RESURGENCE OF THE SPIRIT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN DOCTORAL STUDY

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my gracious and loving heavenly Father and the number of individuals that He has placed in my path to secure His promise that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

To my husband Dorian, thank you for your encouragement and support throughout my educational journey. To my daughter, Bryanna, thank you for your patience and love, as I have been in school your entire life! To my son Dorian II, thank you for being ready to go to the library with me anytime! I love each of you and I am thankful for you!

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ABSTRACT

RESURGENCE OF THE SPIRIT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN DOCTORAL STUDY

by

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This study explored how spirituality informs the experience and progress of African American women in a doctoral study program. Two graduate students and myself, included as a co-researcher, served as the primary unit of analysis. We developed an ethnodrama to transform the data into living text with the use of participatory research methods, ethnography and social cartography. Our data collection sources reflected the multi-dimensional and complex nature of gathering data that shows the interconnectedness of history, identity and meaning. Sources of data included sister-to-sister conversations, reflective journals, artifacts, and spiritual life maps. The contributions of this study include the impact of spirituality on the attrition and retention of African American women in a doctoral study program with implications towards a

focus on spirituality within the curriculum, and the research process within an institution of higher education.

CHAPTER I

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

There is a popular Christian song that is sung to describe the light of God* that shines within us. The song begins with the chorus repeating, *This little light of mine/I'm going to let it shine,* and then continues to describe all the places where the light will shine. This was one of my favorite songs to sing as a child. Although singing did not rank highly as one of my preferred methods of worship, perhaps due to my family's disagreement that those *were* beautiful sounds echoing throughout the house each morning when I awoke, I still loved the song about the little light within. I loved this song because I felt that within me there was a light that shone, and that light represented the love of God inside me. I knew that I had the choice to share that love with others and I remember feeling that the light within called me to something more, something greater in life. This feeling is something I describe now as a calling to purposeful living and of service to the world. This framing of service is what Dillard (2006) suggests as "a paradigm surrounding research and teaching that is consciously engaged toward freedom of body, mind, and spirit of all involved" (p. 68-69). Seeking to discover this freedom is what I desired as I entered a doctoral study program in educational leadership in

* See Appendix A for a glossary of key terms

Central Texas. However, finding myself lost within the fold of the academy, where the spirit is often ignored, I felt a need within my spirit that urged me to "do something" and like the little light of mine, I carried this need along my journey in the doctoral program.

There was one particular evening in class where we watched a film that exposed the ugly truth that many of our schools are faced with – students, who from behind barbed wired fences struggle to learn by drills of rote memorization – teachers, who from behind four walls of enclosed spaces stand lifelessly, both physically and mentally, removed from the daily activities outside of that space – and parents, who seemingly helpless struggle to attain more for their children amidst a sometimes unwelcoming school environment. These images pierced my heart as I thought about the life experiences that led me to the doctoral program in educational leadership. I understood the film to represent the removal of humanness within educational institutions.

The scenes presented in the film were all too familiar. They mirrored my own educational journey in many ways. As I watched, it was as if my educational life experience flashed before me. That evening my light flickered, I saw myself in leading roles of student, teacher, parent and educational leader. When the film came to an end, I raced from the room towards the elevator. I was nearly gasping for air as I tried to make sense of the experience. I caught my breath as I entered the elevator. My professor entered behind me and stood beside me. As my face warmed, my eyes welled and I burst into tears. She turned to me, placing her hand on my shoulder, and asked, "Are you okay?" I reached aimlessly for words to describe how I felt during and after watching the film. At that moment, it was as though I could only explain it as a spiritual surge, or a resurgence of the spirit. I recognized that throughout much of my educational journey,

like the individuals in that film, it seemed that the human spirit was missing. Surmounting emotions encircled me that evening in class, and many more instances to follow, and called me towards the release of my full human potential through an engagement of the spirit. Similar to that little light shining within, begging to be shone, my spirit begged release within this environment. I recognized my reliance on the spirit within other areas of my life, however, I had not fully allowed it to emerge within this particular environment, feeling in a way that it was unwelcomed. Even though my spirit is what drew me towards a career in education and towards the pursuit of a doctoral degree, I had not let this light shine freely. However, I understood that I would be remiss if I did not fully engage the spirit in this stage and process of my educational journey. I understood as Cozart (2010) describes spirituality as the "Inner submission to my God consciousness" (p. 257). My spirituality is what connects me to God and others as I form relationships that encourage and motivate me towards bringing my full self into the doctoral journey regardless of any unwelcoming forces that stand to do otherwise.

Problem Statement

There is a gap in the literature that specifically addresses how spirituality informs African American women's experience and progress in doctoral study programs and specifically in educational leadership programs (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Tisdell, 2002). In higher education we fail to recognize and utilize "other ways of knowing" (Shajahan, 2006), which has contributed to the absence of nurturing and fostering spiritual knowing and learning. The whole person is neglected and we feed the mind, not the spirit and soul of students. When the whole person is neglected the consequences are detrimental to the experience and progress that students have.

The emotional distress that I felt at the beginning of my doctoral work is something that at the time I did not fully understand. The underrepresentation of [2]Black females in graduate school and the staggering "odds of a Black, female student making it all the way to the PhD club [with] statistics showing only 1.9% of all the PhDs in this country belong[ing] to Black women" (Dowdy, 2008, p. 13) caused doubts to linger in my mind. Feelings of lifelessness and isolation along this journey caused me to question my purpose for pursuing a doctorate and my path as an educational leader. These emotions turned into what Sanders (2009) calls soul unrest, "a general malaise (depression) that infiltrates all areas of life" (p. 18). I recognized this soul unrest in my relationships and communication with close friends and family as I became distant in my interaction with others. During that time, I began the inward search for answers about whether or not I was on the right spiritual path that God has for my life. I spent alone time writing in my journal, shared conversations with women that I considered spiritual advisors, and focused on my health by exercising daily to reach an emotional place of solace. Although I exercised my mind and body seeking solace, there remained numerous inexplicable emotions and questions about my educational journey. Was I doing the right thing in taking time away from my family to pursue a doctorate in educational leadership? What was my contribution to society supposed to be? Was I still on a path that was divinely ordered? Echoing the call of my spirit, I was encouraged by friends and family to continue.

I realized that I had allowed fear to grip my usual optimism, as I pondered many questions and thoughts about my odds as a Black woman in the academy. Within this

[2] The term Black is used interchangeably with African American due to the use of the term in the literature and the specific use of the term in the theoretical framework for this study. See Appendix (A) for the definition of African American.

low point of my educational journey I began praying and thinking deeply about my journey. During this time, I experienced what Muller and Dennis (2007) call "life change" - characterized by the altering of my normal routine and a change of my perceptions. Suddenly gripped by this life change moment, or what I now consider a spiritual force that persisted within me despite the doubt and emotional distress, I realized the need for a resurgence of the spirit, and my little light shined brighter. My little light became a metaphor representative of my spirit and spirituality. Furthermore, I was intrigued by the idea of exploring how spirituality informs the experience and progress in doctoral study for others and for myself.

Purpose of Study

Realizing that spirituality was not something nurtured or openly discussed in graduate school in general, or in my work environment as an educational leader, it was necessary to explore it even though there tends to be guardedness within the academy towards issues of spirituality (Becker, 2009). While there were pockets of individuals that made mention of spirituality, I had not felt that my spirituality was considered throughout my journey as a doctoral student. Fortunately, connections with others who had similar interests surfaced in my doctoral program and through national research organizations. Through these connections I shared my feelings, perceptions, and disconnect between spiritual concerns and the social and political structure of the educational environments of which I was a part. When I shared these emotions with another African American woman from a different doctoral program in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as well as with others through the connections I began making, I found that I was not alone. Specifically, this other African American female doctoral student

expressed that her experience in doctoral study was just as much a spiritual journey as an intellectual one, and by this comment I had the eureka moment where I knew that this was the topic I needed to explore more fully. From this conversation I began other intentional conversations with African American women and found similar reactions. They shared with me that they also questioned their purpose and motivation throughout the academic journey of doctoral study and acknowledged the space of academia as a journey where spirituality can provide us the strength to survive and continue (Cozart, 2010). Many of the women I spoke with expressed the understanding of an influence of spirituality, and that the moral responsibility we feel as African American women in the academy impacts our journey as doctoral students. Subsequently, some of us began questioning the limited ways in which the academy acknowledges our spiritual journeys, as well as how our spirituality shapes the highpoints and low points of these journeys.

