me think more intently about naming play in the experiences Elizabeth and I shared prior to our research-participant relationship. However, my fragmented recall of our playful moments makes it difficult to name our experiences as play.

loving, and honest in your interactions with her. Elizabeth is grateful for every act of kindness and takes no act of kindnesses for granted. Elizabeth creates and embraces moments of play and fun in her everyday interactions with others. These moments are important to her identity-making and relationship building. So, when I think about songs like *Brown Girl in the Ring* as illustrating power, for Elizabeth, her stories of play in school are storied as just play. Times of play was an opportunity for her to not think about grades and being the best. Elizabeth was focused on having fun. Although Elizabeth did not share any stories of schoolyard rhymes and songs, she did share that her favorite time in the school day was dance. Elizabeth began this story with an outburst of laughter which made me happy. Elizabeth reflected on play by sharing that;

> *I was a dancer. I love to dance but I did not like to sing. The dance encouraged me. Of course, we would do Math, English, and Social Studies and all those courses. There were some I liked, but what I remember most and what I loved most of that time was the music and dancing section. I loved soccer. It was a time where I could play with males and females. It strengthened my relationship with my peers. We would play at recess and at break time*. […] *I could play with both males and females in the class and it drew me closer to the other student relationship.* (PQ, January 30, 2020)

Attentive to Elizabeth's words and joyful physical response in telling this story, I am mindful of how play and reflecting on play can create imbalances. Elizabeth storied play with words like 'love' versus describing Math, English, and Social Studies with the word 'like'. While Elizabeth has never expressed displeasure for school and learning, I was attentive to how stories of play for children can ignite bright smiles and remembrance of love. Through her stories, I have come to know that Elizabeth did not escape or ignore the social, cultural, and

institutional pressures of being differently advantaged. She lived with the hardships and appreciated the sacrifices her parents made for her to have better opportunities.

Elizabeth's stories of play were told as a mechanism for coping and finding balance with experiences of harmful power at home and school. As I returned to Elizabeth's stories of play and relationships in school, I wondered about the untold stories of relationships outside of play and her ability to live in the 'moment'.

> *Did she not see her experience of schooling outside of play as living in the moment? What was relationship building like for her outside of play? Did she desire to be the best academically prevent her from drawing closer to her peers?* (FN, February 1, 2020)

Elizabeth's recounted stories of familial economic hardships and its significant impact on her perception of power, relationship, and schooling. Elizabeth shared how her mother would work,

> *meager jobs with minimal wages earned while working extremely hard to make enough to provide for me and my siblings.* (PQ, December 11, 2020)

Elizabeth went on to explain that,

> *My mother's illiteracy meant she had to work odd jobs like selling fish known as a fishmonger. Looking at the nature of her job, she had a social stigma of not being educated. So, I wanted to go to school and get a career that is better than hers and make her happy. So as a child this is all that came to mind. I wanted to make her happy by having a better job and having the social status of being educated. I wanted to be better. For my mom, although she was married to my step-dad, it was her responsibility to provide financially for her children outside of their marriage. As a child thinking about*

my mom and the struggle she was going through with seven kids, she did labor-intense jobs to pay tuition. I did not want her to waste money. (PQ, December 11, 2019)

Reflections: From Oppression to Empowerment

For many racialized minorities harmful power can be seen across generational stories. Stories of illiteracy, slavery, poverty, and being voiceless continue to reproduce experiences of powerlessness. Earlier in the text, through found poetry, I captured these threads of power with the help of Snap (1989). Returning to the words:

My word and work they are *Copywritte*n
They have to be, *so they can't be stolen*
I have been robbed too long
With knowledge, I say and know
I've got the power

I wondered about Elizabeth's sense of taking back what was stolen from generations before her. Her fight to be educated and in a sense 'copyright' her future so that it could not be stolen and legitimize the work of her past. The Oxford online dictionary (2020) defines copyright as "the exclusive legal right, given to an originator or an assignee to print, publish, perform, film, or record literary, artistic, or musical material, and to authorize others to do the same" (n.p). For Elizabeth, she storied her ability to "take back her power" through education which she hoped and expected to break the generational cycles of poverty and illiteracy.

Often the power that is connected to socioeconomic status for young black children is masked and inquiries are avoided as to what this might mean for their educational experiences. It is evident through my conversations with Elizabeth that she recognized how her parent's

socioeconomic status was greatly attributed to their lack of opportunity to be educated. Additionally, Elizabeth's parents acknowledged that this meant working "*meager jobs*" to provide for private education. But beyond money, what does poverty or lower socioeconomic status mean for black children like Elizabeth. For Elizabeth, it meant having to think about the lack of opportunities and having to wear torn and tattered uniforms to school. For Elizabeth[38] poverty was not masked by her outward appearance, but her parent's hard work to send her to a 'prestigious private school' masked the extent of the hardship and sacrifice.

Yet, Elizabeth's presence and attendance at school was not a blanket escape from the impacts of poverty. Elizabeth's socioeconomic status meant a sacrifice on her part. Elizabeth had to work harder in school to keep up because her parents could not afford all the required textbooks or extra private classes. It meant being singled out and isolated. The power of socioeconomic status for Elizabeth was more than a familial experience, it was and is a life experience. Yet, Elizabeth continuously sought many learning opportunities. She learned to be grateful for what she had and made the best of it. I too can story these lessons. I wondered about those who perhaps can story lessons of hard work, gratitude, and sacrifice without storying threats of food insufficiency and educational disadvantages. I wondered if black children

[38] To understand the socially constructed understanding of one's self and others, it is important to consider world experiences and our social and cultural understanding of elements of life including wealth. For Elizabeth, her worldviews were shaped by her family's wealth or the lack thereof. Reflecting on Elizabeth's experiences with poverty called me to think about my own experiences of seeing my parents work hard, and at times, struggling to provide for me and my siblings. While this experience resonated in some ways, what was uniquely different about Elizabeth's experiences with poverty is her understanding of the role of school as a place (meaning its physical structure). It was also a tool to change her social positioning later in life. Coming to understand her worldview was difficult for me as I reflected on her telling of attending a private prestigious school while having to go in tattered clothing. The tensions Elizabeth faced in being proud of being in this physical place while at the same time, experiencing feelings of not belonging because of her family's financial inability to meet the social expectations of having untattered clothing. While I still struggled to conceptualize her experiences, I accepted that I did not need to understand all of her experiences.

regardless of their socioeconomic status view the world similarly because of the color of their skin.

Power of Shifting Narratives

As I continued to look across Elizabeth's and my stories of schooling, I could see that our early experiences of failing were different. For Elizabeth, she always thrived as a scholar. Elizabeth's success was based on academic excellence, in other words, grades.[39] I recalled noting

> *Elizabeth's mixed emotions as she described herself as a scholar before and after schooling experiences in Canada. As Elizabeth sat with me she started sharing with a bright smile which shifted to expressions of what felt to me like sadness. Elizabeth's joy somehow deflated as her body posture changed from a proud shoulders back seated position to a soft slouch. With her head gently propped up by a hand, Elizabeth explained.* (FN, December 11, 2020)
>
> *Until the time I came here, I had always seen myself as a good student A-student. I always fell between the first five people in every class from preschool way from high school preschool to my university. I even came here with first class. I was the best nursing student but when I came here my self-esteem was hurt. (PQ, December 11, 2019)*

[39] As I continued to sit with the idea of place, I begin to see place differently through Elizabeth's stories. Place is a strong theme in Elizabeth's experiences of schooling in Canada. Elizabeth's Canadian educational experiences shifted not only perceptions of herself as a scholar but also education. Experiences of failing in the Canadian higher education system made Elizabeth challenge and doubt the value of education. As I think about this, I wondered about the long-term impacts this experience will have on her future experiences with education perhaps in Canada or elsewhere. Will Elizabeth regain her pre-Canadian value of education as new experiences shape and reshape her world views?

As I sit with Elizabeth's words I recalled her pride in her early reflections of her identity as a scholar. It is at the very point that when the education system imparts a story of hurt to Elizabeth's self-esteem that expressions of joy are traded for sadness. It is here that I saw shifts in Elizabeth's identity.

> *I was intimidated by the system. The curricula structure was different. The kind of assignments we do here is different from what we do back home. Back home, I was not writing essays, so the grades in Canada obviously were not good.* (PQ, Dec 11, 2019)

As Elizabeth shared this story, I sensed her tension with coming to see herself differently. She struggled with the conflicting narratives and experiences of her past and present as a student. Coming to know and do something as a requirement for educational success pushed Elizabeth to have a more critical, reflective, and comparative lens of her experiences with schooling thus far. This discomfort reminded me of my own feelings of being intimidated.[40] I recall as Elizabeth and I almost simultaneously blurted out… *I felt like an imposter (FN, January 30, 2020).* Elizabeth went on to say that,

> *For the first time, my self-efficacy in education was hurt. I felt like maybe I'm not as good as I thought. Maybe I had a misrepresentation of myself because now the system was revealing who I am. So, you feel like an imposter. You think you have the success. You think you are so good. You think you are the perfect student. Now the system is proving*

[40] *I felt like an imposter*. These words made me feel like I was in a time trap. The resonances of these experiences immediately brought me back to one of the most vulnerable experiences I had as a scholar in Canada. My first experience in a Canadian classroom for statistics and hearing the introductions made me question my worth, place, and ability to compete with and against my academic peers. I was called to see my imperfections and question my acceptance into this place. Elizabeth's experiences reminded me of my own words as I felt my heart rate increase and silently prayed my facial expressions were not exposing my past emotional trauma of feeling like I was not enough. Elizabeth called me to consider how feeling like an imposter, is in part, feeling like deficiencies within me were being exposed. Perhaps, this is what graduate school is intended to do - help a student see that growth and learning is uncomfortable. Yet, I wondered, if some of our experiences of discomfort were the result of systemically structured expectations of belonging that led to social exclusions.

> *there are a lot of deficiencies in you. It is probably the first time I felt like I lost myself. I needed to re-evaluate who I think I am and what my strengths actually are. Am I as good of student as I felt from childhood or was it just a mirage? Or my educational system was not good enough to bring out my weaknesses and now it is being obvious.* (PQ, Dec 11th, 2019)

As I listened to Elizabeth, I recalled *shifts in my body posture. I began to sit with what felt like shame that the stories of my early years of school echoed failure. I suddenly found myself reflecting and longing to share my experiences as a student in similar ways. It was not until I began to write notes from the conversation that I was able to reflect and re-story my identity as a scholar. Pulling forward some of my reflections, I wrote to myself, "Look at how far you have come. Yes, you were once labeled as a failing student, but you have made it to a PhD program"* (FN, December 12, 2019). As I wrote these words I once again found myself longing. I longed for these words to be enough. I wanted them to be true in my heart. It is not that I don't recognize that on paper and from an outward appearance I have done well academically, but the threads of feeling like a failure are always present in the fabric of my life. Once again, I am reminded of how powerful experiences and labels can be to identity making.

Elizabeth's stories of schooling also called me to be attentive to how experiences can cause us to challenge and question the value of our past experiences. Elizabeth in telling of her scholarly identity shifts began to query the value, strength, and quality of her educational experience in Ghana. I wondered,

> *was this a natural response? Was it an attempt at self-preservation? Or was this grounded in subconscious perceptions others may have expressed to her about her schooling value and experiences in Ghana?* (FN, December 12, 2020)

As I looked forward and backward at Elizabeth's and my experiences in school, I was mindful of how power dynamics in schools continue to be visible. Power is demonstrated and enacted from classroom structures to the geographical locations of schools and the ways in which students are segregated by grades. Returning to Elizabeth's reflections of schooling, she recalled how students in schools were segregated based on achievement. Elizabeth's schooling experiences like mine systematically created associations of sameness based on grades. These systems encourage students to associate with their 'like' peers.

I remember a story Elizabeth shared of a lifelong friend she met during her early years of schooling. Elizabeth said,

> *The guy I used to attend quizzes with, we are still in close contact. I still talk to him because we were always representing our class. The school would often pair us together for academic competitions (PQ, January 20, 2020).*

Elizabeth went on to tell stories of her longing to only want to associate with the 'smart' students because they pushed her to want to do better and be recognized as being the smartest.[41] Elizabeth said

> *I wanted to learn with males because I just gravitate towards them. I think because they were doing well. If you looked at the first, second, and third positions it was always a male and then I'll be maybe the fourth position. So that kind of drew closer to them.* (*PQ, Jan 20, 2020)*

Elizabeth's account of her relationship with the top academic students and their gender made me question the social and cultural understanding of males' position in education and

[41] Sitting with the idea of belonging in school, Elizabeth's stories resonate in ways of wanting to be an exceptional scholar. Why did we both were longing to be seen as smart? Was I a desire to have an equal sense of longing to be popular and accepted by the popular crowd?

schooling. I wondered about gendered roles and their impact on girls having access and opportunity to education. I pull forward one of Elizabeth's stories of understanding her mother's ability to advocate on her behalf when she faced challenges in school, she said

> *I believe I might have complained to my parents. But, my mom was not someone who would take it on the complaints of a child and go and deal with the educator. It was only my stepdad. He was in the position to do it. You would lodge a complaint to her [my mother] and she said "Okay" and she would hope for the best for you. My mom hoped it would change but she would not advocate or stand up for you. But my stepdad would! He was quite educated.* (PQ, January 30, 2020)

As I listened to Elizabeth, I wondered about the connection between education and literacy and the ability to advocate. As I encouraged Elizabeth to share more, she explained that she thought her mother's lack of advocacy was more about,

> *will power or maybe she was not interested. If I tell her she would just empathize and not take it on because the interest was not there.* (PQ, January 30, 2020)

As I inquired further into the roles of gender in Elizabeth's understanding of her mother's advocacy role, Elizabeth called me to understand this from a cultural lens.

> *For my cultural setting, women do not talk that much when it comes to dealing with child abuse or when it comes to dealing with family problems. The head of the family, the man, deals with these issues. In the case of my mom, I don't think she saw herself as somebody who could do it because she didn't have the skills to do it. I would say personal interest mattered. I think she did not have the interest to do it. And maybe not having the interest could have been influenced by the fact that women don't do most of the social issues*

outside the family. Men are at the head of the family, it is the head that deals with it. (PQ, Jan 30, 2020)

Thinking with Elizabeth's story I wondered about common threads that emerged in her stories of power and their intertwining with gender, cultural understandings, and education. [42] I also wondered about how these threads worked together with Elizabeth's understanding of her power in academia. I wondered if education alone would have been enough to empower or increase interest in her mother's response to advocate in school settings. While Elizabeth did not story or name these experiences as stories of power and empowerment, I cannot help but wonder about this.

Reflecting on Stories of Shifting Narratives

As I sat and listened to Elizabeth's stories of schooling, I recalled my own experiences. Although both of our experiences were marked by failing and power, there were clear differences in our perception of power. While I can name some of my early years of schooling experiences as powered and as highlighting gendered and racialized encounters, Elizabeth did not story her experiences in this way.[43] This created tensions for me as I listened and wondered about how and why we saw these experiences differently.

[42] Understanding gendered roles and expectations from Elizabeth's worldviews made me consider the resonances in our experiences. While Elizabeth and I shared similar experiences of the homemaking demands of women, our experiences of men addressing issues outside the family differ greatly. For me, I have always experienced women as theoretically operating as the head of the home by managing and addressing problems in and outside of the home. This was particularly true for issues with schooling and education. In my experience men and women were to provide financially. These experiences left me as an adult thinking about the burden placed on black women to be homemakers and caregivers while still contributing to the financial income of a home.

[43] By no means was I born into a wealthy family. In fact, I often observed the difficult moments face by my parents particularly to make ends meet. Yet, when I reflected on Elizabeth's story, I paused at the word meager. Her description of her mother's work made me reflect on how I would name the work of my parents. By work, I do not just mean work that provided an income, I think about the mental and social work of survival. The networking, finding the right associations for advancement, and the mental toll it must take on a parent to have economic insecurity.

> *Was it because of our family experiences? Did Elizabeth's experiences in Canada not make her reflect on her experiences back home in Ghana? Shouldn't there be some sense of sameness because we are black and were raised in colonized context as majorities?* (FN, Dec 11, 2019)

These differences in naming our experiences reminded me to be more attentive to how Elizabeth viewed the world and appreciate how life experiences work together to shape our understanding of the world and our place in it. Through my conversations with Elizabeth, I now understand power and its relationship with social and economic disparities, particularly in schools differently. The stories Elizabeth and I shared about our experiences with familial socioeconomic status highlighted how childhood experiences differed profoundly.

As Elizabeth shared experiences of being raised in a blended family and what that meant economically, I noted to myself, my inability to understand through my personal experiences what this must have been like. I wondered

> *Would my outlook be different had either or both of my parents were illiterate? What would this have possibly meant for my schooling experiences? I began to wonder about my peers in my early school years, did they too have experiences of being differently privileged that may have shaped their perception of me?* (FN, December 12, 2019)

For Elizabeth attending school was not just a privilege, it was a weighted responsibility. She understood that schooling meant sacrifice for her. She too was aware that the sacrifice presented tensions with being a carefree child in school and she constantly had to consider the impact of irresponsibility for her learning in school. Elizabeth's experiences of having to factor in her parent's financial struggle to provide for her schooling is not a unique story. Returning to my earlier narratives of schooling and thinking about my father's sacrifice for his ten children to

attend school, I too can recall thinking about how I could help to ease the burden. Elizabeth and I shared stories that resonated similarly in thinking about the socioeconomic status of our parents and our future. Yet, our stories differed because I viewed my contribution as being more than about good grades. For me, it meant working odd jobs and saving my lunch money to buy things for myself.

As Elizabeth and I engaged in further conversations of school/ing, home, relationships, and power we began to pull more intentionally on teaching relationship and how schools as institutions of learning are structured in powered ways. We realized that each of these threads in our lives required us to think about what it means and takes to not just thrive but survive. These conversations led me to write two pieces of found poetry to make visible the spoken and unspoken conversations Elizabeth and I shared. At the core of these poems are desires Elizabeth shared of desperately wishing she could tell her stories of survival and the impact (good and harmful) on the stories she lives by.

Coming to Understand Survival

My first flight: Surviving at all costs!

It was my first flight
It was all new sights
I was bracing myself
Not just for the takeoff
The unknown landing

I thought I knew where I was landing
And geographically, it was known from a map
Maps! I thought, they were helpful.
But they seem to only be helpful for those who know how to use them.

I needed to survive
I knew my first landing meant survival at all cost
But I did not expect the price to be so high
My prior assets suddenly became my deficits
The cost me more than just money

It cost me; me

Yet, I survived
I survived at the cost of losing who I was
Rebuilding myself was expensive
It cost me my academic identity
It cost me relationships
Albeit superficial ones, it was still costly.
But I survived my first flight.
I survived at all cost.

Dear Teacher, thought you should know

Dear teacher, thought you should know
The grade you give was more than a grade
It is a measurement
For me, it is and was a measurement of my worth and my work
I know what you are going to say, it's not!
But my reality is; it is

I thought you should know
The grade you gave travel with me
It transcends time and space
It lives in my stories
It is sometimes the only story I can tell
Your grade became my scholarly adjective

Dear teacher, I thought you should know
It's not just you
It's not just that one grade
It's all of it;
Me, family, culture, and school
I am educated to understand there are standards of success
I am schooled to learn, grades are key
it's not just a grade
Just thought you should know

I was never one to consider myself as being a survivor. But over the past 5 years, I feel as though I've been in a constant state of survival. When I think about survival in the context of being a student, an immigrant, and a black woman in Canada, I found myself facing intentions of understanding what it means to be a survivor. Like me, Elizabeth also described her experiences entering and living in Canada as an international graduate student as being an experience of

survival. Elizabeth stated *it was survival at all costs*. As I sat with her words, I thought about what it means to *survive at all costs.*

For Elizabeth, her survival experience really began when she was faced with navigating the experience of traveling. Elizabeth's first flight required her to survive the journey of transitioning through airports, finding the right check-in counters, going through multiple security checks, finding the correct gate, boarding the right flight, and enduring the journey from one place to another. When I considered identity in the making and contemplated Elizabeth's first flight, what I came to realize was that within those very first hours in transitioning from Ghana to Canada, Elizabeth's identity began to shift. She was no longer the young woman that lacked experience in travelling.[44] Elizabeth's identity shifted to a young woman who was about to embark on a journey of independence and survival.

> *Although my experience in Canada has not been easy, it was worth it. It forced me to grow up. It forced me to survive on my own. I had to figure out how I would pay my bills, how I would eat, get to school and home. Although my brother secured my tuition, the rest was on me. So, I knew that my survival in Canada meant I had to do whatever it took to survive. I could not let my family down. I wasn't willing to let myself down. It was difficult, but it was worth it.* (PQ, Jan 30, 2020)

It is important to highlight that although Elizabeth and I both experienced challenges with navigating new landscapes of entering and living in Canada, our experiences were not

[44] This work has called me to be attentive to life experiences that are significant in creating shifts in identities. These moments are spread throughout the life span. For Elizabeth, these shifts were evident in her experiences of moving from private to public school, shifts in student-teacher and familial relationships as well as shifts in educational settings. These moments, although presented at different times and places, echoes significant identity-making experiences in my life.

insurmountable. We were reminded of the strength we knew we had and gained confidence when we faced new challenges.

Recounting the cost of survival was an overwhelming experience. An experience that left me and Elizabeth in awe as we said simultaneously, "*only by the grace of God*". These experiences of survival called us to be mindful of what sustained/s us: our faith, family, and culture. Although holding on to these threads became difficult at times, they sustained us when tensions emerged as shifts in our identities became visible in unfamiliar and uncomfortable ways.

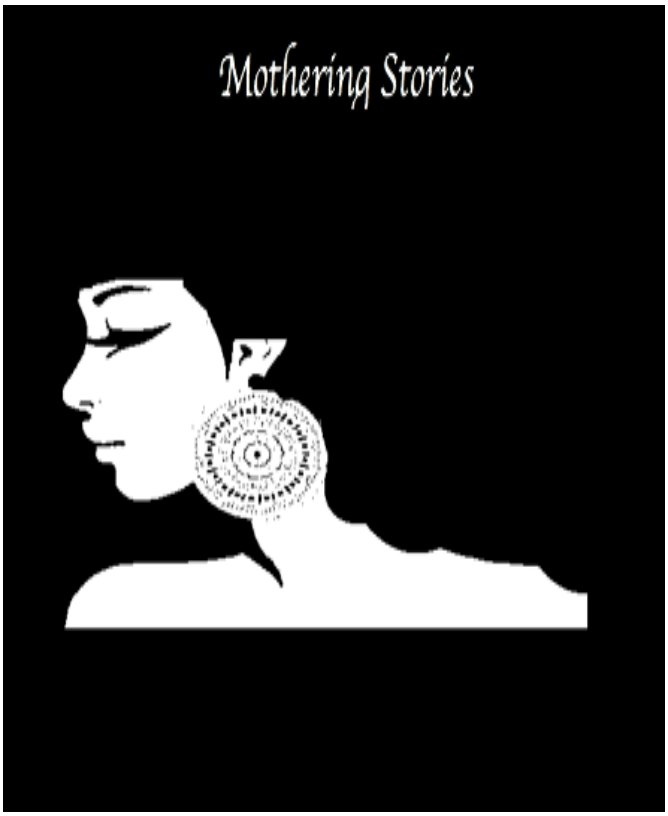
Chapter 6

Suzanne's Account

Coming alongside Suzanne was particularly unique as she came to this study as a student whose spouse and children were thousands of kilometers away from Canada. She made clear her interest and commitment to this research and more importantly her family. At the start of our research relationship in December 2019, the tensions were visible. I could sense her longing to be home in Ghana with her family. Eventually, in March 2020 just as our relationship was transitioning to co-composing field text Suzanne made an important decision to return to her family. The uncertain of future travel due to the novel Corona virus was threatening her ability to travel home to her family in Ghana. But thankfully, we were able continue our research relationship virtually with frequent check-ins on each other's well-being and the study's progression.

Coming to know Suzanne

Not so Empty Canvas: Life and Identity in the Making



The canvas on which our lives are painted never starts off blank. We enter this world with generational stories and experiences that cannot be erased. This lesson proved true in my relationship with Suzanne. Suzanne taught me that to see someone is not to know someone or unknow what we think we know of them. Coming to know Suzanne, has been an experience that left me thinking about the layers of life and how life stories are expressed and made visible, one story at a time. Suzanne, as I came to know over time, is a strong black woman with beautiful locks of hair. Hair which is often covered with brightly coloured head coverings. To understand Suzanne's selection in colors, style to cover her locks forced me to look closely at who Suzanne was. As I engaged with Suzanne, I learned increasingly about what sustains the stories Suzanne

lives by. Suzanne's stories were of faith, family, education, and her purpose. Thinking with the stories Suzanne lives by, stories that sustain Suzanne, helped me see and know her differently.

I first met Suzanne three years ago in the final months of my master's in nursing program. I recall being in awe of her natural beauty. This sense of beauty reminded me that it had only been a couple of years since I grew to love and accept my own natural beauty. It was something that I had to learn. This lesson had not come easy to me. To see Suzanne in her unembellished beauty made me admire her even more. I still remember the very first time I met Suzanne, she was wearing a beautiful purple layered outfit with a matching headpiece. Her smile was so bright and warm. Suzanne's presence was inviting. Her beauty was marked by confidence.

During the first time I met Suzanne, I kept watching her and I recalled the nervous look on her face as she sat on the left-hand side of the classroom near the exit door. Suzanne seemed so organized as she prepared for our first lecture of the semester. I was certain that she had been part of the master's program for some time. She seemed to know about some of the unwritten expectations, unlike me in my first days and months. At the time, I did not know it was Suzanne's first semester at the University of Alberta. Perhaps in retrospect, I could have interpreted the nervous look on her face differently. Yet, despite Suzanne's nervousness, she appeared confident and ready to engage in the class.

Even though it is now several years ago since this first encounter with Suzanne, I remember wondering about her hairpiece. I was clearly intrigued by her appearance and the way she carried herself. It seemed natural for me to assume she was from the continent of Africa. Looking back, I wondered why my assumptions about her place of origin seemed so natural and certain for me. I detested when these same assumptions were made about my place of origin

based on the color of my skin. What I detested most was that it erased my ability to tell my own story. Why did others think they could place me? Why did I think that I could place Suzanne?

While naming where Suzanne was from seemed easy when I first met her, it is only now that I can see how harmful this can be. As I think with Suzanne's and my experiences, I can see how I shifted from assuming where people were from to wanting people to care about knowing who I was and the place I was from. The place I am from is critical as it so strongly shapes my sense of belonging. Suzanne helped to shift my thinking about identity and coming to know others. She taught me through friendship that she was more than what meets the eyes. With this in mind, I thought about who Suzanne was and the stories she lives by. I was called to make visible her ever-evolving identity through imagery. As I think with Suzanne's stories, I stay wakeful to her life stories beyond her external appearances.

Over time, I became increasingly intentional about weaving Suzanne's seen and unseen identities together to make visible her life and identity. By the end of this narrative account, the original image of a strong black woman is depicted with strands of hair threaded with words that help me retell the stories told. Like hair, Suzanne's stories are rooted deep in something that is not easily seen on the surface. Its deep strong roots sustain and become the foundation of new stories. Likewise, just as hair is seen as an element whose beauty is difficult to understand as single strands, so are the stories Suzanne live by. To separate each strand or story is to leave too much room for misunderstanding, vulnerability, and incomplete experiences.

Growing up

Suzanne is one of three children; she was born in Ghana and raised by her mother, a trained teacher later an entrepreneur, and her dad whose occupation remained unnamed. In our conversations, Suzanne began to describe her early years of living in a home with a trained

educator. She always described her home as loving and supportive. Suzanne shared how her home structure shaped her understanding of schooling expectations and standards. These expectations and standards framed and continue to frame Suzanne's identity. Suzanne shared that:

> *my mom was a trained teacher before she decided to run her own business. I don't know if you had a trained teacher in your family but if you have a mother who is a trained teacher you should know what to expect when you see those red crosses in your papers.* (PQ, December 12, 2019)

Here Suzanne highlighted unspoken expectations of success in school and how success was often measured. Crosses are traditionally associated with 'incorrectness' while checkmarks denote 'correctness'. While correctness and incorrectness can be seen by some as a measurement of the work, Suzanne reminds me of how these symbols often represent personal worth for students and failing to meet standards and expectations at home and school. With a slight smile on her face, Suzanne shared a story of her mother:

> *She [my mother] had her expectations and if you don't meet the expectations you are in trouble. I grew up in a home where we were hardly beaten with a cane. When my mother was angry you got all the insults you needed to get. [So verbal insults] the verbal yes. She's someone who had in the mind even though she had a cane; she knew that caning the child could not work anymore. She knew that calling you "dumb", that will get to you. When she yells at you trying to tell you are "dumb". And anytime you think about her words you will be crying. So, just so you don't get those words, you did as much as possible to meet expectations.* (PQ, December 12, 2019)

As Suzanne reflected on her mother's approach to schooling and education,

> *I recalled the laughter that erupted in our conversation. I made note of the unknown reason for her laughter, noting that perhaps it was the disbelief of her experiences as a child. Or, was it her reflections that allowed her to travel backwards across time and picture the reactions of her mother and herself as a young girl.* (FN, December 12, 2020)

As we continued to share, I joined in unknowingly with her infectious laughter. Eventually, Suzanne came to a place where she shared stories about her dad with me.

While Suzanne named her father's role as opposite to her mother's, she described his approach as not creating division between the common goal her parents shared about education and schooling. Suzanne helped me see that because they shared a common goal, their differences in approaches did not create a barrier in her relationship with either of them. As I sat with Suzanne's story and reflected on my experiences of schooling and the roles my parents shared, I hear resonances of opposite roles while noting that this created tensions between me and my mother. Suzanne shared more as she leaned towards me from across the small round brown table:

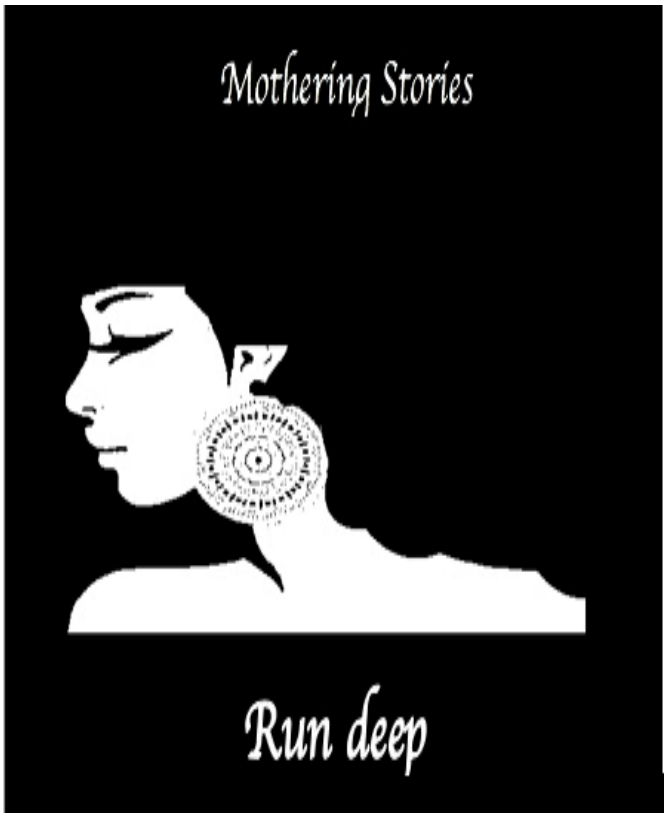
> *You know I had a parent on opposite sides. So, when my mom was like that, my dad was just coming to console you. When he's doing that, he lets you know that your mother wants the best for you, that's why she's doing that. I never saw it as creating any boundaries between me and my mother. The only thing I remember is that if you don't do well, you're going to receive that [verbal insults]. So as much as possible, even though she said all these things you know she does not mean it, because she is still like this. She has not changed.* (PQ, December 12, 2019)

Inquiring into Suzanne's stories about her mother and how her mother approached schooling helped me better understand how lessons can be shaped across generations. For

Suzanne, as she reflected on her family, she recalled with a warm smile how her mother now plays a significant role in her children's life:

> *I remember my daughter during her first day. My daughter received attitude from my mother to the point where she wept. I was here [in Edmonton] when my older sister had just visited from the UK. She [my sister] called and told her [my daughter] this is how this woman is. You better get used to it. My sister said to my daughter "you can call your mother and ask her". My sister calls me and was laughing when she asked me, "Is this the first time she is experiencing this with my mom?" Now she [my daughter] doesn't argue, she doesn't cry, she just tells her [my mother] that "next time I'll make sure I do better".* (PQ, December 12, 2019

Mothering Stories Run Deep



Suzanne helped me see how deep mothering stories run in her family; they cross generations. When Suzanne talked about her mother, she spoke about the importance of naming school performance as disappointing rather than the child as being disappointing. As I sat with the difference, I could see why differences in parenting styles between Suzanne's mother and father did not create tension. I became wakeful to the significance of this as Suzanne was able separate school work from her worth. As Suzanne recalled stories of her father she echoed her mother's reminders of the difference between education and schooling.