The crossroads that fellow doctoral African American women expressed between spirituality and educational leadership preparation and progress is not felt in isolation. There is a need to question and seek a deeper understanding of our spiritual engagement in doctoral study. Thus, an exploration of spirituality in education and its role in the way African American women navigate through the limitations of traditional structures in doctoral study and how this knowledge/asset plays a role in our progress ensued. Through my explorations, I recognized that this work could not be done in isolation, and it needed to be done collaboratively as it reflected a cultural experience that peaked the excitement and the interest of many African American women I encountered. Particularly, two women collaborated with me as co-researchers throughout the study. Therefore, when discussing the work I have used terms such as: us, we, and our to show

this collaboration and credit the co-researchers with the knowledge that we discovered together. This collaboration and togetherness is our way of showing and sharing our spirituality, our interconnected experiences.

Research reveals that spirituality plays a significant role in African American women's lives (Dantley, 2003; Mattis, 2000; Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002) and is often a focus of discussion surrounding decisions and choices for pursuing careers in education (Milner, 2006). Milner (2006) purports that spirituality, particularly for African American educators, is focused on as a way of persisting through difficult situations. Spirituality is also spoken of as a life-giving force that is transcendent in nature (Mattis, 2000), connecting us to others and our deepest selves (Cozart, 2010). My experience as an African American woman engaged in doctoral study led me to be deeply interested in how spirituality informed the journey. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore how spirituality informed my doctoral study experience and that of two other African American women and spiritually mapping how our educational experiences informed our work and persistence in doctoral study.

Research Questions

1) How does spirituality inform the experience and progress of three African American women in an educational leadership doctoral program?

2) How is spirituality represented when mapping the cultural history of the educational experiences of African American women in a doctoral program?

Significance of Study: Spirituality Endures

Research continues to reveal that students of color are consistently faced with systems that are inadequate in meeting their needs (Gay, 2002). Particularly, African American women are met with hardships at the intersection of race, class and gender oppression (Collins, 1998; hooks, 2005), and meeting these hardships is often explored in the context of higher education (Collins, 1998; Cozart, 2010; Dillard, 2006). Although the notion of the strong Black woman has been critiqued (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009), there is a documented history of Black women drawing from spirituality to endure hardships. Thus, having explored spirituality in the context of higher education, where inequities and hardships permeate the fabric of institutions, we found spirituality embedded in our everyday living and learning and a useful resource towards persistence in doctoral study.

The Quest: My Ontology, Faith and Spirituality

hooks (2005) writes "Healing takes place within us when we speak the truth of our lives" (p. 11). Strong emotional pain often strikes when I am watching or hearing about suffering in the lives of others, even when I have no personal connection to them. I have never fully understood the deep sadness that overcomes me during these moments, but I have learned to cope with this reaction by asking questions. Like many children, incessant questioning governed my interactions with adults when I was a child. Today, incessant questioning takes place constantly in my mind. Questioning pushes me to unchartered boundaries, supporting my curiosity and forcing me to expand my mind. When a childhood friend of mine found out that I was continuing to pursue a postsecondary education, she reflected on our experience growing up together saying,

"You always loved school!" In thinking about this, I understand now that she believed I loved school because she recognized that I learned how to "do school". While I was good at sitting quietly, listening and regurgitating information, by no means was this something I loved. It is my desire to explore, ponder curiosities, and question ideas and concepts that keeps me seeking. Unfortunately, few instances in my educational career have fostered these desires. Growing up, the closest experience I had to exploring and pondering was at home. My mother, who is the main influence of my youth, never tired of answering my questions however trivial she may have believed them to be. She was always ready with an answer. It was through the behavior of taking in information as it was given by my mother spewing answers to all sorts of questions, that I experienced Freire's (1973/2000) notion of "banking education." I became a receptacle ready to be filled by the teacher. Although my ontology was shaped by the idea that most questions could be readily answered, and that I was not yet the knower but rather needed to be filled with answers by someone who was, I continued desiring more of myself as a learner and teacher. As a child, I recognized that there were questions that my mother could not readily answer, those that caused her to slow down or even pause for deeper thought. These questions were about life's purpose and matters of the world beyond what our five senses can experience. These questions evoked an insatiable desire for a deeper interrogation of my mother's knowledge. She responded to me, not with certainty about the answers, but with assurance of her understanding from her religious faith, the faith she has in Jesus Christ and from her understanding of the Christian Holy Bible. In her religious faith, she recognizes Jesus Christ as the Son of God, a part of the Holy Trinity that is the Father (God), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. In Jesus, and

recognition of the Holy Trinity, she pronounces her glory and honor and therefore would respond to me with an assurance of knowledge from this standpoint.

The questions that evoked responses that my mother gave according to her faith intrigued me. I listened more intently to those answers, and I tried to ask more questions that would result in such answers. As a child, the questions were self-centered. A question such as, "Why do I look the way I look?" would draw my mother back to her faith. In response, she would offer me an abstract explanation of how God has molded each and every person and numbered the hairs on our heads according to His good and perfect plan. Although, I would have been satisfied by a simple answer such as, "You look like me," her answers left me hungry for more. My question then became, "Then what is God's plan?" The cycle of questioning led my mother again and again back to her faith, leading me deeper and deeper into faith of my own. This was the emergence of my ontological understanding and the molding of my identity.

As my mother attributed her survival and life's purpose to her religious faith it laid the foundation for my ability to cope through life's adversities. I desired the same religious faith in my life, and while I was strengthened in my religious faith as I watched my mother push beyond ordinary boundaries to do extraordinary things, it often felt as if it was to her own detriment. She tirelessly did as much as she could for her children while giving little attention to herself as it related to mental, emotional and physical health. This was not a fate I desired. The shaping of my identity took place as I watched her emotionally deteriorate as a single mother of four often holding three jobs and struggling to support our family. She left little time for herself and for her own needs. She stopped just a few hours short from completion of her bachelor's degree in order to

dedicate her time to support her children and the many things that we did. My connection to her caused me to work harder educationally for her sacrifices. She did whatever she could to help us achieve what we set out to achieve and seemingly did nothing towards her own self-preservation. Her continuous support for all that we do now, even as adults, leads me to believe that she might also be living out what she was not able to do in her life through us. There were many things that she did for us as children that she continues to do today, due to what I consider actions of her faith and what she believes is the "right" thing to do. She has maintained a powerful influence in my life because of her faith commitment.

The influence of my mother and understanding her actions as characterized by her religious faith has led me to develop a unique connection between my own religious faith and spirituality that I am becoming more in tune with. My spirituality grows in response to pivotal moments in my life. Some of the most memorable of these moments are where the spirit was revealed all around me and within the relationships of my childhood and in my adult life. For example, when our family did not have what Maslow (1970) describes as the basic human needs, such as food and water, other members of my family, my mother's co-workers and friends were there to help us. The altruism of these individuals caused me to believe that people lived in connection with others and for a greater purpose. I make the assumption that it is the unseen forces of the spirit within others that led them to help us, while creating within me both a passion and purpose for helping others myself. Their influence in my life also played a role in the development of my spirituality that has filled my life with purpose, hope and desire. These accounts represent my journey of the spirit. Like a seed in soil, my spirituality has grown

serendipitously alongside my religious faith. This is the foundation for my ontology about my world.