When I listened to Suzanne, I heard stories of loving parents recognizing and trying to find a balance between meeting the standards of performative school measures, the expectations at home, and wanting the best for their children. I heard Suzanne speak about how her parents have always hoped that their ways of making sense of this difficult balance will be woven into the stories their children live by. It seemed that their children understood the complex and difficult balance of what 'successful' schooling could mean for their children. Sometimes Suzanne uses the word "successful outcome "and I wondered while the outcome may be viewed as 'success', can it be comparable to a 'successful' schooling experience?

As I focused more on Suzanne's stories of mothering; particularly stories of Suzanne's daughter, I heard echoes of her mother. I also became attentive to the visible shifts in Suzanne's mothering in relation to schooling and identity-making. In my conversations with Suzanne, we discussed how parents shape an understanding of school and ourselves:

> *I would say that there is a lot of things I learned from my parents which has actually shaped who I am, and the way I understand education and schooling. Even back home, whatever I learn from home and from them [my parents], tells me who I should be and*

*who I'm expected to be in the society no matter where I find myself. (*PQ, December 12, 2019)

With this narrative, I am better able to see how in Suzanne's experiences, identities are shaped significantly through parenting. While Suzanne recognized that her home teachings shaped her identity as a black woman, scholar, and daughter; she also learned lessons of socialized behaviors. For Suzanne, these lessons influenced her actions and words, particularly in social settings. As I listened carefully to Suzanne, I reflected on some of my earlier narratives about the lessons I learned at home about being a black woman, scholar, and daughter.

I wondered, if like me, Suzanne was taught lessons of how to be physically present as a girl. Lessons of 'being seen and not heard' or dress codes and identities of how a 'lady' is defined. It was also evident in Suzanne's narratives that lessons at home do not stay at home. They travel with us over time and they reverberate across generations. I wondered if there are lessons Suzanne has come to question, or as wanting to change when she too became a parent. Suzanne continued to share experiences of home and showed me how they have become tools of survival for her, both in and out of school. *It has, in a way, shaped my survival in the school's back home in Ghana. Whatever you learn in the home is what tells people who you are.* (PQ, December 12, 2019)

Here Suzanne helped me understand that lessons at home deeply shape perceptions of self. The lessons Suzanne learned at home shaped how she saw herself both from a familial and cultural point of view. As I inquired alongside Suzanne, the importance of valuing social perceptions became a point of tension. This tension of who we are and how we are storied by others, was difficult for me. I resisted the idea of others needing to accept me. Yet, as I listened to Suzanne, I was awakened to the importance of familial representation as well as the cultural

and personal significance this held for both of us. In my earlier writings, I drew on the work of Carr[45] (1986) about narrative coherence and the concept of 'living up and out' constructed narratives. While Suzanne seemed to value the idea of living out the identity constructed in her home, I wondered about her value of living out social narratives of who she is expected to be. I wondered if culturally these narratives of identity aligned with the experiences Suzanne had at home.

As our relationship unfolded, Suzanne told of tensions faced as she negotiated cultural versus familial identity-making experiences. Suzanne shared experiences as an adult woman leaving home to go off to school in a distant place. She talked about a cultural push back to wanting to seek educational experiences elsewhere. Suzanne explained that as a wife and mother she faced gendered expectations from her community. She noted *You have people who are being condemned because they leave their family* (PQ, February 14, 2020).

Looking at my field notes, I noted the shift in Suzanne's facial expression as she perhaps reflected on experiences of condemnation:

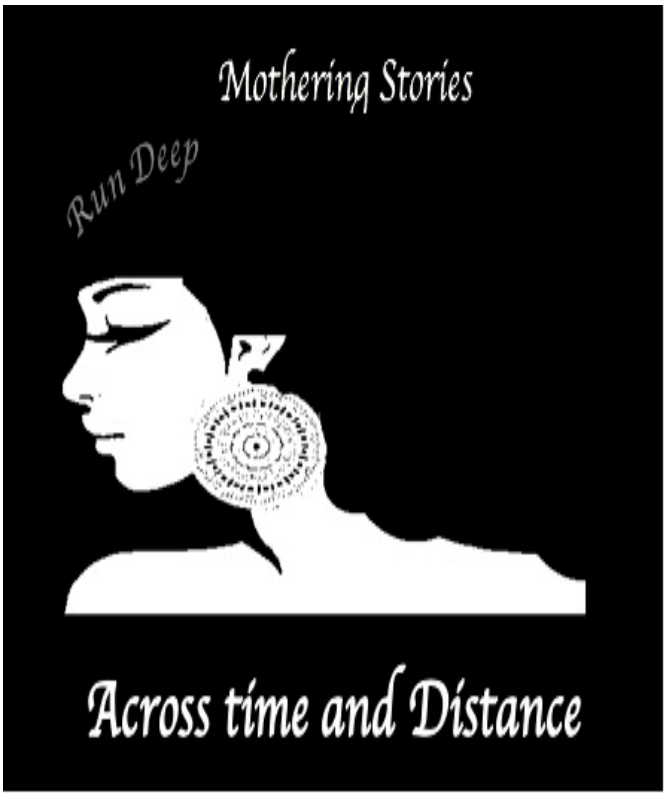
> *Especially a woman, you are leaving your husband and children to go pursue a degree outside of the country. You get things like "you are abandoning your home", at least that's what it looks like. So, even though my family might not be seeing it that way because of the kind of conception, or how they view what I am doing … it is like as a woman why are you abandoning your duties? Why do you want to go to school that much? And in the African context, the female's office is the kitchen and home. So that's what it is supposed to be. So, going after all these degrees people wonder what is wrong*

[45] Carr (1986) explains that for a life story to be coherent, humans desire to 'live up and out' the narratives associated with the identities others construct about them or the narratives they choose.

> *with you. In my case, I have a good husband who is even the one pushing me. He's the one encouraging and sometimes you don't have a husband like that.* (PQ, February 14, 2020)

Suzanne's tensions helped me see that familial and cultural values and expectations do not always align. When there is misalignment, it can be a difficult to find balance and one can struggle to meet the expectations of so many roles. This balance can be even more challenging for black woman in their fight for a space at home, in society, and higher education. As Suzanne and I went on to share our experiences of being away from home and our loved ones while studying in Canada, stories of survival and mothering sacrifices emerged.

Mothering Across Time and Distance



Listening to Suzanne's narratives of being a mother while in graduate school in Canada was difficult to hear. There were countless stories of the sacrifices the entire family was making. Yet, as I listened to Suzanne's stories of sacrifice, I was also admiring how deep mothering stories can run. Suzanne called me to understand that although leaving her children to come to study in Canada was a sacrifice, she was comforted by her cultural understanding that raising a child is not the sole responsibility of the parents. Suzanne recalled how her grandparents made sacrifices when her mother became an entrepreneur which meant spending many hours away from home. In a reflective turn, Suzanne recounted how she now has to do the same. Suzanne told this narrative in ways that helped me better understand the connection between mothering, love, and sacrifices. *When I was growing up in the African system, the child is not raised by the parents alone. So even though I had a busy mom and dad, I had Aunties that were always around, and always present.* (PQ, January 20, 2020)

Suzanne makes evident the significance of family relations and never feeling alone. These are sentiments that are part of my childhood experiences as well. Suzanne continues by sharing that *My mother never left us, like what I have done now. Like, maybe leaving for 3 or 4 months to be away from the kids. (PQ, January 20, 2020)* I wondered about sentiments of guilt as Suzanne compared herself to her mother:

> *She was not always at home. But then she's always busy during the day. It's like you see her in the morning before going to school and until she returns home. She [my mother] usually comes back around 7 p.m., so that's when you see her again. That's quite different for my situation, where I have to leave my family, all my kids at home. So, it's like a huge sacrifice for me and the kids. But it is more of a sacrifice for the kids because I have to be*

here. They [my kids] have to make sure they do what they have to do when I'm not there, or what I expect them to do when I'm not there. (PQ, January 20, 2020)

I was wakeful of Suzanne's love for her children as she stories her children's sacrifice as greater than her own. Suzanne consistently compared her mothering to the ways in which she was mothered. Although I could sense the tension in Suzanne's words as she contemplated being away from home for extended time frames, I too heard efforts to be kind to herself with subtle reminders of the value of their sacrifices. Earlier, I shared Suzanne's stories of identity-making, coherence, and social expectations. Again, as Suzanne storied a mother's sacrifices, she made clear how similar to when she was a child, her children also know what is expected of them in her absence. This is because of lessons Suzanne taught them at home about who they are and what they represent outside of the home. Suzanne added to my understanding of this sacrifice by explaining:

In terms of their education, I want them to excel. So, it's more talking to them on the phone having these face/video calls and all these things. So that's technology, imagine if that was not there. That would have been a huge gap. The good thing about my family is, my mother is a teacher. (PQ, January 20, 2020)

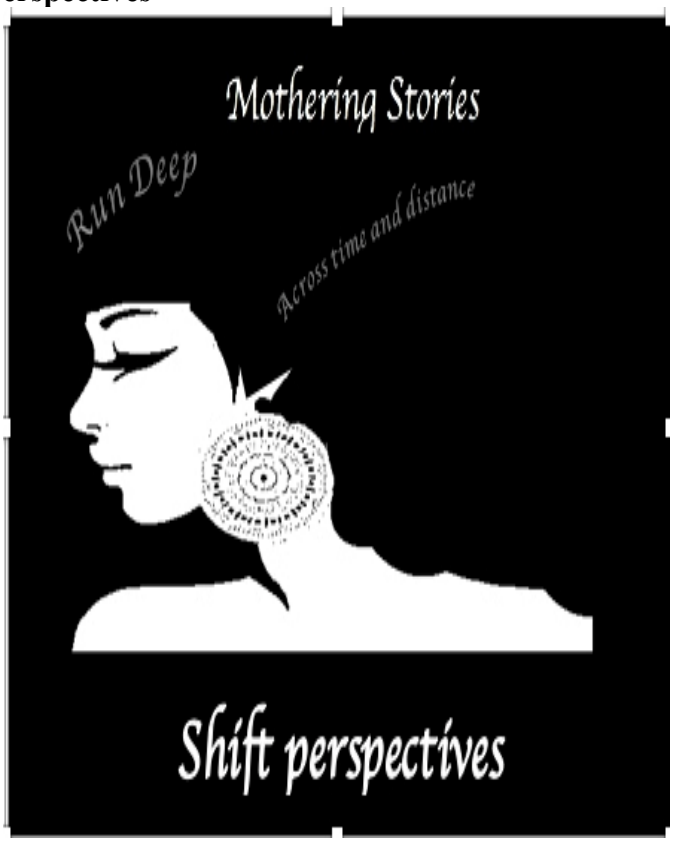
Suzanne reminded me of her sense of gratitude and joy for her mother's presence in the children's life. Suzanne's posture was relaxed when reflecting on the comfort of knowing that the children are in good and capable hands:

When I am not there, they live with Grandma, because daddy, he's also busy until Friday. And then they are with Daddy for the weekend when he's at home to take care of them and check on them with their homework. Then they come back to grandma again. He also has to sacrifice, right. Grandma has to sacrifice, and their dad has to sacrifice.

> *Even if he has something to do he has to make sure they also are okay, and their school stuff has been done. Grandma has to be like a mother now so just make sure they get up early to get to school, organized everything they need for themselves and when they are back she makes sure they have done their homework. So, it's all about sacrifice.* (PQ, January 20, 2020)

As Suzanne storied the sacrifice being made by everyone in her immediate family, I sensed a shift in her emotions and subsequently my emotions. The atmosphere was mixed with emotions as Suzanne's voice lowered and her facial expression shifted from joyous to one of contemplation. I wondered at that moment was she reconsidering the cost of this degree. Was the sacrifice too much? Was it worth it? I wondered about these possible tensions as I too have asked these same questions of myself as I count the cost of being away from those I love and those that love me. Understanding through my early writings that stories are often fragmented, I turn to narratives shared by Suzanne later in our conversations about her mother and maternal grandmother.

Shifting Mothering Perspectives



Suzanne's mother is positioned as the last daughter of three. I wondered if Suzanne's grandmother used the same approaches for all her daughters or did shifts occur for Suzanne's mother when her grandmother began to see value in educating her daughters. Suzanne's mother and grandmother remained nameless in our conversations, nevertheless they were very important. As Suzanne and I continued to sit*:*

> *in a warm corner of a local coffee shop on campus on Valentine's Day, sharing a whole grain muffin and hot cups of earl gray tea, it created a space for me to come to know and understand these women and Suzanne's perspectives on education in relational ways*.
>
> (FN, February 14, 2020)

Suzanne shared:

> *my mom tells me a story about how my grandparents especially my grandmother used to get her to learn to take her books seriously.* (PQ, February 14, 2020) *As Suzanne began the narrative, I was reminded of the significance of meal sharing as we storied our lives. I wondered about the context in which Suzanne's mother share this story. Was it over a meal or a warm drink?* (FN, February 14, 2020)

As I listened intently, I was attentive to the significance of women in both of our lives. Suzanne stated:

> *My mother was the last girl out of three girls but not the last child. So usually, my grandmother would allow her to go and hide so she could go and learn while the other girls would be doing all the housework.* (PQ, February 14, 2020)

As I listened to Suzanne, I was intrigued by the experience of "*hiding".* Suzanne added:

> *My mother unlike my aunts got an opportunity to be educated. She was the hated one. She was the only one who had a diploma or degree. The only girl that is. So, I think it is the importance of the significance of education that had impact in her life. And this is what she also assured we all had.* (PQ, February 14, 2020)

I paused here to consider privilege. Many young girls around the world today do not understand that to be educated is not always a right, it is a privilege. I struggled with this, wishing that every girl could receive an education. As I thought about my struggle, I think about how Suzanne's mother had to face rejection by her female siblings because of the opportunity she was afforded. I wondered, about the tensions of trying to find the balance of being the youngest sisters and taking advantage of educational opportunities. I paused to consider what shaped their relationship. Perhaps, it was not about the formal educational opportunities but about their perception of Suzanne's mother being favored over them regarding household chores.

As I puzzled silently, my wonders emerged out loud as I asked Suzanne why she thought her grandmother's perspectives of formally educating her last daughter was important. Suzanne shared:

> *I am thinking that, one, it could be that my grandma saw a potential in her or it could be that she actually recognized the importance of education over time. So that is how come she just got to get at least one person out of the girls to get some kind of formal education.* (PQ, February 14, 2020)

Suzanne's family's perspectives on formal education shifted over many years. I wondered what influenced these shifts toward or about formal education. Were they shifts of social, political, cultural, or just familial perspectives of education? I also wondered, would Suzanne's grandmother be able or willing to name these and other influences then? As Suzanne shared more of who her grandparents were as self-employed tradesmen, more questions surfaced. Did Suzanne wonder if their inability to read or communicate in English limited their business growth? Did this influence their decision to ensure at least one of her daughters received formal education. Suzanne reflected:

> *maybe they saw someone who is trading with formal education doing trading maybe a better job than someone who is not educated. Because of the education they gave to my mom made her prosper. As someone who was more educated, she [my mom] got a teaching diploma but eventually, she stopped teaching. Because she [my mom] was now the backbone of the family. She [my mom] decided to go into her own business of trading with a different level. Because of her formal education her style of trading was different from what her parents had.* (PQ, February 14, 2020)

Suzanne called me to consider the economic influence of her grandmother's shifting perspectives towards formal education. Suzanne also added to this perspective when she shared:

> *you know the interesting thing is that she [my mother] went into the same trade as my grandmother which is fabric. But my mom took it to another level by having international partners because she could speak English fluently and sign good deals. So, my mom had a lot of international partners and none of her sisters could have done that because they don't speak English. My grandmother was only able speak the local language. So that gave my mom the opportunity to have international partners and local partners who were on that level. And based on that my mom realized the importance of what her mom gave her. My mom also made sure that her siblings and her parents benefited from the success.* (PQ, February 14, 2020)

Thinking with Suzanne's story and pulling forward narratives of her grandparent's work, I saw the forward-thinking of Suzanne's grandparents in preparing the next generation. Suzanne invited me to see how this single shift towards formal education in her family had a positive economical return for generations. Again, perspectives shift in this story as Suzanne shared:

> *Initially, I remembered my mom saying they [my grandparents] use to take her to hide. The sisters use to get angry when she got to hide, and they got sent to the kitchen to cook. And when the food was ready she [my mom] is called and had her food dished to her.* (PQ, February 14, 2020)

Having to hide to learn is shaped by layers of complexities. A mother's desires for her daughter's education are met with hard decisions of risking impressions of favoritism. While I listened to Suzanne, I could hear the wishful hopes or perhaps regrets about not being able to provide opportunities to all children. I wondered if Suzanne's aunts showed resistance to what

they may have interpreted as unequal opportunities to be educated and an uneven distribution of household chores. I also wondered about the tensions these choices created between Suzanne's grandmother and her other children and how she navigated them.