Thus, spirituality is the impetus in all that I do and all that I know. I understand my spirituality to be a reflection of my religious faith, but different from my religious faith in that it connects me with a deeper meaning and purpose that relates to my role and relationship with God and people. As I have always felt guided by a strength much more powerful than my own, I recognize the deeper meaning in all that I do. Framed in my ontology, I see this strength as the power of God. The power of God is a spiritual force represented in my life as motivation and encouragement to engage purposefully in work that is divinely purposed. Although I was taught at a very early age to always rely on God, it was during times of great struggle that I witnessed God's power revealed clearly as things took place in my life that showed me that I had help in doing all things. As I seek my doctoral degree in educational leadership and school improvement, while believing this path is divinely purposed, I recognize the need to rely on my spirituality to get me through. The experience of having doors opened for me in the field of education from a very early age is a part of my testimony concerning the spiritual force in my life. For example, when directly out of high school I was offered a position at a private school as a lead teacher without certification or any great amount of training, I knew it was nothing I had done on my own but something greater than me. It was this opportunity and others that allowed me to begin thinking about what was happening in my life as a plan directed by God moving me towards my purpose in life. It is not by accident that I have had the opportunity to serve in a number of schools that populate high numbers of students of color, whereby I have witnessed inadequate environments for learning

whether characterized by a lack of human or material resources. God has shaped my purpose in life, and through a spiritual force He has created a desire within me to work for social justice in supportive environments where all students can grow and prosper intellectually and emotionally. Moreover, my identity has been molded towards being an educational leader that will support the growth in, and the acknowledgement of the inner realm of our lives. hooks (2003) reminds us "the inner life should not be ignored" (p. 182). She offers the idea that in order to reach the inner life one must fully engage in teaching and learning. She describes this as "engaged pedagogy". Engaged pedagogy dismantles the conventional structures of education making it less about "data, logic, analysis, a systematic disconnection of self from the world, and self from others [by emphasizing that there is more to teaching and learning than just] matters of the mind" (hooks, 2003, p. 178-179). Moreover, Dillard (2006) suggests "that a paradigm surrounding research and teaching that is consciously engaged toward freedom of body, mind, and spirit of all involved, can be framed with service to humanity as its goal" (p. 68-69). My goals and philosophy of education are grounded in these ideas and the notion that when educators operate with the mindset of full engagement there is great potential towards the success of all involved.

As I entered the doctoral program in educational leadership and school improvement, I desired and searched for opportunities to be fully engaged in the learning and with others to embrace the wholeness of myself and the fullness of others in the learning environment. The doctoral program, progressive in its nature to discuss issues of inequitable situations facing students in public school, exposed me to problems larger than I imagined. The cohort of students that entered this doctoral program came from

ethnically, racially, and professionally diverse backgrounds and served in a wide variety of positions as educational and community leaders. Through discussions, videos and readings, professors presented us with challenging images faced by our public schools and encouraged a social justice agenda. While this initial encouragement stood to reprise the interrogative nature I often drifted into, it was not long until I began feeling that I was lacking in terms of how I could make a difference among such widespread problems as an educational leader. Although I believed that God prepared the way for me to be at this particular time by allowing certain paths to cross and by preparing me for the journey, I doubted myself and believed that I was ill equipped to handle it. Feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy kept me from believing that I could move forward and progress in my educational journey, believing that I had reached a point where I was unfulfilled solely with a focus on matters of the mind. I needed something deeper that connected the intellect with the spirit and this was something that I did not see immediately. Then, there was a shift in my thinking that allowed me to recognize the potential in exploring the spiritual dimensions of education by refocusing my attention inwardly and contextually towards understanding the contribution of spirituality in the preparation of educational leaders in doctoral study. This shift occurred after feeling a sense of lost voice in my experience and progress. As I drifted away from my ontological foundation, I began to reflect the institutional norms of the environment I was a part of. During this time, my mother shared with me that she even dreamed that I was stuck in a black hole and no matter how loud she cried out for me I would not respond. I then realized a need for a resurgence of the spirit and it was in this deeply emotional space that I attributed spirituality to my progress in this space. However, the question

remained, how had I drifted in the first place? The disconnect and distress that I made mention of in the beginning of the introduction shaped my mindfulness and awareness, leading me closer towards the resurgence, which is this act – this research. As I began moving towards awareness, I began to question how spirituality informs my journey as a woman of color, and the journey of other African American women, as we strive to progress through the adversities of a doctoral study program in educational leadership. Once again, as in my childhood, I had fallen prey to this notion of *banking* (Freire, 1973/2000) within the doctoral program as I was being filled with theories, epistemologies and frameworks for learning that did not fit within my pursuit for holistic human engagement. Therefore, my continued learning and awareness is unlearning the ways of a traditional institution in order to discover hope and reject the "mindlessness" [that] is the result of previous learning that has become so routine that thinking is unnecessary" (Gurin et al., 2002). In essence, I recognize that in order to release the reigns of the oppressor, which have filtered the way I learn and understanding my past, institutions, structures and teaching, through a Western hegemonic funnel, I must awaken a resting spirit by transforming my mind and my actions towards what education can be.

Johnson-Bailey (2004) points out that the experiences of African American women in higher education have been routinely ignored in the wider context of educational studies, and she notes that several factors influence the participation and retention of this group. She also details the significance of the role that gender, race and class play in the academic lives of Black women. On a similar note, Tisdell (2002) points out that little attention is given to the cultural issues of spirituality. As it stands, there is a gap in the literature that specifically addresses how spirituality informs African American

women's experience and progress in doctoral study programs in educational leadership. Thus, the study is significant in that it contributes implications for higher education, African American women in higher education and the collective nature of development.

Black Feminism: Making Sense of My Lens as a Researcher

In my initial phases of thinking about this topic to explore for my dissertation, I was asked by a professor, "Why African American women?" As information swam around in my head about all of the reasons this topic was important in the field of education and pertinent in the lives of African American women, it was difficult to express them at the time. After deeper analysis towards the impact of spirituality in my own life and the lives of other African American women that I have spoken with about the topic, I find it privileging to share the reasons why we are an optimal group for this type of study. First, there is a gap in the educational leadership literature, and in the curriculum concerning doctoral students that speaks to the implications of attending to experiences of spirituality along the educational journey. Second, it is important that other African American women understand what this experience is like as it stands to contribute to their doctoral journey, as the literature does speak to the impact of spirituality in other areas of African American women's lives (Mattis, 2000; Wheeler, Ampadu & Wangari, 2002) and the source of power spirituality provides when nourished in the academic life (Dillard, 2006). Lastly, there is potential for contributing to the growing body of spirituality and higher education research.

Black feminism is the lens I come with to the study, placing Black women's experiences and ideas at the center of analysis (Collins, 1991). "Black feminist thought draws upon the body of knowledge that sets forth the idea that the daily living of Black

women has produced a collective consciousness that resists being defined as 'less than', resists negative stereotyping, while seeking to define and empower its members by encouraging Black women to celebrate their survival as a significant phenomenon" (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 333). Black feminism took shape in the late 1800's when Anna Julia Cooper wrote about the struggles of Black women in *A Voice from the South* (Carby, 1987; Guy-Sheftall, 2009). When Cooper (1892) denoted that she was adding her "little voice….to the already full chorus" (p. 2), it solidified the previous exclusion of Black women's voices and signaled an emergence of agency towards the concerns of Black women. Black feminist studies have continued to persist historically, emerging in the 1970's, intertwining "black studies and women's studies, probing silences, erasures, distortions, and complexities surrounding the experiences of peoples of African descent" (Guy-Sheftall, 2009, p. 11). Later, Black feminism was emphasized more heavily as notable scholars such as Collins (1986), hooks (1981, 1984, 1989), Lorde (1984), and others emerged with seminal pieces that have marked the field of education. Occupying the space of knowledge that exists with these women, my thoughts are closely situated within the fundamental themes of Black feminism that offer guidance in the ability to rearticulate Black women's experiences. These themes include: the importance of self-definition, self-valuation and respect, self-reliance and independence, and self, change, and empowerment.

What Do You Want to be Called?

A few semesters into my doctoral study a heated discussion erupted among the diverse members of my cohort. The discussion was about the various names that have been assigned to describe people of African descent over the years. A young White male

cohort member, seemingly determined to put an end to the debate once and for all, took it upon himself to decide that those of us considering ourselves African Americans should individually answer to the group what we wanted to be called. Floored by what I, at the time, could not describe as his assertion of power, each African American began offering their "label" to him. Soon, I felt the eyes of the cohort members upon me waiting for my response. When I hastily offered, *You can call me whatever you want to call me, because what you call me doesn't define who I am,* I heard a gasp from the older African American woman in the cohort seated across from me. While I knew the historical struggles faced by African American people, concerning what we were to be called over the years, I did not feel that I owed this young man a "label" that he could then determine his preference of use for me. This was my form of resistance towards his assertion of power. This experience caused me to reflect upon the personal, cultural, academic, historical and political constructs that are presented within the context of African American women's lives. As I reflected, I also began deconstructing the situation recognizing that from a personal and cultural perspective, I have been labeled through societal constructs from birth. As Dubois (1994) points out:

> BETWEEN ME AND THE OTHER WORLD there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your

> blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer a seldom word. (p. 1)

Thinking back to previous experiences in academic environments that have created images and labels of who I am and who I am expected to be, I am disappointed by how, though Dubois is explaining his experiences as an African American of the twentieth century, the explanation still applies in my experience today. So long ago, but still like yesterday. When will the moment come when we are no longer subject to being defined by others within society, a problem of society? Seeing that African Americans have historically been assigned labels that were, to say the least unfitting, particularly in the case of African American women, Black feminism provides a platform for identifying the mislabels and redefining Black women from Black women's standpoint. "Self-definition is an important idea within Black feminism. It is imperative that we identify who we are as this determines how we experience and survive in institutions that constantly seek to redefine our identities in relation to their specific needs" (Burke, Cropper, & Harrison, 2000, p. 299). Recognizing who we are as individuals, particularly in the case of African American students of color, may influence educational experiences (Gardner, 2008, p. 135).