Thinking with these narratives, I take a reflective turn to my childhood. While all the children in my parent's home had the opportunity to receive a formal education, the school/housework balance was far from equal. I recalled feeling anger in my home towards my male siblings as they played, and I cleaned. I recalled feeling the weight of the responsibility of caring for them in the kitchen, laundry room, and at the dining table with their homework. Although I could not name it at the time, I felt my resistance. I know with certainty for my family those gendered expectations shifted with time. But I was uncertain about the factors that shifted these gendered roles.

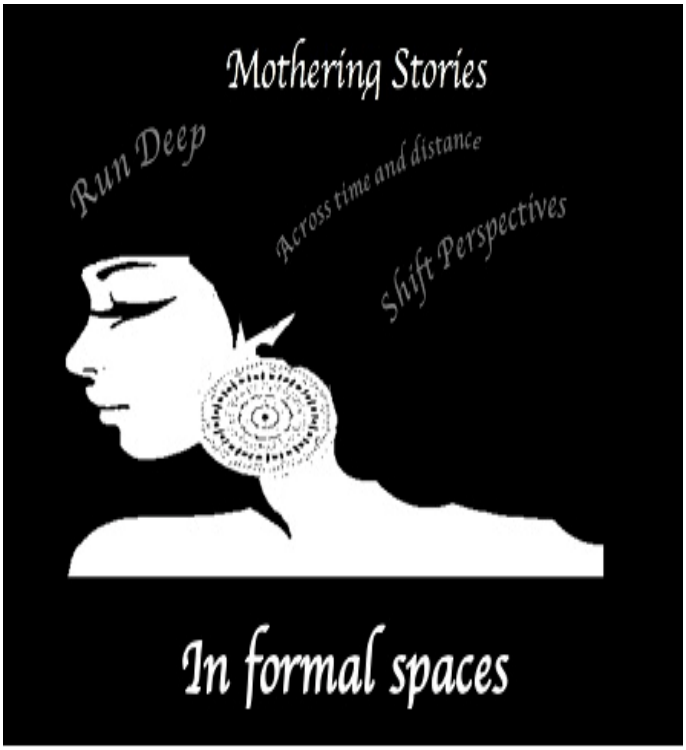
How did my grandparents and parents shift their worldview? Were there particular events that happened? I became wakeful to the link between gender roles and the associated responsibilities. Some of my male siblings were taught how to cook, clean, and do laundry, yet, because they did not identify with these responsibilities based on their gender they were not inclined to participate. As I recall my frustrations of gendered expectations at home with chores, I thought about how different those frustrations must have been for Suzanne's aunts:

> *Initially, I think they [my aunts] really did not like it. But in a way, I believe that my mom tried to not pay them off but tried to get them to benefit from what she received. My mom tried as much as possible to take care of them. For instance, for one, my mom established a business for her. Then my mom put up a house and when she started going old her kids took up the shop and the business. And then my mom made sure she put up a house and a lot of apartments so each of them had an apartment for each of their families so to make*

each of them comfortable, so they could also benefit from what she benefited from. The older one was the one taking care of my grandmother when she was alive, but my mom made sure she helped, and she took care of her daughter [my aunt's daughter] and got her a nursing education and my got her to live abroad in the UK. So, it was a way to pay them back. (PQ, February 14, 2020)

Returning to Suzanne's story of her mom's contribution to the family's economic security over the years, I wondered what motivated her to provide for her siblings in this way. Was it a personal sense of responsibility or a sense of familial obligation? I wondered about the tensions between these siblings over the years and how or if these acts of love eased those tensions. I wondered what influence these actions had on Suzanne's aunt's decisions to give formal education opportunities to their daughters as I hear stories of Suzanne's female cousins attending nursing school. Was this the sole initiative and influence of Suzanne's mom?

Lessons of Mother in formal Learning Spaces



Suzanne's narratives of lessons at home and in society are important. She adds to her stories by sharing an understanding of lessons in a formal setting such as the classroom as being prescribed and scripted:

> *It is not just about the teacher. The teacher only picks the curriculum and tells you what is in the curriculum, but the extras are what comes together to make you who you are and help you to survive in this world and makes you who you are.* (PQ, December 12, 2019)

Pulling on the idea of "the extra" made me wonder about Suzanne's worldview of what she termed as formal education at school, i.e. the curricular education:

> *During this conversation, I recalled Suzanne's expressive nature of using her hands and body language to emphasize thoughts and words. In moments of deep reflection, Suzanne would partially cover her mouth and tilt her head left as she storied her experiences or responses to an inquiry.* (FN, December 12, 2020)

At the time, I did not pick up on the notion of "the extra" as I wish I had. I wish I could inquire deeper. I wondered if she understood her use of the word extra to mean lessons at school although prescribed through a curriculum as being foundational or at the core and other lessons such as those outside of school as "the extras".

I puzzled about this because I got the sense from our time together that lessons at home were equally if not more important to her identity-making. As I inquired further, Suzanne made it clear that it is "*not just about the teacher*". She called me to understand that, yes, teachers influence her identity-making but there is more to a schooling experience than teacher-student encounters. So, I wondered, if the word "extra" is referring to other experiences at school outside of the classroom and teacher-student encounters that:

comes together to make you who you are and help you to survive in this world and makes you who you are. (PQ, December 12, 2019)

With this in mind, I hear Suzanne's caution and urgency in mothering situations in formal education spaces with her children. Starting with gendered experiences of mothering boys and girls, Suzanne made visible how much more sensitive her daughter was to schooling experiences that made her feel abused, silenced, or powerless, than her sons:

As she began to share this story, she smiled and gave a light chuckle which invited me to do the same. I sensed her pride as she saw reflections of herself in her daughter's approach to potentially harmful experiences in school. (FN, December 12, 2020)

Suzanne shared:

There was a particular teacher, as I said the boys will not talk until the girl starts talking and even though the girl had gone through that class and complained, the boys only speak out when the girl complained. There was a teacher that use to be on my girl, like to pick on her and pass comments which she didn't like. Comments like, based on her tribe what did you eat this morning? Then mention a local dish and say I could see this what you had this morning. He was just trying to make her feel bad based on socioeconomic status. My daughter was always in the first three in class and he [the teacher] would say look at you are growing fat you are only eating local dishes. (PQ, January 20, 2020)

As Suzanne shared this, again, *her demeanor shifted as I sensed her frustration and perhaps disgust at the actions of this teacher* (FN, December 12, 2020). Like Suzanne, I too can see how experiences like these in formal education spaces, could create identity labels. I also saw how assumptions about who a person is are often made based on perceived cultural background and assumed socioeconomic status. This was certainly true for Suzanne when she entered the

Canadian learning context. In one of our most vulnerable conversations, I shared with Suzanne my perspectives that I *think some instructors clearly show bias if you're from a particular country. Assumptions are also made that you must not be capable of doing A, B, C, or D* (FN, March 2, 2020). I shared with Suzanne that while this was my personal experience, I also came to know this through my observations and relational understandings with fellow international students. I shared:

> *I don't have a very strong Caribbean accent, so there was always an assumption that I was not an international student. If I didn't say something everyone assumed I was from Canada. They might ask what your origin is, but the assumption was generally that I've been in Canada for a long time. It's interesting to me how people associate language, dialect, and accent to capabilities, knowledge, and ability to perform in higher education*. (FN, March 2, 2020)

In response with expressions of disbelief and frustration, Suzanne shared:

> *I don't know if you missed any word … that's exactly what it is, and that's the experience around this place. And I think that's the kind of mindset before your paper is even marked, you have already been graded. So sometimes you immediately entered the class, you have already been graded. So that is what I noticed. When I came someone told me that, but I didn't believe it until I went to one of the classes through my one and a half years.* (PQ, March 02, 2020)

As I pause in reflection of Suzanne's experience, I returned to Suzanne's daughter's experiences of assumptions and labels in a formal education setting. Suzanne shared:

> *Last year [2019] they were giving overall best prizes and she [my daughter] got second-best so she did not get the prize and he [the same teacher] passed a comment. He said,*

> *"You are only sitting in your house eating you could not even get the first prize". Which she [my daughter] really did not like. I actually went to the school and said it has been happening and I've been quiet about it, and apparently, he did the same thing in my older boy's class.* (PQ, March 02, 2020)

Looking back, I thought about with my earlier reflections of labels and how labels shape identities over time. I returned to my early labels of being called a *C* student or being storied as *at the bottom of the class*. Narratives like these made it challenging for me to overcome thinking about myself as being a failure and created shifts in how I saw myself. I wondered, why such identities stick to me more than positive identities. I also wondered if this is true for others, particularly for Suzanne's daughter. Suzanne went on to share and helped me to see how places of schooling continue to be a part of familial and community stories:

> *Then, other parents came in to see the headmistress. She (the headmistress) is someone known by our family. She knows my mom, so she said, "please just mention the teacher's name". I mean was doing this because I have been dealing with this so long. So afterward, I got home I told her [my daughter] the truth and said to her it is in case he is going to pick on you. Because of that, I mean, he was there for a while but didn't talk to her. He [the teacher] was being extra careful with his comments and eventually, he left the school*. (PQ, March 02, 2020)

While Suzanne personally understood the importance of protecting her children in school settings, Suzanne also recognized how the presence of a known authority figure at this school created a sense of ease in confronting a matter that she worried would cause retaliation. This concern although alleviated was not eradicated. Suzanne still appreciated the need to protect her daughter by making it known that she addressed the issue formally. What was not explicitly

expressed is her daughter's initial resistance to her parents formally addressing this issue about this teacher. As I inquired more, I asked Suzanne about the source of her daughter's resistance and she reverberated *it was her [my daughter's] fear of retaliation* (PQ, March 02, 2020). While sharing, I wondered about the gendered role in addressing issues at school for Suzanne's family:

> *The issue is the kids won't tell their dad I went with my husband to my brother's house to visit. I mean accidentally, I just talk about it and they were furious. My husband handled an issue before and he had that person locked up. So it's like the way the man will handle the issue eventually will affect the kids, so they told me and said, "Don't tell daddy".* (PQ, March 02, 2020)

As Suzanne expressed her children's comfort with addressing the concerns with her:

> *she chuckled as she reflected on her husband's demeanor and natural response of protection. I too chuckled as I thought of my dad. My father is a protector and does everything humanly possible to protect those he loves.* (FN, March 04, 2020)

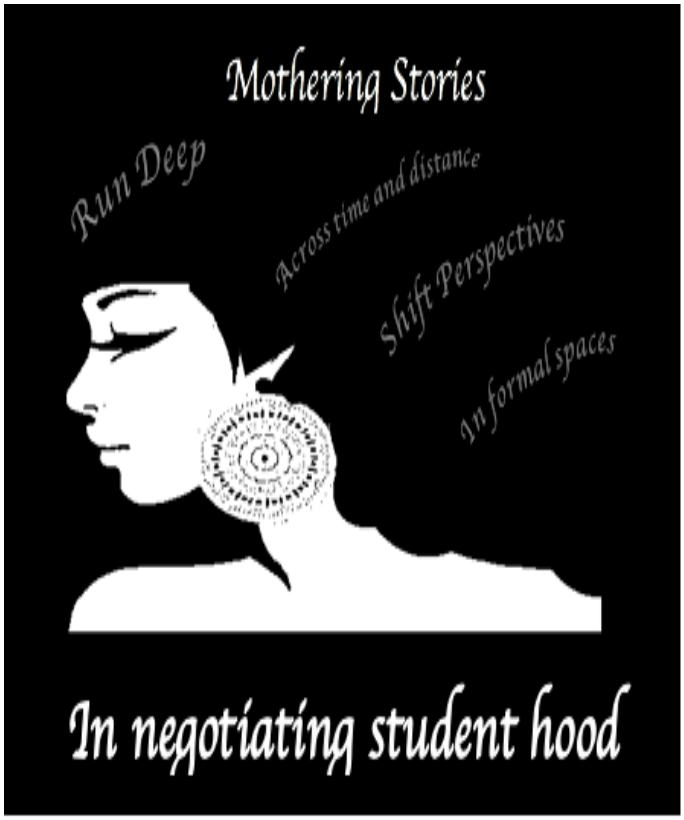
As we continued to share I wondered about Suzanne's mother's response to addressing concerns at school for her and her siblings. Starting with a light chuckle, Suzanne shared:

> *It's funny with my mom, you dare not because when you get there [to my mom] the first question she would ask you is "What did you do?" Then you narrate your story. She would say okay you were right. Then she picks up the phone to the proprietor who was my mom's friend or drive to her house and tell her a piece of her mind.* (PQ, March 02, 2020)

Relationships in school settings come to the forefront and involve the matriarch of their family: Suzanne's mother. Suzanne's mother's legacy in the family is woven in and out of school settings as she shaped and continues to shape an understanding of schooling, power, resistance,

and justice. Suzanne's mother helped shaped a general understanding of the rights parents and students possess. Suzanne shared a similar approach to parenting. I recognized that Suzanne's approach was a learned behaviour. Lessons at home are seen as being foundational in Suzanne's understanding of the pursuit of justice, humanity, and relationships.

Negotiating student hood as a mother



Negotiating stages of life is a natural response. Suzanne told stories of countless negotiations; negotiations that deeply impacted her identity-making across her life. In Suzanne's current life stage, she negotiates her identity as a wife, mother, daughter of aging parents, colleague, student, and friend. In this section, I pulled forward Suzanne's negations of being a student.

Taking a reflective turn, Suzanne recounts her first days in Canada as a student and her experiences with challenging grades. Suzanne recalled arriving in Canada on a late Tuesday

afternoon with the weight of an overdue assignment on her mind. I listened intently as Suzanne shared these beginnings with me:

> *I came [to Canada] on a Monday. The sad thing was I came in late, and I had my assignments that I worked on when I was back home. And in a luggage that I accidently left at the airport, I had that assignment. I went back to the airport and they told me to come back on Tuesday and that class was the Tuesday. I couldn't hand in that assignment, as I was supposed to pick it up that evening. So that was a welcoming situation for me which cost me some marks in that course because the agreement was to hand it in when I reached in Canada. I mean you go back and say another story [to the teacher] that makes you look like you are not serious. I lost some marks because I did not turn it in on time, which I just took as one of those things, I mean, I learned a lesson from that.* (PQ, March 2, 2020)

As Suzanne reflected, I noted:

> *her posture shifted slightly on the potential first impression she was making by not turning in this assignment, losing marks as a result, and having to negotiate with herself if it was worth defending her scholarly character.* (FN, March 04, 2020)

It is here that many students find themselves at a crossroad in addressing concerns in academic spaces. Like Suzanne, I too have been in these situations. As a student, these crossroads moments could create defining shifts in who we understand ourselves to be as students and how others see us. Suzanne continued to share how this experience made her feel in the days and weeks after:

> *Honestly, I really felt very sad. And you know, I thought let me go and speak to this instructor, I mean, things do happen right. But the funny thing is I went to the person and they just smiled.* (PQ, March 02, 2020)

As Suzanne shared this I quickly wrote down:

> *how a smile could be so deceptive. I reflected on how my smile often hides so much about what I am feeling in the moment. I wondered, how this smile made Suzanne feel. (*FN, March 04, 2020)

Just then, Suzanne chimed in:

> *I was thinking, I will just hand it in. There are two parts of the assignment. So, I handed in the one part and it was the other part was in that bag. And I was thinking, does she even believe me? Does she even believe what I was saying? I felt so bad and terrible. I didn't even know that I was going to lose some marks for that. In the moment, she said it was a part of the assignment you supposed to have handed in, but she did not communicate that I would lose marks until I got the feedback and I notice I was only scored for the initial part. I am sure if I had gotten those marks I would have moved to another grading level.* (PQ, March 2, 2020)

Suzanne's narration of this experience reverberates my sentiments about a smile. How Suzanne was under the initial impression that her explanation was accepted, and this would be reflected in the grade. Yet, Suzanne simultaneously wondered to herself about how this teacher saw her. She puzzled if her words meant anything. Asking the question, "Does she believe me?" shifted her inquiry towards who Suzanne was in and out of school. Suzanne added that after that conversation with the teacher, her perspective about being a student in Canada shifted.

> *So, at that point, it just dawned on me that I am in a different environment and I think they don't joke with their timelines. So, I need to be extra cautious when I am handing in my stuff.* (PQ, March 2, 2020)

This shift in how Suzanne saw assignments and grading shifted her approach to schooling in Canada. With concerns about her status as an international student, Suzanne became more aware of her identity and what this potentially meant as she submitted assignments. Suzanne shared:

> *I quite remember, on one of my papers the instructor told me that I did not put in my thesis statement. I had to right there! I got confused. I booked an appointment with the instructor and she was like "What?" I said it's right here. She said, "Oh, you should have written it this way, in this English." And she never changed my grade. So, I said to myself, really just because I didn't write the English the way you wanted it. It doesn't make sense to me. But then I guess she just didn't want to accept it. So, I just let it go.* (PQ, March 02, 2020)

Having to "*just let it go*" became a mantra that encouraged Suzanne to complete what she started. This mantra also became another reminder of Suzanne's powerlessness to change and fight a system as she pursued recognition for her scholarly work. Suzanne made visible how these experiences shaped an understanding of her identity in Canada as an international student:

> *Before your paper is read, there is already an impression about you. Because of some of the feedback I got from my final papers I know this to be true. Some of the things that there were asking for in the feedback was right in the paper. The person asked the question earlier and then come down to see it. So, it's like there is an impression. The impression that this person is from this country and has nothing to offer. Sometimes when you try to prove yourself even though they see, they turn a blind eye and pretend like they*

haven't seen because that is the impression there is nothing good coming. And then when you do good please ask you "how did you do it? Did you do it yourself?". (PQ, March 02, 2020)

As Suzanne faced tensions of being an international student in Canada wonders began to emerge about the influence that this particular place had on these tensions. Suzanne puzzled:

I don't know if it's just with U of A or is with other institutions but I'm here at the U of A. Sometimes what they do end up discouraging people. What happens if people tend to stop believing what they are capable of doing and they see themselves as not capable. I think it affects the individual as a person. And if you don't get the right person to tell you, "Look, don't let anyone use that kind of approach or don't let them make you feel you're incapable"; you end up giving up. (PQ, March 02, 2020)

Suzanne understood and knew that her purpose in Canada was greater than herself and the sacrifices everyone in the family was making could not be in vain. So, Suzanne continued her pursuit of a PhD while holding on to the sustaining threads in life: family, faith, culture, and personal value. It is these threads that encourage Suzanne to keep challenging the system of assignments and grades. Although Suzanne admits, sometimes the fight wasn't and isn't worth it. *I'll say I experienced that and with one of the courses because I really wanted to make an excellent grade in that course, so, I kept inquiring* (PQ, March 02, 2020). These inquiries became critical for Suzanne to understand the significance of grades in the Canadian context:

These are assignments you are sometimes given, you're not really given at max or a score. Such as the assignments you give in every week, but you get feedback every week but not with scores. So, at the end of the semester everything has to come together, right. So, maybe you do three and receive feedback on how to improve on the other one. You

then get the impression that everything is okay. Then the end of the semester when everything is put together and you're graded, you don't get the excellent grade you are expecting to receive. At this point you don't feel like going back to ask questions. I rather focus on what's ahead of me than to go back and ask questions. (PQ, March 02, 2020)

Again, Suzanne returns to these mis/understandings of scholarly expectations and grades. After multiple troubling experiences, Suzanne no longer thinks that it is worth the fight:

I've done that a couple of times. Sometimes you go and then the person tries to say something, and you realize that sometimes it is a waste of time. Other times I've tried it, and then instructors have accepted it and then try to work on my grades for me. I mean sometimes, it is just about who you are working with. Not everyone will say "okay I marked you down for something which is there especially being an international student". And that is one of the impressions I got when I came to Canada being an international student. There is no way that you can go in and try question an instructor and get what you want. It doesn't work that way as an International student. Sometimes I just say let me just "Let It Go". I mean I'm not here to take a first-class or second-class; I will just take my PhD and walk away. (PQ, March 02, 2020)

Suzanne's words resonated with me in poignant ways. I saw her hurt, frustrations, and disappointments in recognizing that the change needed was beyond an individual instructor. The changes are deeply rooted institutionally and systemically. These changes seemed too big and too much for Suzanne to influence. Besides, Suzanne came here for a degree and that's it! But like me, Suzanne recognized she will leave with a lot more than what she bargained for. Suzanne will leave with experiences and stories that will shape and reshape her understanding of higher education and herself as a scholar.

Chapter 7

Resonant Threads

Thinking with the Metaphor of Fabric

I used the metaphor of a fabric to set up this work in its early stages and to position myself in this work. It is in thinking about narrative threads that I return to this metaphor. The making of a fabric is intricate, detailed, and consists of the interweaving of multiple threads. Thinking with the multiplicity of these threads is at the core of this work and related to identity-making. As described earlier, each thread within a fabric is positioned in either cross or lengthwise directions. The lengthwise (warp) directional threads are filling threads, they represent the experiences and stories that live alongside the sustaining threads of our lives. I see the sustaining threads as the crosswise (weft) threads (Tortora, 1978). Pulling the weft threads forward helped me to remain wakeful to what sustains me.

Looking across the stories of participants in this study, I came to see their sustaining threads. Some of these threads resonated across our experiences. But not all of our threads were visible. Like me, they too had inexpressible experiences (Dewey, 1938); experiences in their lives that were silenced or embodied. These silent and 'invisible' threads were marked by tension. These tension-filled moments called me to think *with* their stories rather than *about* them (Okri, 1997). I realized that thinking *about* their stories would not be adventitious to my inquiry and our relationships. Thinking *with* their stories gave space to me and to Elizabeth, Suzanne, and Hanna to be silent and listen to what was not being told.

As I continue to think with the metaphor of a fabric, I was reminded of the carding process in fabric making. The carding process is marked by pulling apart and isolating threads from one another (Zurich, 2008). At some point in the study, I realized much like the threads of

my life, participant stories cannot be pulled apart without creating tensions and threatening the overall integrity of the fabric. In this chapter, my intent is not to isolate or present the experiences of participant as single threads. Rather, I hope to make visible across their stories the filling and sustaining threads, the silent or silenced threads, as well as the patterns in the fabric of their lives.

Coming to Resonant Threads

Coming to this chapter has not been easy. Participants and I negotiated several tension-filled threads, particularly in relation to being black. I struggled to come to my understanding of blackness as I lived alongside other black women in this study. As I pulled on this thread, I found myself again, questioning my understanding of my blackness. As I looked across the experiences of Elizabeth, Suzanne, and Hanna, as black women raised in different geographical places of the world, I noticed that they seemed so sure of who they were. While I was being pulled in countless directions, directions that were spurred by questions about the shade of my blackness, my accent and hair texture and geographical place of birth. The warp threads which lived silently in my stories, emphasised that my birth place was too 'Americanised', that I was not truly Caribbean. Threads of not being black enough, called me to return to labels of being called 'yellow' or questions that challenged the authenticity of my parent's blackness. It is the work of hooks (2003) that created a pause for me and allowed me to reflect on my experience.

hooks (2003) in writing about the experiences of teaching communities for black people made me see my experiences from another vantage point. hooks (2003) wrote that in institutions of education, domination marked most often by race and sex, shifts the experiences of black people. However, experiences of black people in higher education make visible the resistance to these dominating threads. At the same time the experiences show how complexions (shades) of

blackness was and is favorable for some black people. hooks continued in explaining that light-skinned or fairer skinned black people historically have been allowed to experience freedom through education, because of the color caste hierarchy that exist in higher education. hooks words make me pause and reconsider my experiences. I began to consider that the very thread that created so much tension in my identity of blackness, may have create opportunities for me that I may otherwise not have been afforded.

My understanding of blackness through the course of this study has shifted. Suzanne, Elizabeth, and Hanna taught me and reminded me that blackness is more than a race or color of skin. It is an identity. To be black and travel into the world of black people means coming to the world with a readiness to see more than the colour of skin. World-traveling as Lugones (1987) describes is an invitation to a relational space that requires sensitivity and an intentionality of openness. This space has to hold a sense of trust, ease, and willingness to become part of another person's world. The world here is not just geographical, it is historical, cultural, social, personal, familial, past, present, and future.

When I first met Suzanne, Hanna, and Elizabeth, I was struck that they accepted their blackness without question. They forcefully pushed back at any notion that questioned their 'blackness'. They accepted without question that claims of blackness were justified if you were from the continent of Africa. I wondered about this acceptance of blackness and began to wonder how blackness was defined. The Oxford English Dictionary (2021) defines blackness as: "Dark skin-colour, esp. in a person of sub-Saharan African or Australian Aboriginal ancestry, latterly (originally *U.S.*) as the basis for affirming a distinct ethnic and cultural identity" (np). Reading this definition, I can better understand why my experiences of being questioned as 'authentically' black was and is possible. Definitions of blackness such as the one put forward in the Oxford

English Dictionary has assisted many in defining and limiting our understanding of blackness to the shade of skin, geography, ethnicity and culture. The definition unknowingly has created experiences that made me continually question my black identity.

For many years, I lived with the hope that others would see me as black, only to realize that it starts with me. I first have to accept and be confident in my identity and naming myself as a black woman. Over time, as I engaged with Elizabeth, Suzanne, and Hanna I began to realise that like me, they too questioned their black identity. Yet, for all three of them this presented differently, as they did not have others overtly challenging their blackness. Rather, they came to see their blackness being undermined in less overt ways in the Canadian education system. These challenges particularly emerged as others questioned their ability and 'right' to be in graduate school. hooks (1989; 2000) and Lorde (1980; 2016) point out that these experiences are not new to black women. They write that experiences of being and belonging in higher education has been a long withstanding issue; black women have to prove their right to their seat in educational spaces. hooks and Lorde argue that even after jumping through the hoops to 'prove' ourselves, our acceptance at best is only tolerated.

For Suzanne, Hanna, and Elizabeth, the shade of their complexion and their accents resulted in questions of how they had and continued to 'earn' their place in the classroom. Unlike them, these same identity threads somehow 'qualified' me to be part of higher education. As I think with the threads that resonate across our lives, I can see how different their expression is. Yet, there too are similarities and differences that reverberate. For Suzanne, Hanna, Elizabeth and me, the reverberations of our blackness being questioned by ourselves or others made visible the many tensions and gaps in the stories told of the experience of black women in Canadian higher education.

As I looked across our experiences, coming to a place of deciding which stories to pull forward from the times we spent together created tension for me. Every story, every experience, and every thread of their lives weighed heavily on my heart. In these moments, it was important for me to return to the research puzzle and the justifications of this work. It was in these moments of returning to the intentions of my study that I could shift from the tensions I experienced. I was able to shift from the competing to conflicting stories that lived alongside dominant stories (Clandinin et al., 2009). Dominant stories are stories told and retold in social or institutional landscapes; they intentionally and unintentionally shape people's identities and lived experiences in profound ways.

Narrative inquiry offers flexibility in conveying and comprehending a phenomenon through the analysis and interpretation of threads that resonate across participant narratives (Clandinin et al., 2007). While grateful and attentive to this flexibility, I am wakeful that this flexibility does not negate my ethical responsibility to the participants of this study and their stories. As I think with the narratives of Hanna, Elizabeth and Suzanne, their stories linger.

As we co-composed their and our narratives, our narratives as black women shifted amidst the current COVID-19 pandemic. I am reminded of Suzanne's urgency to return to her family, particularly as the threat of not being able to return loomed. For Hanna these shifts were situated in having to reimagine the balance between work and home life, as her home suddenly became her place of work. Elizabeth had to negotiate decisions about an uncertain future in her academics and career. These negotiations led to her having to forfeit an offer of paid academic work because of immigration restrictions due to COVID-19. While I struggled with my mental health at different times during this pandemic.

Naming Resonant Threads

Naming the threads that resonated across the three narrative accounts was tension filled. I found myself wanting to name every reverberating thread rather than discern what might be important. There were times where I felt lost as I was trying to make sense. As I continued to think with the metaphor of the fabric, I was reminded to think about woven stories. I sat with each participant's narrative account individually and then collectively. As I sat with the stories shared collectively, time and place were a thread that reverberate across the stories.

Turning to Time and Place

It was in this quietness of sitting with the narrative accounts that I became attentive to how *time* and *place* was a meaningful thread that resonated across our experiences. Time and place shaped our identity, particularly as it was closely intertwined with our understanding of home. Canada, a place of choice for each of us held different meanings of home, different meanings of belonging. Within the Canadian context the thread of time and place carried varying degrees of tensions. Yet, as I looked across our experiences in Canada what sustained our experiences were the stories of our birth land, Ghana, Somalia, and The Bahamas. We carried with us a sense of place that connected us to who we are and are becoming.

Narratives of place and time are not fixed in the fabric of our lives. The significance of place and time changed across generations, which shifts who we were as woman in unique ways. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain time and place in relation to narratives in this way: "Time and place become written constructions in the form of plot and scene respectively. Time and place, plot and scene, work together to create the experiential quality of narrative" (p. 2). In other words, time and place shift our identities and the patterns of who we are. Connecting past, present, and future with collective and individual identities created new ways of knowing

ourselves and the contexts in which we live. These new ways of knowing did not replace previous ways of knowing. Instead, all of us found ways that these different knowledge and identities, could live alongside each other. This did not mean tension or gaps did not exist. The tensions and gaps are woven throughout and across the resonating threads. Some of these tensions are embodied and are named as silences in this chapter.

Turning to Silences

Silences are present in all of the stories we tell, yet, these stories are not visible or easily identifiable. hooks (1989) speaks to the historical nature of silencing and silence for black people. She wrote that to be silent or silenced is an act of survival or oppression respectively. As black people we learn and are taught what is safe to say and when and where it is safe to say it. These lessons are woven through our experiences at home, school, and in social settings. These lessons are observable, fragmented and structured, intentional and accidental. Our parents teach them with a sense of hope that their teachings will protect us. Our teachers teach them because it is curricular and institutional. The societies we find ourselves in teach lessons of silence because they are familiar. Silence and silencing is an act of preservation. Barlow (2018) suggested that for black women silence has become a culture. Barlow added that for black women, historically we are taught to be silent about our trauma and hurt or be silenced. Silence is used as an act of keeping black people in the margins; it is an act of exclusion and a denial of belonging.

Turning to Spaces of the Warp

Silent stories are sometimes silenced by choice because they help us shape the stories we want to tell. Other times they are silenced by others. There are stories of silence that are closely linked to stories of failing and feelings of inadequacy. These are experiences and stories that live *between the spaces of the warp* (sustaining threads). In the sections that follow, the narratives of

participants are teased (carded) apart to identify three resonant threads. This work is messy, it presents as fragments of an entire fabric that makes up our lives.

Weaving Identities: Threads Across Time and Place

Weaving is a process that is often carefully done by hand and bears culturally meaningful patterns. The stories people tell are no different. They are carefully selected and placed together in ways that allow people to tell and retell who they are and are becoming. Often, we learn to tell the stories that are 'safe' to tell; we too learn that the context of time and place shapes every experience and story we tell. The context of time and place also intersects with race. It is Butler (2018) who notes that "since Black women experience oppressions along the lines of space, place, race, gender, sexuality, and class; liberation should be imagined along those same lines" (p. 28).

Suzanne, Elizabeth, Hanna, and I all contemplated our identity in relation to place and in relation to being black. Interestingly for the participants and I, the inquiries into our identities were generally prompted by shifts in life experiences, such as a move to Canada. My move to Canada, was the beginning of me puzzling over my identity. It was not only the geographic displacement, but also that I found myself suddenly on my own - fully responsible for my well-being and survival. Hanna, Suzanne, and Elizabeth too found themselves at one point in their move to Canada attentive to their stories to live by. Looking back, I reflected on Connelly & Clandinin (1999) definition that 'stories to live by' are narratives of human lives which are not fixed or singular. They are continually composed and recomposed in multiple ways. Elizabeth's stories to live by were also marked by the tensions of being a single woman living in a new geographic space. Suddenly, she too was no longer living within the familiarity of home with her parents:

I never paid my own rent and stuff before. So, coming here (to Canada), and having the responsibility to do that made me mature and independent. I had to look for the means to work and earn money and pay my rent and my feeding. My brother paid my tuition, but the others was on me. (PQ, January 14, 2020)

Elizabeth's reflection is a story that reframed her situation. Rather than telling a narrative of fear and disparity, Elizabeth reimagined her experience as one that provided her with the opportunity to mature and become independent. Elizabeth too told stories of becoming more attentive to her blackness. I wondered: Did or could Elizabeth name the experiences of 'finding her way', of beginning to tell new stories to live by in her early months in Canada? Lorde (1984) wrote that if black people are going to take back their power, they cannot dismantle the master's house with the same tools used to build it.