Recanting the experience of Sojourner Truth as she stood before a group of White women and men, baring her breast and exclaiming *ar'n't I a woman?* hooks (1981) describes the struggle that Black women have faced in the midst of an oppressive society. While I am unwilling to accept the negative stereotypes and labels that society has handed African American women, I still question, *Why are we still at the place where*

our identities are hinged upon a single definition embedded within a group identity? Is it that difficult for the dominant group to recognize us as uniquely situated within a larger cultural context? It is important to seek the greater path towards understanding who we are for ourselves, so that we do not fall into the system of accepting false labels and images that have been assigned to us by others, but bring others into a new discourse that shares insight into our diverse yet complex lives and experiences as African American women. Fitting for a framework with a goal such as this is Black feminism which encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it, and does not mean that all Black women generate such thought or that other groups do not play a critical role in its production (Collins, 1991). However, the critical role that other groups play in the production of Black feminism is not deemed fitting if it undermines the ability of Black women to self-define. Self-definition is an important and powerful theme in a Black feminist framework. A second invaluable theme is self-valuation as it addresses the content of the labels that have been imposed upon Black women.

I Am Beautiful; Everybody Loves Me; I Am Going to Have a Wonderful Day

At an early age my mother began having me state daily, while looking in the mirror, *I am beautiful; everybody loves me; I am going to have a wonderful day.* While I despised doing this at the onset of her request, I later began to believe it. The words took shape in my mind, and regardless of what took place during the day I believed the words that I had spoken to myself earlier that morning. A prominent theme in Black feminist thought is self-valuation and respect. My mother recognized the importance of my rejecting the images that others placed upon me as I went to school each day, usually one

of very few African Americans in my class. She encouraged me to believe that I was beautiful and that everybody loved me, and regardless of what took place I was going to have a great day. Collins (1991) notes, "The significance of self-valuation is illustrated through the emphasis that Black feminist thinkers place on respect. In a society in which no one is obligated to respect African-American women, we have long admonished one another to have self-respect and to demand the respect of others" (p. 107). Each day when I looked in the mirror, quoting the words my mother had given me of self-valuation; I was learning to love myself while determining that everyone else loved me too. Witherspoon (2008) writes about redemptive self-love informing her research with Black female principals stating, "Black women are called to love themselves in spite of circumstances and intersecting oppressions" (p. 20). The nature of her research, in working with Black female principals who work for social justice in schools, made it necessary to recognize self-love or self-valuation. I understand the two to be closely tied, along with self-esteem. Self-valuation, self-love, self-esteem, however the self is edified, is notably important in the lives of African American women. Understood within my ontology, and as written in the work of one Black woman of Christian faith, "We can't shine on the outside unless God's power is at work on the inside" (Shirer, 1999, p. 29). Despite the devaluation of African American women that takes place in society through media and pop culture representations of certain stereotypes, I learned to respect, value and love myself. Thus, I maintain a sense of self-worth that carries me throughout my life and through my engagement with others. This is projected throughout my writing and research.

Redefining the I-N-D-E-P-E-N-D-E-N-T Woman

In referencing the influence of pop culture on today's society, I am reminded of a moment when I was afforded the opportunity to hear my young nephew, who was three or four at the time, spell what was considered a big word for his age. In a song he was inspired to sing by his dad, he spelled out the word I-N-D-E-P-E-N-D-E-N-T as he belted out the lyrics of a commonly known hip-hop artist's recording. As a former reading teacher, he was sure to make me proud. Excited by the fact that the lyrics of the song offered support in the area of literacy, I found it unfortunate that the lyrics also took a twist for the worst feeding into many of the negative and controlling stereotypes administered to Black women throughout the years. Unbeknownst to my nephew or my brother, the lyrics of the song fed into the degrading images of Black women who choose independence or self-reliance as opposed to positions that are subservient to men. Though the song in its chorus may fool one to believe it is discussing the independence of Black women as a positive idea, in reality the lyrics that follow the chorus are suggestive and play into a number of stereotypical images. Moody (2011) contends "Webbie's 2007 rendition of 'Independent Woman' speaks of his ideal mate as a college graduate who is financially stable, which is positive, however; the song further describes her as making time to cook, clean, and give him back rubs" (p. 190-191). Placing women in a position of the overachiever, who is also willing to be subservient, takes away from the positive aspects of independence and self-reliance, two prominent themes of Black feminist thought.

The terms independence and self-reliance understood, defined, and voiced outside of the controlling images that devalue Black womanhood, can serve as tools to strengthen

the experiences of African American women. Collins (1991) cites Steady's 1987 work stating, "Whether by choice or circumstance, African American women have 'possessed a spirit of independence,' have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another to value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity" (p. 109). Although I did not bring this controversial topic up to my brother at the time, I realize that it is necessary to share in discourse about such topics in order to support a growing knowledge towards Black feminist thought that stands to influence each generation to come. As our independence and self-reliance are nurtured we begin taking greater action towards changing society. Early Black feminist thinkers were self-reliant, and independent, as they took on women's causes outside of the civil rights struggle and apart from the early White women's movement finding it necessary to situate the struggle of Black women in the context of Black women's experiences. As Black feminists began organizations to address the "triple jeopardy" of race, class and gender in the early 1960's their independence and self-reliance built the foundation for generations to come (Anderson-Bricker, 1999).

Moving Forward and Looking Back

In taking action to move towards the change needed to influence future generations, we embrace another central theme in Black feminist thought. Collins (1991) states that self, change, and empowerment are necessary in changing "the conditions of our lives" (p. 110). In middle and high school, I dreaded going to history classes in schools. I despised the curriculum's negative portrayal of Black people in history, presenting the fate of Black people solely as slaves, poor, and unintelligent. Being that I was fortunate to have received some positive images of Black people outside of the

traditional school setting, I hardly believed that being subject to the viewing of Roots each year was the best that could be offered by the public school! History lessons, as they were presented to me from grade school through high school, proved that an indoctrination of certain beliefs was at work in the school system, determined to represent, in a negative way, any group other than groups holding a western worldview. I am glad to know that many political actions have been taken to move educators forward in creating a history curriculum that values the historical contributions of many different groups, but I also know that growth is still needed in this area. As I look ahead towards what we must do as educators to support the continuing need for a history curriculum that affirms the values of various groups, I also look back towards the history that shapes my political actions today. Where I once sat voiceless, today I occupy a different space. The agency that I have developed and that I am determined to express in this work is empowered agency and recognition of the need to share my experiences and understandings about issues that hold significant importance for me and for creating educational environments that value social justice. By connecting my past and present conditions I have become "empowered through self-knowledge" (Collins, 1991, p. 111) to explore issues that support my individual commitment to political action for future change. Hull (1982) writes, "In the process of conscious-raising, actual life-sharing, we begin to recognize the commonality of our experiences, and from sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression" (p. 15). A collaborative effort for change that also recognizes that "Black feminist thought may originate with Black feminist intellectuals [but] cannot flourish

isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups" (Collins, 1991, p. 35), stands to significantly influence and move us forward as a society.

The tenets of Black feminist thought serve as part of a conceptual lens and a theoretical foundation for exploring the experiences of Black women who are naming their own reality by enacting principles of spirituality into their higher education journeys. The empowering nature of Black feminist thought drives this study and promotes transformational thinking, action and change by taking into account the unique cultural experiences and understandings that support the generation of new knowledge, while also taking into account the diverse experiences of all Black women. By understanding and incorporating the fundamental elements of the aforementioned framework into this study, I was able to focus on the experiences of Black women from a Black women's standpoint, and use these elements to explore the literature surrounding the study.