In other words, for black people if we want to change the narratives told about us, we have to reframe and rewrite the stories. The way we story ourselves cannot be from a place of oppression and disadvantage. Our stories must be ones of resilience, overcoming, resistance, empowerment, and freedom. Hill-Collins (2017) wrote that when black people look between the intersections of the very things meant or used to oppress us they became awaken to what actual empowers us, which speaks to our experience of resilience and resistance. In Elizabeth's reflection of her experience she did just that; she took back power. Elizabeth without knowing taught me to do the same.

For Suzanne, coming to Canada shifted her identity as she faced tensions of cultural expectations of the socially constructed identity of a married black woman with children in Ghana. Davis et al., (2018) wrote that black women often find themselves dealing with macro

and micro aggressions interlaced in the social, cultural, familial, and institutional expectations of being black and woman simultaneously. Suzanne shared:

> *I have a lot of colleagues who struggled to do a master's degree, their husbands were not for it. The idea is that you have a bachelor's degree, so, as a wife you need to be home, you need to take care of the kids, that is your goal.* (PQ, Jan 20, 2021)

Although Suzanne understood this as the dominant narrative in her culture, Suzanne's family storied the expectations of women differently.

> *In my family, education is something that we hold very high. It is valued. I wanted to pursue a PhD education, and everyone will have to support me because of the value placed on education. Even if it was not a PhD it is about what the individual is doing and that is how important it is for my family.* (PQ, January 20, 2021)

It is Suzanne who helped me see that our familial landscapes are deeply interwoven with our identities, these landscapes shape us across different times and places. The interweaving of place and time with familial landscapes makes carding these threads apart almost impossible. Interestingly the interactions in higher education do not recognise the stories to live by that shape the lives of black women. It is Moodly and Toni (2017), who note that for black women in higher education, considerations of family as well as social, political, and institutional influences are rarely taken into consideration as factors for advancement or the lack thereof.

Understanding Diverse Contexts in Relation to Place and Time

While Suzanne and I chose to come to Canada, this was different for Hanna. Hanna did not choose to leave her home, rather her family was displaced as refugees. As a young child Hanna found herself as a refugee due to war in a place where her native language was not spoken. A place where her immediate family was suddenly all she had. Familial stories of

generational interdependence were important in Hanna's life. Hanna's experiences were very different than mine. For Hanna arriving in Canada changed many things. Hanna's family no longer had the support of a community where everyone was family. This lack of support placed Hanna in a position where she became a primary caregiver to her siblings, as her parents were busy trying to rebuild a home for their family. Almost immediately upon their arrival in Canada, Hanna became a teacher, tutor, and co-caregiver to her younger siblings:

> *I feel like it's just an expectation that is always there. Sometimes it shifts. Now the kids are older they don't need me to help them how to read and write. With the four youngest, all four of them, I taught them how to read and write. Although they went to formal school it is something I did. I spent a lot of time at home doing that when they were younger. I would help with school, I went to parent-teacher interviews when my parents couldn't go. Then it's the cooking and cleaning. I didn't do much cooking except breakfast, but lots of cleaning and lots of babysitting.* (PQ, February 18, 2021)

Hanna never storied these experiences as a burden. For Hanna, they were just necessary adjustments and familial expectations of support. Yet, there was a sense for Hanna that she had to make sacrifices:

> *The extracurricular activities I wanted to join I couldn't do any of that. There was no way. My mom didn't say "you couldn't do it" but I had all these expectations. So, there was no way I could do all these curricular activities and meet the expectations. Then have time to do my homework, breathe, and sleep.* (PQ, February 20, 2021)

Hanna and Suzanne shared with me a deeper understanding of cultural expectations and how these are shaped by place and time, as well as context.

A Classroom

Time and place is significant in how each participant's identity has been shaped and reshaped. The classroom can be understood as a particular place. For black women, it is often a place that shifts our identities. Walkington (2017) explained that for black women in higher education, there are countless interlocking systems of power that help to co-construct our identities. Walkington added that for black graduate female students, depending on the space and time, the inequalities experienced in higher education creates a matrix of oppression and displacement. Hanna, Suzanne, and Elizabeth all at some point in their journey joined the Canadian school system. Hanna, entered the Canadian school system as a young child while Suzanne, Elizabeth and I entered this landscape as adults in graduate school. Each participant at one point or another questioned their sense of belonging and self-worth as a student. For Hanna, it was finding her place in an English-speaking classroom and having to be intentional about learning English on her own. I recall my awe and sadness when Hanna shared:

> *Coming to Canada in grade 6,7, and 8 it was really difficult learning the language [English]. I really did not part take in class or school. I would skip school. I used to go to the library on my own to learn English because I wasn't learning anything in the classroom. Literally, it was the worst two years of schooling experience. They would just make me sit in the classroom and nothing was happening. I would just sit in the end row and I had a buddy who did not speak my native language so how was I supposed to understand them. I got nothing! So, they use to say I have to go to English as second Language [ESL] but there was no ESL class to go and learn English. So, that is how I learned English. On my own! By high school my English got better, especially speaking, reading, and writing.* (PQ, February 27, 2021)

While English was critical for Hanna, the root of her schooling challenges in Canada were not about English. Instead, it was the systematic barriers to her ability to succeed. Williams (2018) maintained that is almost impossible for black children to meet the countless expectation of them in school systems that provide little support for those expectations. For Hanna, being told that she needed ESL classes without providing the means or inquiring into her ability to access these resources forced Hanna to make a choice. Choosing to learn English on her own was the better alternative to sitting in a class where she could not comprehend what was being taught. What is important here is to understand that these choices for black women are beyond schooling experiences and they too come with risk. Choosing to skip school to learn English so she can survive her schooling experiences in Canada posed a risk to her attendance record, scholarly reputation, and held the possibility to call forth stigma and judgement.

While these experiences were highlighted for Hanna in her early years of schooling, for Suzanne, Elizabeth, and I they are more recent. Like Hanna, Suzanne too came to understand the barriers in the Canadian schooling system, barriers that let to being othered. Others made assumptions about Suzanne's scholarly ability based on her accent and the colour of her skin. She recounts:

> *That's the experience around this place. I think that's because of that kind of mindset. Before your paper is even marked, you have already been graded. So, sometimes you immediately entered the class and you have already been graded*. (PQ, March 02, 2020)

Suzanne clearly associated this experience with a particular place. Both Suzanne and Hanna chose to learn and adapt to meet the notions of success set by the institutions and society at large. Elizabeth's experiences of schooling in Canada also resonated with the stories of Hanna and Suzanne. But Elizabeth's stories presented differently. Elizabeth did not name her

experience explicitly related to language, her accent, or home of origin. However, she did name experiences that called her to measure up against other students in the class which produced feelings of not measuring up. Elizabeth shared:

> *Instructors come to class here (in Canada) and make you feel like the 'A' is what we all need to get in order to get scholarships. The grade here in Canada has so much implications. If you get a 'C', you are out the educational system. And you don't want to get a C and waste your money. You get a 'C' here and that 'C' can define your success. You feel like it places this label on you that you are not good enough. That you are not a good student.* (PQ, December 11, 2019)

Elizabeth stories of the 'weight' of the grade is not an experience isolated to her. She came to learn and understand the significance of a grade based on her lived experiences in the Canadian school system. She realized early in her experience the 'power' a letter grade had on shaping a student's immediate and future identity as a scholar. Stories of grading and identity making are not new to scholarly experiences in higher education. Boston and Warren (2017) in their study found that for black students their racial identity strongly correlates with feelings of belonging and academic achievement. But despite this growing evidence educational systems rarely take into account the additional social and institutional barriers such a race and gender. These are important gaps in the fabric of our lives as black female scholars. These gaps are filled with stories. These gaps, or metaphorically, filling threads further impede the success of black women and can have negative impacts on our identities of belonging; they further make us question the metaphorical seat within high education.

At times these filling threads become the dominant stories we tell because it is difficult to separate these from the stories that sustain us. Eventually, when we as black women take a step

back and look at the fabric of our lives, what is most visible are the exclusions and marginalization. They become the dominant stories we know of ourselves and others come to know us by. Halliday (2020) names these threads as the entanglement of black womanhood. Entanglements that are not easily named, entanglements that are denied in their existence and yet are a profound contributor to our tension-filled existence. For Hanna, Suzanne, Elizabeth, and I the differences in speech, word choice, and accents should not be a part of the rubric by which we are assessed, yet, they are. In this way the place of the classroom shapes who we are and are becoming in lasting ways, they pose questions of who we are and where we come from. To think with the stories of Suzanne, Elizabeth, Hanna, and myself means to think about what is shared and what lives silently between the threads of their stories. As such, I turn to stories that lie between the warp.

Spaces Between the Warp: (Re)thinking Silences as Spaces that Create Tensions

When I started this work, I came with an inquiry into the identity-making of black women in Canadian higher education. As a central point, I wondered how experiences of appealing grades shaped people's identities. My interest in grades was informed by my understanding that grades are central to the experience of the triad of schooling (Coles, 2004). Further, due to the subjective nature of the grading process it produces threads of uncertainties and fear for many students (Walstad & Miller, 2016). Although, this work started with wonders about the ways in which grades shape identities, what I came to realize is that stories of failing and appealing grades were not the focus of the experiences participants shared with me. Instead, Elizabeth, Hanna, and Suzanne gently and slowly reoriented my understanding to what matters and what sustains them.

The ability to choose which stories are told and which stories are seen as sustaining is natural and beautiful. It is also protective. This protective element is important to consider according to hooks (1989) when coming to know and understand the stories black people tell of themselves. And yet, while the participants helped me see sustaining stories as critical, I was wakeful to the silences and untold stories that marked their lives. Moran and colleagues (2021) wrote "stories prioritise the voice(s) and perspective(s) chosen of and by storytellers and by extension, every story is laden with silence(s), elements of life and context that remain untold, suppressed and/or, are absent" (p. 1). While Elizabeth, Suzanne, and Hanna chose to tell of sustaining stories, their stories of failing were present in their lives and shaped their identities.

Silences in the Red Ink

As I continued to think with participants stories, I heard reverberations of the 'red ink'. As I looked across the narrative accounts of Elizabeth, Suzanne, and Hanna, I paused and reflected on my own experiences of the 'red ink'. As a young scholar growing up in The Bahamas I knew that in the context of the classroom the 'red ink' was powerful. I recall the countless Sunday evenings sitting at the dining table with my Grammy watching as she completed her lesson plans and graded assignments with red or black pens. She used the black ink pen to draft her lesson plans, but the red ink pen was used to mark assignments. I always was afraid of the 'red ink'.

Hanna, Elizabeth, and Suzanne, each told at least one story of the 'red ink'. At the time, I inquired into their perception and understanding of 'crosses' versus 'check' marks and how the 'red ink' impacted their understanding of power in academic spaces. I wondered about how the 'red ink' seeped into their lives. Listyani (2021) wrote that "red ink […] can result in students' disheartenment and lack of self-confidence" (p. 22). The ability to shift a sense of success versus

failure is powerful. And while institutions of learning give choice, a teacher's choice to use red as a marking color tells stories of who a teacher is and how they want to be storied. Stories of power and authority lie silently with each stroke of the red ink pen. Regardless of the grade or comments made, the 'red ink' sends a clear message to students of who gets to assess and name this work as worthy of the grade it receives. hooks (1989) wrote that when black women are graded in higher education they fully understand the power situated in the grading process. When black women can come to a place where they find courage to appeal a grade, it means they resist the power of the teacher to mark them in unjust ways. This resistance is also in parts a resistance of humiliation and degradation. During one of my earlier conversation, Hanna shared a story of the 'red ink':

> *If you were to see this paper, there was red marking all over it. That was the worst experience when it came to grades. And it was the first time I was challenging a grade and never got to the point of challenging because I felt so defeated. I did not understand what was happening. I did not see the mistakes. It did not warrant this professor saying I should be getting all this support and commenting unnecessarily.* (PQ, April 2, 2020)

I recall Hanna's dismay when this professor advised her that she should seek help from the writing support centre on campus to improve upon her English. Listyani (2021) in an appeal to teachers asked them to be mindful, for while students value grades, they also value comments and words. In fact, Listyani suggest that comments can have a greater impact on a student's identity than the letter grade itself. I am reminded of Hanna's earlier experiences in the Canadian classroom. Experiences of being told to seek help from ESL classes. I wonder about the tensions this experience caused for her. I reflected for some time on Hanna's personal journey of learning English on her own. Hanna had come to a place where over time, she was able to celebrate her

growth and success in being a 'good' speaker, writer, and reader of the English language. And then, one experience in the Canadian higher education system with a red ink pen sought to threaten her identity; threatened who she had storied herself to be; threatened her sense of success. Hanna continued this story by making visible how this experience created tensions in her identity-making:

> *I did not feel the need to push the issue of this or any other grade any further. I wanted to, but where do you go to push further? It was like, how much more can I challenge this? And it was the beginning of my PhD and so I thought maybe he was right. Writing has always been my one strength in my academic life, or so I thought. It just gave me very low morale. But it was worth 5%, so I thought, even if I got an F, it would not make a big deal in my final grade. But also, I was very confused and questioning myself and my abilities*. (PQ, April 2, 2020)

It became visible that Hanna did not know where to turn for help within the educational systems to appeal or challenge her grades. She did not know the places and spaces where she could challenge the power held by teachers and the system itself. I also heard stories of finding ways to survive and protect by minimizing one experience with the hope to succeed in the experiences that really matter. Educational systems have conditioned us to believe that in the end, only the final grade really matters. In this dominant narrative, what is silenced is the struggle to get to the end; as well as the cumulative effect of every grading experience on the identity stories of students. Could one so easily forget all of the 'red ink'?

As I inquired into stories of appealing grades, there was a notable uneasiness of talking about grades for Suzanne, Elizabeth, and Hanna. As the uneasiness increased, participants seemed to escape the uneasiness of recounting these experiences by retelling what sustains them.

Sustaining stories seemed easier to tell and I wonder if they felt that they were also safer to tell. I am mindful of the word 'safe' when I refer to the stories we tell of ourselves because our stories always carry a sense of vulnerability with them. They are vulnerable to misinterpretation, as well as misunderstandings.

Suzanne shared in her reflection of 'red ink', *if you have a mother who is a trained teacher you should know what to expect when you see those red crosses in your papers* (PQ, December 12, 2019). Her statement resonated with me, as I traveled backwards to the dining table where I watched my Grammy mark assignments with a red ink pen. In Suzanne's stories, between the sustaining thread of family, love, and support, are silences of the expectations placed on black girls. Elizabeth in her reflection of the 'red ink' shared:

> *The cross represented danger to success. At that time red is only used by the teacher in marking and giving feedback. It was always given by teachers. It was a life and death thing. It was the same red that makes you to know if you are doing well. And it was the same red that makes me know that you have to see the teacher.* (PQ, December 11, 2019)

Hanna, Suzanne, and Elizabeth's experiences mirrored my experience. While we may have storied them slightly different, the fabric of our lives is woven with fear, hope, definitions of success and failure, and expectations. The thread of getting 'good' grades is an expectation placed on us by our parents not with the intent to harm us, but to allow us to gain a sense of freedom as black girls and as black women. Many times, we did not talk about this and it is Winkle-Wagner (2019) who calls these silences the "in-between-space" (p. 423). These in-between spaces, are the spaces where black women negotiate the tensions of not meeting the expectations of home (parents), and instead affirming the societal and institutional expectations to fail. hooks (1994) explained that:

> The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (p. 207)

hooks words pierced my soul because her words that tell us, that education is freedom, bump with the reality of our daily lives. The reality that our race and gender creates additional hurdles in gaining an education. But there is hope. hooks reminded us of our power in numbers and the need to have a collective voice that makes visible the silences of our presence and our worth within higher education. This work depends on our collective voices and knowledge.

Shifting Patterns: Contextualizing Collective and Individual Identities in the Making

Our life stories are not just about and for us, instead "[l]ife stories are significant to identity formation" (Albright, 2020, p. 7) and significant across generations. Young and colleagues (2012) wrote that stories are a gift from those who go before us and a gift to those who come after us. They add that it is through intergenerational stories that "we can connect with our ancestors" across time and place which shapes who we are (p. 59). When generational knowledge and ways of identity formation are disrupted, the fabrics of our lives are fragmented. This in turn creates gaps and tensions. The collectiveness of who we are and where we come from, when passed across generations, shifts the way we understand ourselves and how we are understood by others. This was certainly true for me when I came to a place of questioning my identity as a black woman. I recall that afternoon on campus when a black professor asked me "which one of your parents are white?" This question planted seeds of questioning my belonging

to the black race. I never considered that other black people did not accept me as being 'authentically black'.

This seed of questioning made me look differently at my intergenerational stories. My Grammy, a knowledge keeper always reminded me that I am a descendant of a slave. My great, great, great grandfather was the offspring of his mother who was raped by her slave owner. While I could dwell on this hateful and disgusting act, I chose to take back my power. I saw the resilience and strength of my great, great, great, great grandmother in living through this experience. Rather than the story of power over us, of the possibility to rape us without repercussions, this knowledge shifted the pattern in the fabric of my life in a different way. Instead, I choose to tell the story that I am part of generations of women who have overcome injustices, who have taken back the power. My family's life stories are bold, beautiful, and strong. These threads are not unique to my family's life stories and I can see that they resonate across the familial life stories of Elizabeth, Suzanne, and Hanna.

Butler (2018) called me to think about what it means to think about generational stories for black children. Butler wrote, conceptions of Blackness are tied to reclaiming a sense of belonging, weaving one's self into genealogies of resilience and conjuring new imaginings of existing. In thinking with Elizabeth, Suzanne, and Hanna's experiences I can see how important it is that black children see themselves as belonging to educational spaces and see their identities as more than just being black. Winkle-Wagner et al., (2019) called for an eradication of the one-dimensional lens by which black students particularly black female student's identities are seen. Davis et al. (2018) explained that as generations of black families and women begin to recognize and resist racially gendered identities, they begin to self-define who they are and are becoming.

Hanna's generational stories of education and schooling continues to bring joy to my heart. She helps me rethink what it means to be educated. Hanna shared:

> *I come from a very oral tradition and oral Society, where people don't do formal education a lot. So, our Leaders and Elders, a lot of them are and can be illiterate. But then they are still seen as wise and educated because they have their lived experiences which are valued. And just because they cannot read or write does not mean that they're uneducated. They have a lot of knowledge which is passed down orally. A lot of teachings which is done orally as well at both formally and informally. So, yeah, schooling institution is not necessarily the only place where you can get an education.* (PQ, February 27, 2020)

Hanna's narratives of valuing collective knowledge and her differentiation between education and schooling was important. The collective ways of sharing experience and valuing experiences as a source of knowledge gave space to learn from the wisdom passed from generation to generation. Generational stories are critical in seeing patterns of identities for black women. As generational life stories are shared amongst us, I am attentive to how black women continue to resist and balance who they are on and off higher education landscapes.

Conclusion

Looking across the narrative accounts of Suzanne, Hanna, and Elizabeth was important to me and call forth a sense of privilege. I am privileged to be in the midst of these women lives and to see the silences, hopes, growth, strength, and power they hold. I heard echoes of boundaries but also breaking glass ceilings. Reverberations of generations of black women who dare to see, be, and think differently so their daughters and our daughters can have stories of overcoming to tell and live out. I write this paragraph with tears rolling down my face knowing

that these very words will shift the identities of my daughters and daughters around the world. This work is bigger than me and the participants. It is a landscape of new possibilities for black girls.

Chapter 8

A Reflective Turn

Reflections of the 'Outsider within"

An encounter and reminder of being an 'outsider within':

Unwelcomed thread: "Well, I don't consider you black. I would consider you brown."

My response: "Do you recognize that being black is more than a skin complexion?"

Unwelcomed thread: Silence.

My response: Tears, disappointment, and sleeplessness.

As I entered my office at the long-term care facility where I work as a Registered Nurse on the first day in April 2021, I sensed my hesitation. This hesitation was heightened by a growing feeling of being (mis)placed. There were few options of work – in the midst of my graduate degree, in the midst of a pandemic - working this job was about my family. Due to the pandemic, several of my family members were struggling financially. Yet, it was not just about getting paid, I showed up to work daily because I felt that I had to prove my worth. This sense of having to prove myself was a constant and exhausting aspect of my life.

Sitting in one of my morning meetings, I noticed that something was different. There were tensions. I could not name them, but they were familiar. As I sat and listened to the advice I was given on how to complete a report, the conversation quickly shifted. I heard someone say to me: "I need to talk to you about something." I was familiar with these words; they were words that often precede criticism. While I had learned to welcome constructive criticism, I also learned through my experiences in graduate school and elsewhere in Canada that much of the criticism I receive is not constructive. Instead, the words were reminders that who I am does not fit into the narrative of who others expect me to be. Each time these words disrupted my sense of coherence,

they challenged my identity and they often resulted in seeing myself from a place of confusion and temporal disorder (Carr, 1986).

As I sat in silence, I found myself pulling inward. Pulling inward and becoming quiet, was a way to ensure that I would be OK, that this too would pass. Yet, my silence was disrupted – it was disrupted by my body. Tears started to roll down my face and my mind returned to the words that had been told to me earlier that day: "Some people think you are intimidating and belittling." This was part of the same conversation in which the colour of my skin had been noticed, while simultaneously been erased: "I don't consider you black." It went further, and next was a focus on my education "One person said it's because you are so educated they feel intimidated, but in general they did not say what it was." In that moment my tears stopped, and I could feel an anger welling up inside my body.

Hill-Collins (1999) argues that the there are multiple intersections, that race and gender are part of our being and our knowing. Knowing and knowledge cannot be separated, and they shape our lived experience. Suddenly, it felt as if I was living the realities of my research study once more. I wondered how in my life I had been called to act. Were the silence and tears part of my action? How am I implicated in building communities of resistance?

As I sat in 'my'[46] office I once again felt the weight of the colour of my skin. I was reminded that for me as a black educated woman, there are no qualifications I could meet to become an insider in some communities. In that moment, I asked, "Do you think if I was not black that my education would be considered as threatening and intimidating?" I paused and then returned to that geographical space on campus when a black man questioned my right to claim

[46] I am careful here to stay wakeful of possessive words that might give me the illusion that I owned that space. The illusion that that space was permanently mine rather than only temporary.

blackness as an identity. These experiences made me wonder, am I really not 'black enough' to be black and not 'white enough' to be black.

I quickly dismissed this thought, but tears continued to stream down my face. The pain lived within my body. My work place[47] superior had assigned[48] power over me by the nature of her position. Hill-Collins (1999) elaborated on her understanding of the term 'outsider within'. She described that it was a term for:

> Individuals like myself who found ourselves caught between groups of unequal power. Whether the differences in power stemmed from hierarchies of race, or class, or gender, or, in my case, the interaction among the three, the social location of being on the edge mattered. (p. 85)

I found myself at the interactions of race and gender; it created a space 'in-between' where the power at play was harmful. I understand power in relation to ethnicity, race, socioeconomic standing, words, and actions. As such, by harmful power I am referring to power that /produces experiences of vulnerability, silencing, hate, oppression, and segregation. As night came, I wondered how human beings take up their power to shape and reshape another persons' identity unknowingly and sometimes knowingly. I have learned to reclaim my power to tell and live out the narrative I choose to live by. Narratives that tell that I am not intimidating. I don't have nor should have to undermine or minimize my education and worth as a black woman in a white space to make other people feel more comfortable.

[47] I want to place emphasis on work place superior because historically black people are considered to see and accept whites as superior to them in all places and spaces. So, I want to make it clear that while we have been socialized to see and accept this, I reject and resist this premise.

[48] Here I use the word assigned to highlight that power can be assigned and reassigned. Titles such as 'boss' are systematic ways of assigning power and oppression.

This experience happened as I was getting ready to write the final pages of this dissertation. It allowed me to return to my narrative beginnings and re/consider my personal justification(s) for this work. It reminded me of the 'so what' of this work. I returned to my earlier justification, puzzling why it matters to inquire into the experiences of black women. In sum, it matters because we matter! Landscapes are critical in locating one's self in the context of one's lives. For me, contexts, places, and time, continue to shape the 'stories I live by' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Thinking with my most recent experience of being 'othered' at work helped me to return to my experiences in the Canadian higher education system where I often felt like an 'outsider within'.

Shifts in being the Outsider Within

The 'stories we live by' shift in sometimes subtle ways. At the start of this work it was challenging for me to name my tensions related to identity-making in and out of school. I found it hard to pull on threads of experiences that I embodied and silenced because of their harm and difficulty in telling. I often told cover stories of uneasy experiences of failing and relationships. Slowly over time, I recognised that I came to this work with a desire to understand my experiences of disempowerment which in turn led to wonders about the experiences of other black women and the "comparable collective" experiences in similar contexts, places, and across time (Hill-Collins, 1999, p. 85).

What sustained my personal justification for this work is knowing my life matters. And that my experiences as a black woman in the Canadian higher education are not isolated. I reflect on these experiences and the tensions they created. Being attentive to the tensions, silences, and gaps of the women I lived alongside mattered. These tensions gave space for me to pause and think *with* our experiences in the four directional ways of forward, backward, inward, and

outward (Huber et al., 2006). The pause and reflection in these four directions shifted my affinity to stories of not belonging. It opened up questions that I posed to myself, questions such as: "Do you recognize that being black is more than a skin complexion?"

As I posed this question to myself, I wondered how the participants of this study would respond. Does Hanna see her stories of growing up in a community-based understanding of family as a thread of what it means to be black for her? Does Suzanne see the generational stories of educational perseverance and success as stories of what it means to be black for her? Does Elizabeth see her stories of overcoming harmful power in schools as a thread of defining what it means to be black for her?

Social justification(s)

This work only begins to scratch the surface of addressing the social injustices seen and unseen towards black women. From a theoretical lens this work forefronts experiences of black women underpinned by the ideas of pragmatist theorists such as Dewey (1935) and black feminist theorist such as hooks (1987), Hill-Collins (1999), and Lorde (1980). I looked at these experiences individually and at the intersections of race, gender, region, faith, creed, ethnicity, familial, and individual experiences.

At times I was deterred from seeing the hope of this work because of continued experiences of injustices. But, I also persevered knowing that I don't get to quit the fight because it was difficult and painfully relentless. If it helps one person to see that blackness is an identity that is not limited to skin complexion or hair texture, then this work matter. Ruffin's (2020) words served as a constant reminder that while black for many is just a color of skin, for black people it is an experience. I pushed through my tears and feelings because of the hope that this work would create a space for other black women to know that their experiences are valid, and

that they matter. With that being said, while this work is about black women, it is not just for black women. It is a work of labour and love written from a space that desires to lovingly welcome anyone who wants travel into my world and the world of the participants. It is a work that seeks to help black and non-black people alike understand what it means to hear 'Black Lives Matter'.

It was often difficult to inquire into each participant stories. I remember sitting with the participants as they storied experiences of disempowerment as black women in schools and at home. I remember sitting with Suzanne as she told stories of earlier educational disparities for women in her family and society. I wondered how the experiences of pulling on these particular threads created wonders for herself. While the social justification of this work is far reaching, it is also near. For each participant, having a platform that allowed them to inquire into their experiences as black women intentionally has empowered them to tell their stories and for their stories to be heard. In my earlier conversation with Elizabeth, she made very clear that her justification for coming to this work was a hope for change and a place to safely tell of her experiences.

While justice is imperative, safe justice is more important. By safe justice, I mean there should be no fear of backlash or consequences for seeking justice. Black people, particularly women are in most cases willing to tell their stories in the pursuit of justice. However, there is often a hesitation as our stories when told on social platforms are at risk of being dismantled and turned against us. For black people, when we think about fighting for justice there is meaning and purpose. Often this fight is selfless but also for self. We fight to fix the now and preserve the future.

Most recently, the world returned to the television screens, social media platforms and street longing for justice. The murder of George Floyd was particularly hard because we all saw ourselves under the knee of the policeman. It was hard because again it took a heinous crime for the world to acknowledge and join the fight for justice for the lives of black people. It should not be the case that black people have to hold their breaths and pray for our social structures to give us justice for the wrongs against us. Yet, we did. We all held our breath until a guilty verdict was announced. But this is not justice, this was accountability. There could never be justice for taking a life, worst, a defenceless life at the mercy of someone's knee and conscience. So, when I think about the social justification of this work for black women in higher education, that justification comes with the need for accountability. The need to hold our policies and the enactors of the same accountable for intentional and unintentional consequences they hold for black women in higher education.

I remember when Suzanne was faced with the choice to not tell the story of why she was missing a portion of her first assignment for her first class in graduate school in Canada. The truth is there was merit to her story. But when Suzanne considered the potential mis-representation of the story by her professor, Suzanne chose silence. For Suzanne, wanting and needing to tell her story was more about her reputation as a black female student than the grade. Yet, the fear of her story being seen as an excuse or lie, silenced her truth. It is here that I call on readers to consider the racial and gendered threads that force many black women to silence their stories.

Suzanne made a choice to not allow others to story her as 'excuse making'. This choice came with a cost. Suzanne had to accept a failing grade. Suzanne accepted in that moment, the powerlessness of her voice and story. She also made a personal choice to work twice as hard to

prove she was worthy to sit in this classroom. Suzanne's story resonates across each participants' story in the study. Stories that present choices between truth and silence. Stories where silence wins to protect and preserve. Stories that we often choose as a cover to belong and be accepted though be it with resistance.

I concede that even as I come to the end of this dissertation, I still find myself longing to tell cover stories of belonging and being accepted. But what has changed is my willingness to accept cover stories and tell them as easily as I once did. I resist the powerlessness that comes with wanting to fit in so desperately as I did in my early experiences in the Canadian classroom. My desire to not make visible my differences has faded, even so, it has not disappeared. I wonder if with time this desire to silence my differences will disappear. I am wakeful to Connelly and Clandinin (1999) call to remember that identities are "composed, sustained, and changed" (p. 4).

While my identity as a black female scholar has shifted in good ways because of this work, there are times when I just don't know the way forward. The forward movement can be exhausting when you are in pursuit of so much. Yet, you feel the weight of all that is behind you pulling on your every movement. But when I return to Lugones' (1987) work of *loving perceptions I* often find help in how to forward. Lugones helped me to see that it is love that pushes our work further. Without love, we will fail in complex ways "to identify with another woman … [and will fail] to see oneself in other women who are different from oneself" (1987, p. 6).

The movement of Black Lives Matter is not a movement of injustice. It is a movement towards accountable and eventually justice. A movement where love and world travelling are central. It is no longer acceptable to say, "I don't see colour, I just see people." Without seeing colour, we are unable to see people and their experiences. That statement becomes a willful

choice to ignore that the colour of our skins shapes our experiences as people. This statement reminds black people that when we enter spaces of work and school, they do not see us. They are spaces shaped by legacies of policies and practices that emerge through the lens of gender, race, class, and politics that push many of us into the margins.

Hanna, Suzanne, and Elizabeth all told stories that made me reflect on visibility and/or invisibility. Alongside participants, we storied walking into countless classrooms throughout our lives looking for a reflection of ourselves. Elizabeth said that only once in her early schooling experience did she have a female educator and never her experience in the Canadian higher education did she have a black teacher. Experiences like these shape black women's socialized understanding of belonging. When I consider the past 6 years as a Canadian higher education scholar, I have no stories being personally taught by a black professor. Sitting with that 'Truth' I began to understand better why I at times struggle in imaginative ways to see myself as capable of gaining a seat at the table of Canadian professors.

So, an intentional approach to social justice is making the experience of being taught and supervised by a black professor normalized. There is no excuse for my peers and the participants of this study to experience what we call 'the fight for a black supervisor'. This fight further perpetuates tensions between black scholars as they are all fighting to be supervised by the few black professors on campus. On the flip side, it creates 'burnout' realities for black professors as their time, talent, and expertise is in desperate demand.

Social justice is seen when I as a black female scholar won't have to pray to be tokenized just to have a seat at the table. Social justice will be actualized when there are is more than one pre-accounted seat at the table for black women. Justice in higher education will be actualized when black women like Hanna, Suzanne, Elizabeth, and myself won't have to give ourselves pep

talks that tell us ‘work twice as hard to be seen as half as good’. When our work ethics and hard work are seen.

Being in the margins as hooks (2000) describes, means being in a socially constructed space. A space that for black people means to always prove their worth and earn their keep in spaces such as higher education. hooks further explains that this marginalized space is filled with tensions that black people often find difficult to face. As such, the choice is often made to “ignore, dismiss, reject, and even hurt one another rather than engage in constructive confrontation” (p. 1). The intent of this work is to engage in a constructive confrontation of injustices for black people in higher education with a focus on women.

We as black women realize that we have access to opportunities we did not have before. I hear this as Suzanne tells stories of her gratitude to her grandmother for creating an opportunity for her mother to be educated in a time when education for women was not a priority. This single opportunity potentially shifted countless of generational stories for the women in Suzanne’s family. Likewise, I too recognize and story gratitude for the opportunity I now have as a black woman. But, I want to be clear that these opportunities were not just given to us. They were earned and fought for over centuries. Many black women lost their lives and the lives of those they loved for black women like us to take back our power.