Road Map

My co-researchers and I, along with feedback from professors, determined that the best route for this study was through performance. When we began, we were not sure how a performance of our lives built from research would look. We pondered possibilities of having workshop-style gatherings with other African American women to engage in dialogue. Then, after conversation with my advisor and a further exploration of diverse representations of data, we determined that an[3] ethnodramatic representation would best suit the type of data we collected. Chapter I supported the building of our foundation towards a non-traditional structure of data reporting, and the ensuing chapters

[3] Ethnodrama is a written playscript that uses significant qualitative data and dramatizes it into text that can then be performed in public (Hare, 2008; Saldana, 2005).

and structure of the dissertation continued to frame the ethnodrama. The endarkened feminist epistemology used as the theoretical framework for this study correlates with the ethnodrama by responding to the six assumptions of: 1) *self-definition* in the participation and responsibility to community, 2) research as a *pursuit of purpose* that is both intellectual and spiritual, 3) *becoming* through dialogue and within the context of community, 4) *meaning in the concrete experiences* of everyday life, 5) *history* that shapes and influences knowledge and research, and 6) *gender, race and identity relations*. Having explored the historical and influential aspects inherent within the socio-cultural history of African Americans that built an orientation towards a spiritual identity, the ethnodrama enhanced the understanding of the role of spirituality in African American women's lives. Following Chapter II, the review of literature, the ethnodramatic methodological representation unfolds providing the collective nature of research in Chapter III. Chapter IV presents the data; the implications of the research follow in Chapter V.

CHAPTER II

FREEDOM WRITERS AND LITERARY EXPRESSIONS

Lord I humbly pray, realizing that I am standing on the shoulders of many other African American women scholars that have come before me. Allow me to share my story while accurately representing the work and scholarship of those who embark upon this journey with me. Give me this day that I might increase my understanding through my experience and practice and that I may not hold back due to fears or anything else that has chanced to stand in the way of my progress; be it people, systems, or structures. Give me this day that I might let my light shine on the inside so that my inner strength allows me to move forward with vision, purpose, and power. Give us this day!

In the midst of several changes, and in the beginning of a new direction for my research, I prayed. I had no idea at the time that my prayer above would draw together critical areas that are important in the exploration of literature for the topic of research, and provide me with a sense of direction towards a theoretical framework. Thus, an endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000) emerged as an encompassing framework for the deeply cultural and spiritual research that I embarked upon. The deliberate and descriptive use of language within an endarkened feminist epistemology captures an understanding of my ontology and reality of the world. Dillard's (2006) basis of contrasting "the common use of the term 'enlightened' as a way of expressing the

having *of* new and important feminist insights arising historically from the well-established canon of white feminist thought," (p. 3-4) established a reference for how my work would be theorized differently and in response to my cultural and spiritual self. In addition, seven themes emerged from my prayer, which set a broad context for the study, exemplified what was and what was not in the scope of the investigation, and situated an existing literature in a broader scholarly historical context (Boote, 2005). The seven themes are humility, identity, sharing/inviting or community, knowing/awareness or mindfulness, action, power and hope (referenced as light). While these themes are a significant part of my own spirituality, many are also significant in the literature about spirituality in African American women's lives (Cozart, 2010; Dillard, 2000; hooks, 2003; Mattis, 2000), the general outlook of spirituality in education (Dantley, 2003; 2005; Glazer, 1999; Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell, & Capper, 1999; Milner, 2006; Palmer, 1993), and spirituality in higher education (Astin & Lindholm, 2008; Dowdy, 2008; Tisdell, 1999, 2007). The seven themes guided the review of the literature while paralleling my own personal experiences that gave insight to my *experiential knowledge,* which Maxwell (2005) notes as one of the most important conceptual resources often neglected.

The seven themes are presented in three parts described as: The Literature, Life Notes (Bell-Scott, 1994) and The Weaving. The Literature is representative of resources that span the academic field and beyond into various works of art. Life Notes (Bell-Scott, 1994) are used to represent personal accounts of my life experiences and the data that express my relationship to the literature and my ontology, experience, and identity. "Seen as the part of the body of research literature commonly known as narrative

research, life notes refer broadly to constructed personal narratives such as letters, stories, journal entries, reflections, poetry, music, and other artful forms" (Dillard, 2006, p. 5). It is my intention that the different representations of knowledge through Life Notes offer greater insight towards the overall research. The Weaving represents information that binds the literature and my personal accounts into concluding thoughts.

I purposefully interwove personal narrative accounts within the review of the literature to illuminate experiential knowledge as a valid component within the research (Maxwell, 2005), and to pave the way for a non-traditional format of data representation that is exemplified through an ethnodramatic methodology. Personal accounts along with scholarly literature allowed the document to be both academically attuned, and accessible for general readership beyond the academy. Since this study sought to explore how spirituality has informed the experience and progress of African American women in a doctoral study program in educational leadership, attending to various forms of knowledge strengthens the landscape of the research by centering the focus on African American women's lives and culture (Dillard, 2006; Dowdy, 2000; hooks, 2003).

An Endarkened Feminist Epistemology

The endarkened feminist epistemology is a view of all research as a "social construction and a cultural endeavor" (Dillard, 2006, p.3). The endarkened feminist epistemology moves away from the commonly used metaphor of "*research as recipe"* (Dillard, 2006, p. 4-5), which has guided much of the educational research community, to a central focus on "*research as a responsibility*, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry" (Dillard, 2006, p. 5). With the metaphor *research as a responsibility* we begin thinking about the people, the contexts of

the research, and the actions that follow our responsibilities as researchers. Thus, the rewording, attending to the use of language, and changing the metaphors we use to understand our work is spiritually liberating (Shajahan, 2006). In approaching my work as a doctoral student and educational practitioner, my emphasis was always to understand my responsibility for my work and service to society. An endarkened feminist epistemology articulates,

> …how reality is known when based in the historical roots *of* Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities, and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women. (Dillard, 2006, p. 3)

Therefore, an endarkened feminist epistemology meets the purpose of this research, which is to explore a cultural phenomenon experienced by African American women, weave the experiences of these women, and contribute to the growing body of research of this type. The endarkened feminist epistemology "challenges us to (re)think meanings and constructs in educational research" (Milner, 2006, p. 369) and pushes us to negotiate the spaces that we occupy in our research communities.

Forming the Foundation of an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology

Dillard (2006) identifies six assumptions that undergird the theoretical foundation of an endarkened feminist epistemology. The six assumptions are: 1) *self-definition* forms the participation and responsibility to community, 2) research is a *pursuit of purpose* that is both intellectual and spiritual, 3) *becoming* takes place through dialogue and within the context of community, 4) there is *meaning in the concrete experiences* of everyday life,

5) *history* shapes and influences knowledge and research; it should be looked into and extended out, and 6) *gender, race and identity relations* in the academy are impacted by the power structures and belief systems made up by racism, sexism, homophobia and so on.

Each of these assumptions is also closely aligned to the seven themes that emerge from the opening prayer. The first assumption of an endarkened feminist epistemology arises from the tenets of Black feminist thought and delves more deeply into the spiritual nature of theory by including self-definition in the participation and responsibility to society. While it is difficult to describe the unseen "relationship between our individual selves and the world" (Cozart, 2010, p. 257) it is this connection that binds our responsibility to the larger community. Dillard (2000) suggests "that the struggle for a self-defined feminist consciousness for African-American women in our roles as scholars seems to require embracing both a culturally centered worldview…and a feminist sensibility, both necessary in embracing and enacting an endarkened feminist epistemology" (p. 673). Thus, we negotiate the spaces that we occupy in higher education by taking into account our hyphenated identities as African American-women-scholars and how this standpoint impacts our research and work with the larger community.

Research as a pursuit of purpose, intellectual and spiritual, is the second assumption within an endarkened feminist epistemology that moves us towards alternative knowledge claims (Dillard, 2000). The possibilities of understanding research as more than solely an intellectual endeavor, but that of a spiritual one, places value on individual expression and difference that enriches rather than detracts, emotions and

empathy (Dillard, 2000). Therefore, the pursuit of purpose lies within "research of not just honoring our own version of the practice, praxis, and politics of research as truth but to seek to honor the truth that is created and negotiated in and between ourselves, in relationship with one another as researchers" (Dillard, 2000, p. 675). As such, we must recognize that while there are cultural commonalities within groups there are also cultural differences that we honor with our awareness and appreciation of those differences.

The third assumption of an endarkened feminist epistemology emphasizes dialogue and the knowledge that emerges from being in connection with others. Communal sharing of knowledge often takes place between and among African American women (Dowdy, 2008; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Wade-Gayles, 1995). Reciprocal dialogue is implied in an endarkened feminist epistemology and lends itself to the sharing of concrete experiences, embedded in Dillard's (2000) fourth assumption, that are beneficial in research for African American women. "Thus, concrete experiences – uniquely individual while at the same time both collective and connected – lend credibility to the work of African American women engaged in transformative research and inquiry, as well as, suggest the presence of an endarkened feminist epistemology which grounds such work" (Dillard, 2000, p. 676). Through connected dialogue and communal sharing of stories by African American women words become a powerful force in the production of knowledge.

Left to explore how history shapes and informs knowledge production, the fifth assumption of an endarkened feminist epistemology "both acknowledges and works against the absent presence of women of color from the shaping of rules which have historically guided formal educational research, the system of knowledge production with

higher education, and the meanings and legitimacy surrounding research processes" (Dillard, 2000, p. 676). Demanding *that which is real,* hooks (1989) speaks in resistance to voices unheard noting, "We make the revolutionary history, telling the past as we have learned it mouth-to-mouth, telling the present as we see, know and feel it in our hearts and with our words" (p. 3). An endarkened feminist epistemology places African American women's history and ways of knowing and understanding the world at the center. Understanding that history shapes and influences knowledge, I borrow the conceptual image of Sankofa (Figure 2.1) described by Mitchem (2000) as the West African symbol of a bird that means to look at the past as a way of informing the present and future. In the present study, Sankofa represents the socio-cultural history embedded within African American women's experiences in doctoral study, and the knowledge that the work being done is possible due to the work of many other women who have paved the way.

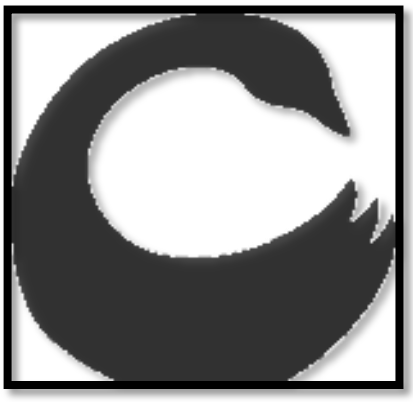


Figure 2.1. Sankofa

As the voices of African Americans have been left out of the dominant discourse, the relevance and importance of claiming knowledge through our cultural historical identity

adds insight to research for and about African American women and also lead into the final assumption that examines power relations. "Power involves not only control over information that is released but also control of information that is not released" (Myers, 2002, p. 2000). Therefore, the absence of African American women's voices from the dominant discourse situates power outside of this group and speaks to the oppression we face.

The sixth assumption presented by Dillard (2000) in an endarkened feminist epistemology is gender, race and identity relations in the academy are impacted by power structures and belief systems. Societal structures that promote racist, sexist, classist behaviors and beliefs continue to silence the voice of African American women (Dillard, 2000). An endarkened feminist epistemology promotes African American women articulating our own way of knowing and how we experience the world. Critical to the creation of a counter-hegemonic worldview is the expression of alternative epistemologies (hooks, 1994). Moving beyond the "formal academic training designed to encourage us to decontextualize our deeply raced/gendered/ classed/sexualized lives and alienate ourselves from our communities, families, and even ourselves in order to do 'legitimate' scholarship…" (Dillard, 2006, p. 28), this study speaks from the culturally and spiritually embedded endarkened feminist epistemology, and is molded within the seven themes (humility, identity, sharing/inviting or community, knowing/awareness or mindfulness, action, power and hope) found in the opening prayer and representative of my spiritual identity.

In Prayer: The Journey Begins

Historical Roots: A Humbling Voyage

The literature. Historical accounts of spirituality informing the practices of African American's date back to the descendants of Africa, and although defining the concept of spirituality is complex many have tried to explain its meaning in the lives and experiences of African Americans (Fielding-Stewart, 1999; Lerner, 2000; Milner, 2006; Wade-Gayles, 1995; Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002). The descriptions of spirituality are broad and complex. "Like the wind, it cannot be seen, and yet, like the wind, it is surely there, and we bear witness to its presence, its power" (Wade-Gayles, 1995, p. 2). However, spirituality is not easily defined. Wheeler, Ampadu, and Wangari (2002) attempt to develop a workable definition of spirituality out of the articulations and experiences of African-descended people in order to use these understandings in an academic format. In doing so, they determine that one of the longstanding major factors influencing the concept of spirituality in African-descended people is worldwide oppression.

Oppression is the ramification of dehumanization and it is "affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity" (Freire, 1973/ 2000, p. 44). The dehumanization of African Americans dates back to the Atlantic slave trade and subsequent years of oppression. The voyage of Africans to a land unknown in America, a land of slavery and servitude, oppressed and bound the physical bodies and minds of African Americans, challenging even the use of words to express such an experience. African Americans remained in the physical bondage of slavery from the seventeenth century through the Civil War (Russell, 1990),

and there is an inextricable link between the history of slavery and that of African-descended people in America (Tibbles, 2008). Although being freed from physical bondage in America took place, there have been post-slavery psychological effects (Benjamen, Henry, & McMahon, 2005). Moreover, African Americans have been humbled both by an oppressive force and recognition of stolen humanity.

The life story of Sojourner Truth, a woman born into slavery around the late 1700's, gives us one example of how slavery was oppressive in taking hold of the mind beyond physical bondage, resulting in both humility and reliance upon the spirit. Her journey situates the context of the historical struggle and oppression African Americans faced in her time and still today. Truth lived as both a slave and a free African American woman. Arguably, African Americans live today in bondage of the mind, yet free from physical slavery. Truth faced constant challenges such as witnessing the loss of family and friends either by death, or purchase and unfulfilled promises of freedom. Despite the adversities she faced, she lived humbly. She shared that she was able to do so due to her spirit. For example, she spoke of a particular instance where her five-year old son, who had been born into a life of bondage, was sold illegally out of the state, and the challenge she invited as a result (Truth, 1997). Determined to have her child returned to the state from where he was sold, Truth set out for justice with a humble heart. When she was offered lodging as she waited to go and make her appeal to the court for her son she expressed that the "nice, high, clean, white, *beautiful* bed" that she was allowed to sleep in was in such contrast to her normal sleeping conditions that she was in wonder that it had been given to "one like herself" (p. 23). She contemplated sleeping beneath the bed as she was conditioned to see herself unworthy of even a bed.

Truth's narrative is one account and an important example of how slavery impacts the psyche of an individual. Though Truth was physically free from slavery, her mind remained in bondage and as a result she was humbled, impacting her spirituality. Freire (1973/2000) speaks of the oppressed as those "who have adapted to the structure of domination" (p. 47). Truth, believing herself unworthy to slumber in conditions contrary to what she had previously experienced had an internalized lower image of her worth. While her experiences humbled her, there remained detrimental lasting consequences of a life of slavery and oppression. In the case of Sojourner Truth, her oppression became an instrument of her humility and spirituality. Her humility allowed her to connect spiritually with many people. In parallel to this historical narrative, the Life Notes present a personal account that expresses a humbling experience of my own.

Life notes. It was difficult to watch my mother struggle to provide for us as a single parent. We did not always have much, but my mother did the best that she could to offer our needs and many of our wants. Since my mother worked so hard to do for herself and her children, what she believed that only she was responsible to do, she had a difficult time asking for help. Witnessing my mother's inability to seek help in times of need was humbling for me. Struggle taught me about myself; it linked me to the past and conditioned me to understand the world from a humbling perspective. We learned early on, through community service, the importance of doing things for others. When on Thanksgiving morning my mother woke us to go and serve food at the local Loaves and Fishes, I was able to see myself in relation to the world. My mother taught that it was our duty to serve others, and because of that duty we would spend our Thanksgiving serving

the homeless. I felt a sense of purpose and responsibility in helping others and I was eager to serve.

When the people came to be served their Thanksgiving dinner, I was surprised by the number of people. I observed the group, and began feeling a sense of disconnect from the group. My personal troubles seemed to be lessened by seeing myself as fortunate in comparison to the group of people that showed up for Thanksgiving dinner. I remember asking my mother why so many people were in need. Although I cannot remember the exact response she gave me, I remember her face, tired and stern, as she told me that we may have had a home, but we also had no food to eat just like the people there that day. While we were there to serve, we were also there to share a meal that we otherwise would not have had. That day was a humbling experience.