As black women we continue to take back our power every time we show up on a campus, finish a degree, publish our scholarly work, and stand firm that ‘we got the power’. I remember Elizabeth’s narratives which compelled me to write the poem ‘I’ve got the power’. A poem that plays on the struggle between empowerment and powerlessness. Yet, in the end many black women in scholarly spaces like Elizabeth can story that indeed they do ‘have the power’. The power to keep writing, reading, and demanding justice and accountability. Now, like never

before, we have access to spaces where we can demand to tell our stories and to be heard. We also have access to loving invitations to teach and live alongside those who otherwise were not willing to learn before. Yet, there are so few of us, and those of us who have access feel the burden to represent the voices of many.

Practical Justification(s)

"So, what?!" The practical justification of this work is a movement towards change. Black communities on and off campus have a long legacy in fighting for justice. This work as a movement toward change matters to me and the participants of this study because it provided a safe platform for our experiences to be seen, read, heard, and hopefully accepted as valid sources of knowledge. While there are currently many researchers inquiring into the experiences of black women in education, much of that research inquiries into the experiences of black women who are already higher education educators. This work takes an intentional turn towards inquiring and understanding the experiences of black female students, an area in black feminist research that is lacking.

The presence of black women on campuses of higher education is not new. Yet, after centuries of our presence, this work still reverberates experiences of inequity, lack of diversity, and the illusion of inclusion [reversed EDI]. Admittedly, communities of higher education have made undoubtable positive strides in creating policies and written practices that address equity, inclusion, and diversity [EDI] for marginalized communities in higher education. But the challenge is not in the intention of these policies and written directives of practices. The challenge is in actualization and accountability. While higher education institutions have designed wonderful webpages and documents that tell narratives of EDI, what is actualized tells a difference story.

Suzanne, Hanna, Elizabeth, and myself are/were all students at the University of Alberta [U of A]. Collectively we recalled the start of the first Black Graduate Students' Association [B.G.S.A.] at the U of A in 2018. As a founding member and executive, I recalled the countless struggles we faced as a community to be registered, get funding, and support from the institution and peers. Three years later, after a relentless fight for justice, in 2021 was the first year that the University of Alberta officially recognized black history month [BSM]. While we as a collective black community were grateful, we still wait in the balance for initiatives to be actualized to support the events and history of BSM.

To date, the university's EDI page has a statement from the president posted and a note of upcoming events to follow. My point here is not to minimize the effort and progress we as a higher education community have made. The hope is to highlight that while policies and promises are great, without actualization our words mean nothing. So practically, a step towards justice is revisiting our policies and promises in higher education and evaluating what has been actualized; it is about accountability not just to those who are in power, but to those whose ordinary and daily life is impacted. A root analysis of the delays in seeing progress for the black learning community is needed to eliminate the margins we as black women live and learn in.

From my personal experience in working and studying in higher education, a cost analysis is often done to determine the 'worthwhile' of initiatives of EDI. Unfortunately, in the end, institutions often decide that policies are good but the financial cost of actualizing them are not as important as competitive administration pay outs. Practically making the choice of one being more important or impactful than another, sends clear messages to black women in higher education. Our lives and presences become bargaining chips with a value not to be exceeded.

Obasi (2020) wrote that we know what institution value because that is what they are willing to pay for.

Research has shown that historically black women in higher education are paid less than other professors men and women alike who are not black or of minority (Porter et al., 2020). This study shifts its focus towards black female students to address this gap in research and to give voice to this population of black women in higher education. But, I bring this practical justification to the forefront because most black female students pursue graduate degrees to advance their career. Career advancements for many of us are focused towards careers in higher education or advanced administrative positions in our respective fields. When institutions of higher education do not make visible the alignment of polices, practices, and wages for black women we remain in the margins despite 'good effort'.

As I looked across the shared higher education experiences of participants and myself, I compared them to the documented experiences of black feminist such as hooks' (1989). There are resonances across our stories. Including the resonance of not belonging or feeling disempowered to challenge grades or processes that story us as otherwise. hooks (1989) wrote that her experiences in education were a reminder of power and the need to feel privilege just to be there. As such, this sense of 'just be lucky you are here' led to oppression and wonders. I wondered often if my work can shift this sense of luck. I hope this work would call higher education institutions to re-examine policies and systems that intentionally create barriers for black women.

One of those noted barriers is the appeal process and the right to appeal. For many black women, including those in this study the process of appeal was foreign and intimidating. While just understanding our rights was obscured, it was even more challenging to read the language

and steps of getting an appeal started. There needs to be greater consideration of supporting and protecting black students who appeal grades. The fear of retaliation often served an additional barrier to seeking academic answers and justice for black women.

I remember sitting with Hanna and the visible frustration she had in recounting the experience of being limited by the unknown policies and procedures for appealing a grade. Not knowing where to start or end while all the while feeling like the fight was not worth it made evident systemic barriers to fighting for justice in educational spaces. I wonder had this process been normalized for Hanna in her experiences in higher education if she would have felt empowered to challenge or question the failing grade, she had received on a paper covered in red ink. Often the barriers to social justice are seen when rights are not known and the procedure for challenging systems are obscured. Silence is often chosen between these spaces of knowing your rights but not knowing how to fight back or fear the consequences of that fight.

While the appeal process is a notable barrier, there also needs to be a systemic change and review towards the process of grading and the meaning of grades for black students. All the participants in this study excelled in their academics. Yet, these achievements came with fear of failing and equating grades with their identity and self-worth. To succeed is more than a letter grade. Yet, that letter grade became the measure by which black students are evaluated as eligible for scholarships, successive degrees as well as acceptance to social, institution, and political circles. Grades carry with them a stigma and prestige for all students but particularly for black women in and out of school. There is a need to recognise that social, familial, institutional, political, and personal experiences shape identities and ways of being known.

For Elizabeth, the weight of the grade was notably present throughout her academic career. Yet, her journey through higher education in Canada made the weight of the grade at

times unbearable to carry. I remember sitting with Elizabeth as she explained how she never before considered how one failing grade could potentially jeopardize her access to further education and funding. As such, a systemic analysis is needed to consider the short and long-term influence grades can have on students', particularly, black female students. Studies show that when black female students enter institution of higher education they do so with a lot of expectations from others and themselves to success in all areas particular grades (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). Johnson-Bailey added that the measure of this success is personal but often guided by institutional measurements of success such as grades. As such, black female scholars learn that although it only takes a 'C' to pass the course, it takes an 'A' to succeed beyond that course.

I remember Hanna's experience of appealing her first grade in the Canadian higher education system. Hanna reminded me that although she asked questions she had already knew that the system would not be favorable towards her for a grade change. Therefore, Hanna choose to look forward and after the calculation of what she needed to achieve on every other assignment, decided appealing further was not worth the fight. Hanna had been conditioned to understand the influence of the final grade. Hanna knew every grade mattered towards the final grade. She also knew with the assignments left she had to excel to meet the expectations of 'success'.

As an evolving wonder about grades and the impact they have on identity making, I wondered how Hanna, Suzanne, and Elizabeth would define a 'good student'. For me, looking back across their narratives I see and hear reverberations of what they thought it meant to be a 'good' student. For Elizabeth, I recalled stories of enduring 'abuse' and mis-treatment while working hard to be at the top of her class. For Hanna, I remembered stories of survival. Hanna made difficult choices of leaving school to learn English on her own in the public library. She

also saw being a ‘good’ student as being a ‘good’ teacher. Hanna taught all of her younger siblings to read and write. Suzanne’s unspoken definition of a ‘good’ student was defined by sacrifice and determination. Suzanne’s generational stories of women sacrificing time with family to gain an education and career were not just lessons for herself of what a ‘good’ student looks like but generations to come.

Reflecting on the work of hooks (1989, 1992;1994a, 1994b;1998; 2000; 2003) I see across her writing a resistance to the ideology of a ‘good’ student. hooks made countless arguments that support the notion that what it means to be a ‘good’ student is a social and institutional construct. hooks maintained that grades are a precursor for others to measure the ‘goodness’ or worth of a black student. For black students, particularly women, resistance and the empowerment to speak up against injustice are more lasting measure of success as a student. hooks in many scholarly writings speaks about the harm being voiceless cause for black women in institutions of higher education.

Yet, hooks (2000; 2003) simultaneously provides support to change. One of the practical changes hooks and I suggest for black women in higher education is awareness. While I write to provide the practical justification of this work towards institutions of higher education, I also write to speak to my fellow black women. As hooks suggest it is time for black women to become attentive to our marginalized states. It is almost impossible to fight back when we don’t see or understand the fight we are in. The acceptance of oppression and injustice as normal creates room for complacency. Hill-Collins (2000) wrote that for so long black women lean on the notion of ‘strong black women’ as a mechanism of endurance and survival in places such as higher education, we will sit back and accept oppression because we are ‘strong’. But Hill-Collins (2000) and hooks (1989) both contend that this mechanism of survival for black women

has kept silences in spaces such as higher education where we should be speaking. Davis and Jones (2021) wrote that "strength is oppressive by design, but it is more complex than how scholars currently understand it" (p. 1).

Institution of higher education are called to be mindful to check (correct and stop) the rhetoric they hear when black women do speak up. Because for years as hooks (1989) wrote when black women in higher education speak up in writing or voice their identities, they are storied as sharp-tongued or aggressive. But hooks in her work invites black women to see the purpose in the pain of the rhetoric and keep fighting. Yes, after decades of fighting and protesting black women still find themselves in the same fight with different people. But, hooks called us to not discount the fight of others before us. Without our continued efforts to demand justice, black women decades from now will lose their seats in the classroom others have fought hard for.

Conclusion

One of the most profound parts of experience is the ability to be shaped into stories. Narrative inquiry as a relational methodology gave space for the experiences between participants and myself to be formed into story, but more importantly it allowed us to form a relationship of knowing and being known. As we willfully and lovingly traveled into each other's worlds across time, place, and space through storytelling, we grew together as participant and researcher. Together, we sat and considered the implications of the colour of our skins as black women in and out of school. We reflected on the purpose of our studies. We lived hopeful for change in a world where being black continues to be a life-threatening condition. We storied and re-storied our experiences with tears in our eyes and often frustration in our hearts. As black women, we collective took back our power and proclaimed, 'we've got the power'.

We also counted the cost of our sacrifices. The cost of leaving our birth land by force or choice. The cost of choosing education over our inherent responsibility to care for others. The cost of being seen as only black in a space design for the advancement of white. Our voices collectively gave us the power to agree to a research that others might not see the purpose in while hoping that some sees us and our lives. As we live in a world that tells us that we have to make visible and justify why our lives matter as black people, we do this work in hope that our humanity is enough. Our humanity has to be enough for us to walk into classrooms and hallways and see black women as our educators and supervisors. Our humanity as black women has to be enough to not have to choose reputation over rights. Being black is more than the colour you see, and it is a story. Being black is more than a race. A black woman is more than just black and woman. She is the complexity of resilience, strength, hope, sacrifice, family, faith, culture, heritage, and experiences told in beautiful stories. We are not limited to the constructed identity of yesterday. Our identities are dynamic and evolving. Our identities are always in the making. My experiences of living and learning alongside Hanna, Suzanne, and Elizabeth are sustaining threads. These women taught me the power of the collective voice. They showed me that each of us has the power to choose the stories we tell about ourselves. They taught me that black is an identity to be valued by all and defined by self. Like, them my Grammy continues to teach me lessons of life, love, value, and identity. I conclude this chapter with a letter to you Grammy.

Figure 11.

Thank you and I Love you: A letter to Grammy

Dear Grammy,

This work has not been easy, but it has been worth it. I started this work as a labour of a degree and it quickly became of a labour of love. I have learned to see in myself what you saw all along; my beauty, strength, wisdom, and resilience. I thank you for keeping and sharing generational stories that helped me to shift my identity and take back my power. I want you to know that the participants of this story also helped me to do the same. It is difficult to write this letter because I never want to carry the thought of a final letter to you. So, I write this letter as a continuation of our life and love together. I am so grateful that I get to share this work and my living with you. As I sit in our robe, I long for the moment we will embrace again. I love you, Grammy.

Forever yours, Chera!

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Letter and Participation Consent Form

Information Letter

Study Title:

A Narrative Inquiry into the Identity Making of Black Women in Canadian Higher Education.

Research Investigator:	**Supervisors:**	
Kenchera Ingraham	Dr. Randolph (Randy) Wimmer	Dr. Vera Caine
5-021 11405– 87 , Edmonton Clinic Health Academy Edmonton, AB, T6G 1C9	7-157 Education North 11210 - 87 Ave. University of Alberta Edmonton, Alberta Canada T6G 2G5	5-021A 11405– 87 Avenue, Edmonton Clinic Health Academy, Edmonton, AB, T6G 1C9
University of Alberta	University of Alberta	University of Alberta
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Background

You are being asked to participate in a research study entitled *A Narrative Inquiry into the Identity Making of Black Women in Canadian Higher Education*. This study is conducted by Kenchera Ingraham and supervised by Dr. Randolph (Randy) Wimmer and Dr. Vera Caine from the Faculty of Education (Educational Policy Studies) and the Faculty Nursing respectively at the University of Alberta. The results of this study will be used in support of my doctoral research.

Purpose

In this study, I am exploring the experiences of black women in Canadian higher education as students who have appealed grades. I am also interested in how stories can influence educational, social, and institutional practices, attitudes and policies in order to influence change while giving a voice for black female students in Canadian higher education.

Study Procedures

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to have audio-recorded conversations with me over a 4 to 5 month time period. Each conversation is estimated to take less than two hours. We will meet in public places, such as restaurants and cafés, or in places that work best for you. I hope to meet you once every two weeks for a total of six to ten conversations. The conditions for a meeting are and will be negotiated between us.

As a participant, you are welcome to talk freely about your past and current life experiences. All the conversations will be audio-recorded and transcribed. I will invite you to take photos of the important places or people in your life, or to bring an item which has a special meaning for you to our conversations. These photos and items will help me better understand your experiences. All the photos and items shared will be returned to you.

You are eligible to participate in the study if you agree to be represented as: 1. Currently living in Edmonton Alberta and who is or has been enrolled in the University of Alberta. 2. Self-identify as black and female. 3. Acknowledge you have formal grade appeal at the University of Alberta while in graduate studies. 4. Speaks and understands English. 5. Plan to live in Edmonton for the next four to six months.

Benefits

You will be given an opportunity to tell your life stories within a safe, long-term relationship with the researcher. By telling your stories, you may become more aware of your life history, identity, belief/value, and strength. You may also obtain clearer understanding of how your life experiences are shaped by various familial, cultural, social, and political backgrounds. Also, I hope that your life stories will help us better understand the experience of being a black women student in a Canadian higher education.

Payment or Remuneration.

During each conversation, I will pay for or bring you a meal and a beverage.

Cost of Participation

It is not anticipated that this study will cost participants any substantial financial cost except potentially the cost of transportation to and from agreed conversations.

Risk

As you tell your life experiences, you may encounter memories and feelings which could be distressing or discouraging to you. Also, you may perceive frustrations and limitations which could be stressful to you. It is acceptable to express negative emotions during the conversations, but if it is difficult for you, you are not obliged to tell me everything. If unidentified issues surface during our conversations, I am able and willing to direct and connect you to appropriate supports or resources without disclosing any of your information.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is solely voluntary. Should you choose to participate in this study, note that you are under no obligations. Additionally, if you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time up to the point before you give consent to the final research text without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions or talk about particular experiences. You can request to stop the audio-recording anytime if you desire.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The information obtained in this study will be used in the writing of my doctoral dissertation. Other outcomes of this study will also include various presentations or research papers. Your permission is required for the disclosure of any information otherwise your information will remain confidential. If you desire, pseudonyms will be assigned to you. To avoid any personal identification the use of any particular names or places will be modified. However, anonymity cannot be guarantee throughout the study. Before dissemination of the study, all the representations are thoroughly examined and negotiated between a researcher and a participant.

Please note that for a minimum of 5 years after the completion of the study, all the data, such as audio-recordings and emerging texts will be stored securely in a locked cabinet or in electronic devices that is protected by password. Access to the data will only be permitted to me and my supervisors.

You invited to feel free to ask for a copy of reports or publications on research findings at any time. The data obtained from this study may be used in subsequent studies. However, should this be the case, a request will be made for approval first by a Research Ethics Board.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Kenchera Ingraham at 587-340-4840 or kenchera@ualberta.ca.

The plan for this study will be reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have any concerns or questions regarding your right as a research subject, you may contact the Research Ethics Office, at 1-780-492-2615.

Thank you for considering being part of this research. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____ _____

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature Date

_____ _____

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date