After all had been served, we sat and ate Thanksgiving dinner at the shelter. While we were there to help, I recognized that we needed help ourselves and I was spiritually impacted by that knowledge. I understood that certain conditions connected individuals. The engagement that took place that day has remained with me throughout my life and has informed my knowledge and understanding of the context and environments in which I am a part. It is humbling to see myself as part of the larger whole of humanity and because of this I am able to connect more fully with others.

The weaving. Humility, even when created as a result of a life oppressed, is socially transformative. As expressed through the life of Sojourner Truth, historical accounts stemming from slavery impact the self-esteem and identity of African Americans to date. As such, there is a recurrent theme that pertains to the psychological health in African American culture that suggests the need for a spiritual orientation

(Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002). Spirituality was a large part of Truth's identity. She expressed her spirituality through her faith and belief in a higher power. She described a pivotal moment in her life when she realized that God was always present with her, even at times when she saw no trouble. "She talked to God familiarly as if he had been a creature like herself; and a thousand times more so, than if she had been in the presence of some earthly potentate" (Truth, 1997, p. 32). Like Sojourner Truth, spirituality is a familiar presence in my life and an important part of my identity that has developed from my socio-cultural history and multiple oppressions as a woman of color. Many experiences have humbled me. Through this humbling I have developed a spiritual identity that deepens my understanding of self and my history impacting my relationship with others and stemming from spiritual traditions of my past.

Forming a Spiritual Identity

The literature. Spiritual traditions of Africa and the African diasporas are born from a reaction to psychological attacks (Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002). African Americans, like many people of color in this country, are under the attack of domination and oppression that regardless of access to material privilege leaves us "wounded by white supremacy, racism, sexism, and a capitalist economic system that dooms us collectively to an underclass position" (hooks, 2005, p. 4). Spirituality creates a sense of wholeness and sanity, promoting positive self-identities beyond these attacks (Fielding-Stewart, 1999). Although spirituality has largely been ignored and silenced in the university setting (Dillard, 2006), it must take a privileged place in the discussion of African Americans and identity development (Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002).

The belief that the spiritual life is a part of the earthly life is an idea retained by Black Americans beyond the land of our descent (Russell, 1990). Within the belief that there is a connection between what is earthly and what is spiritual is also the idea that spirituality is a vital life force that connects us to that which is more than us, "rhythms of the universe, nature, the ancestors, and the community" all of which are valuable components of spirituality and identity (Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002, p. 73). Black Americans have relied upon the life force of spirituality as a means of self-determination and repudiation towards the devaluation of worth (Fielding-Stewart, 1999). "From its genesis to present, African-American spirituality has always possessed this fundamental purpose; to corroborate, save, value, and legitimize black existence in the face of efforts to destroy, devalue, and delegitimize it" (Fielding-Stewart, 1999, p. 56). Thus, in terms of identity, spirituality can be understood as a source of strength and relief from the oppression that continues today for African Americans and is deeply rooted within the history of African American people. Fielding-Stewart (1999) connotes African American's possess a "soul force" described as:

> … spirit that divinely mediates, informs, and transforms a human being's capacity to create, center, adapt, and transcend the realities of human existence. This creative soul force creates its own culture soul, that is to say, the realm of black existence, where black people discover, analyze, celebrate, valuate, corroborate, and transform the meaning of black life in society. The black culture soul is the oasis of black existence; that orbit of being and behavior where black people freely express and preserve

creative soul force while affirming their unique personas as a people (p. 2).

Soul force, described in other terms as spirituality, plays a significant role in the African American cultural identity both past and present.

Life notes. Growing up, being called the little Black girl, among neighbors and classmates from different ethnic backgrounds than my own played a large role in shaping my identity. I learned to understand my ethnic identity based on the experiences and interactions within my family.

Figure 2.2. My 2nd Grade Class Picture

Contradictory to literature that describes ethnic identity development based on a strong community kinship (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999), high mobility limited my access to a close community that could offer more in terms of shaping my ethnic identity development beyond my close family members. Consequently, I struggled to maintain a positive self-identity based on the perceptions I held of myself both within and outside of my home. At school, where most of my time was spent when I was away from home, I was often excluded or chastised due to my skin color. My family taught me to develop a

thick skin to overcome the issues of low self-esteem that invaded my psyche. However, since my family struggled with internalized, racist self-hatred, based on the prejudicial treatment that they themselves experienced, it was not uncommon to hear comments such as; *You don't need anymore sun because you are already the darkest member in our family*, and *You know your Daddy didn't like you because you were so dark,* while they simultaneously tried to provide positive self-images that would equip me for what was taking place outside of home. These experiences impacted both my psychological health and my identity development, moving me towards a stronger spiritual identity. I learned that I could not rely on the socially constructed identities that were created for me, but I needed to have a healthy identity that could feed my soul. The development of my spiritual identity led me to look beyond what others may think of me towards something greater. Prior to the development of my spiritual identity, I understood the feeling of being trapped or caged, hiding from the world and from myself. The poem *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by a renowned African American female poet, Maya Angelou, speaks to how I felt as a child by sharing what it is like to come of age as a child who faces trauma or racism.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

By Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps on the back of the wind

and floats downstream till the current ends

and dips his wing in the orange suns rays and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage

can seldom see through his bars of rage

his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill

of things unknown but longed for still

and his tune is heard on the distant hill

for the caged bird sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze

and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees

and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams

his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream

his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill

of things unknown but longed for still

and his tune is heard on the distant hill

for the caged bird sings of freedom.

I recited the words of this poem during a Black history month celebration one year. It was as though the words called out to my spirit challenging me to claim the sky and connecting me to the youth for whom I recited the poem. Understanding the possibilities of claiming the sky and releasing the caged mentality, I recognized that freedom was only possible when self-love and the love of others worked together for the greater good.

Moreover, allowing myself to love freely is a key element in my spiritual identity development.

The weaving. Our worldviews are made-up of the way in which we have experienced the world through our cultural identities (Dillard, 2006). We learn to negotiate our identities based on situational encounters and expectations that others may have of us (Dowdy et al., 2000). The impact of history in the lives of African Americans has had a major influence in the creation of a spiritual identity today. "African American spirituality is an integral part of black life in the USA" (Dantley, 2003, p.6). Spiritual convictions have led many African Americans to dedicate service towards helping professions and social justice work (Capper, Keyes, & Theoharis, 2000). My past experiences have assisted me in better understanding and filling my calling towards a profession in education. In recognizing that, I am called to express my love of others through my service in education. Thus, I understand spirituality as that invitation of life beyond oneself, and as the force linking individuals with community (Mattis, 2000).

Redeeming Community

The literature. The community of learning, research and service in higher education has seen dynamic demographic shifts. The predominately White American demographic in higher education is continually evolving towards a diverse demographic that spans nationality, race, and gender (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). These changes warrant a necessary look into the cultural spaces of institutions, where many have noted a need for change (Ayers, Wheeler, Fracasso, Galupo, Rabin, & Slater, 1999). The traditional culture of higher education often creates dissonance for people of color with different cultural values (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). However, the importance

of community, sharing and inviting has become more recognized as a cultural value for some in higher education (hooks, 2003; Lee, 1999). Unfortunately, "One of the dangers we face in our educational systems is the loss of a feeling of community…" (hooks, 2003, p. 130). hooks (2003) argues that it is education that moves us forward as the practice of freedom and can restore our sense of connection. Herein lies the possibility of spirituality, understood as the interrelatedness of all things (Cozart, 2010; Jones, 2005; Mattis, 2000; Tisdell, 2002), to call individuals towards an intimate desire in the academic life (Dillard, 2006).

Caring about the value of community in higher education is both necessary and relevant in exploring how spirituality informs African American women's experiences in doctoral study. Sinott (1999) notes the value of reinventing the university to address both mind and heart, discussing the importance of caring about the same things. Sinott (1999) purports that adults develop and create three communities: the *inner*, *outer*, and *transcendent*. She describes these three communities as the dialogue that takes place internally, among self and others, and "with whatever force for meaning, such as God or spirit the individual possesses" (p. 150). She goes on to describe that a balance between these three spaces of community allows for true intimacy.

African American women in higher education communities seek to fill the void of a need for places and spaces of community (Dowdy, 2008; hooks, 2003). However, "To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination" (hooks, 2003, p. 35). "In a genuine community no one is invisible, no one is silenced" (Lee, 1999, p. 176). Black women have continually reported the feelings of

being marginalized and silenced, overshadowed by the dominating Eurocentric cultural hegemony in spaces of higher education (Dowdy, 2008; Fries-Britt, & Turner Kelly, 2005; hooks, 1989; Myers, 2002; Smith, 2000). The need to attend to the cultural value of community in higher education has generated attention in the area of spirituality (Cozart, 2010). Beliefs that concur this need for community reflect attention towards meaning and purpose that are understood more fully in discussions of spirituality.

Life notes. I have always had the desire for a closer connection with others. I value the possibilities of having a community of support. My spiritual self beckons the call for a relationship, but life factors persist in blocking the call. The poem below is a reflection of my childhood experiences within different communities. It is the call of my spirit and the ever-present reality of life factors,

Carried in the Arms of Community

Family

Together no more, spaces unknown, enveloped in the body of Christ; Grasping, needing, wanting more, drifted with the wind – carry me

Home

Holding hands, lifted voices, giving chorus to the breeze

carry me, carry me, I ask you please

School

No song, no noise, fade away, disappear; where are you when I long for you, why now are you not near – carry me

Sports

Here I am, see me, running relay the 3rd leg, I am one part of the whole, middle of the field, I am a part of the team, our unity revealed – lifting, climbing, together we are strong, here we are now, carried all along.

I created the poem above as I reflected on my experiences as a part of different communities. The first two lines I label *family*, describe my feelings about community within my family. When I was five years old, my mother made the decision to leave her roots in Kentucky and relocate to Corpus Christi, Texas, where her sister (my aunt), was transferred for employment. Being transported far away from the larger body of an extended family support system was a pivotal moment in my life. However, growing up with my mother, siblings, aunt and grandmother, I learned that there would always be a small family community that I could rely on.

Having been raised in Corpus Christi, I found significance in my life from the meaning of Corpus Christi being the body of Christ. Although I had feelings of dislocation, being far away from a larger family unit, I understood my location in Corpus Christi as God's promise of my membership in His full body. In a sense I have always felt carried, carried in a community of love. Despite the high mobility we faced due to economic struggles, the next two lines titled *Home* depict my understanding of being cared for even though I was reluctant and fearful in the midst of an unstable home environment. Like a number of children, I looked forward to the fact that school offered me a sense of stability. Although I attended many different schools, going to school was a relied upon constant in my life.

However, the next lines of the poem titled *School* depict my feeling of being isolated within a community, desiring to be unseen. It is within these lines that I express

again a longing to be carried. I have always been a bit curious about how schools attend to students who are highly mobile. High mobility is a serious concern in education, especially in inner city schools and areas with high poverty rates. Students, who like myself grow up highly mobile, easily slip under the radar when moving from school to school. It seems as though attention in this area might help in a number of other problematic areas, such as drop out prevention, assessment scores and general school performance. In any case, fostering community is relevant in all settings of P-20.

The final lines of the poem titled *Sports* depict my experience as a part of a community within athletic sports. It was not until my junior year of high school that I began participating in extracurricular activities within school. Outside of school I participated in organized community activities beginning at an early age. I felt a strong sense of community during organized sports both within and outside of school. This part of the poem describes my membership as a part of the high school relay team with track and field and my participation in community kickball for young women. In these experiences, we traveled together, sang together, and shared our life experiences. In this space of community, I learned to trust and to care for those who were different from myself. The unified body of team, met with the same goal of being successful in our sport, delivered an understanding of community that moved beyond sharing a common cultural or historical background. Therefore, community understood broadly and in a spiritual sense meant an appreciation, commitment and loyalty for those who were not members of my immediate family, but people who were willing to embrace me and I them.

The weaving. Community is a consistent theme in understanding spirituality (Groen, 2008; Rubin, 2007). Whether we are viewing community from within that dimension of ourselves where we have internal dialogue that somehow moves us, or outside of ourselves where we relate our life to the life of others, transcendent community (Sinnott, 1999) allows us to grasp and hold on to meaning beyond what we know or are able to see. Therefore, community from a spiritual perspective becomes that which is redeeming, returning for African American women a historically cultural value of community to the place of higher education where it is often unseen. For African Americans, community was created around the cohesive factor of spirituality where racism and discrimination historically stood to destroy it (Fielding Stewart, 1999). As such, community is necessary in the spiritual strivings of African American women in higher education.

Knowing/Awareness or Mindfulness

The literature. The historical roots of spirituality that make up the humbling experiences in the African American culture, leading towards a spiritual identity, create a desire for and acknowledgement of community which is informative for understanding the next theme of knowing/awareness or mindfulness. Acknowledging that research of this type is only possible due to the groundwork that was laid before me forges a spiritual direction for understanding. Thus, in reflecting on knowledge/awareness and mindfulness is reflecting on the socio-cultural history in which African American's ways of knowing are embedded.

African American women in the academy place value on relational knowing (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). When writing about the sharing of knowledge and

experiences in the academy Fries-Britt & Kelly (2005) purport that commonalities eliminated unnecessary explanations. While it is powerful to acknowledge relational knowing, I take caution in eliminating explanations because of commonalities. As "theoretical and conceptual standpoints are *cultural;* they are not inherent in one's biology…" (Dillard, 2006, p. 25). Therefore, we run the risk of misunderstanding when overly assumptive, and a potentially greater risk of articulating a monolithic understanding of knowledge from an African American woman's perspective.

However, trends in the analysis of African American women at mid-life reveals African American women "transcend the oppressions of racism and sexism through their own spiritual journeys of awareness and wholeness" (Starks & Hughey, 2003, p. 143). Moreover, Omolade (1994) contends, "Black woman's power and knowing can't be understood without a knowing of her spirit and spiritual life" (p. 112). Therefore, attention towards matters of the spirit support the expansion of new knowledge, power, and understanding.

Life notes. Journal entry, March 28, 2012 - I cannot remember where, nor do I know the name for the image of the bird whose neck stretches behind it, but when I heard my professor say the word *sankofa* a chill ran through me. As soon as I got home I searched the web for the name *sankofa* and clicked on images. Where had I seen this bird? I knew that there was a powerful message behind the meaning of the word, so I looked it up to find that *sankofa* is a West African term used to describe looking back or going back to the historical reference and retrieving knowledge. When I began to write the literature review for this study I struggled with what I wanted to *go back* and write about in terms of the history of Black Americans. At the time, I did not want to discuss

the oppressive struggle arising from slavery or the Civil Rights Movement, or anything having to do with challenges that Black Americans have faced. I did not want my work to reflect a sense of victimization, and I thought that I could paint an optimistic portrait of what spirituality has meant in my life without looking at my cultural history stemming from slavery and justice towards freedom. Every time I tried to move ahead, ignoring the obvious cultural history of African American people, I found myself stifled. I literally could not write. I determined that I could not move forward without looking back. Everything I saw, read, and heard called out to me *sankofa, sankofa, sankofa*. I had to include the cultural history represented in the struggle in the lives of African Americans. Given my keen awareness of the benefits that I have enjoyed in light of this cultural history, I am obligated to not only speak of how this history has shaped and paved a path for me but to pay homage. I now recognize that looking back, or going back to retrieve, is necessary in understanding the present and moving forward. My spiritual journey today is linked to the spiritual journey of my ancestors and my socio-cultural past.

The weaving. Awareness creates the conditions for change (hooks, 2003). We are only able to be transformative when we come to know our realities and how they are embedded within our history and cultures (Freire, 1973/ 2000). Knowledge of stagnated structures in higher education constitutes a need for something to be done and some action to be taken. Scholars (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 2003; Lee, 1999) point out that change is needed in the academy to meet the growing trend of diversity and the ever-changing environment of our society. Historically, as knowledge of oppression and struggle of African American's swept communities, action towards *race uplift* became a driving force (Perkins, 1983). African American women played a large part in *race*

uplift, which was purposed towards "economical, educational and social improvements" in the African American community (Perkins, 1983, p. 184). This historical reality has much to do with the noticeable trends in African American women's lives today.

Action in the Spirit of Education

The literature. African American women represent one of the fastest growing minority groups in doctoral study programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007), and through a legacy of service pursue postsecondary degrees in the field of education while grounding that work in spirituality (Alston, 2005). However, the documentation of persistent struggles faced by African American women within these higher education experiences, particularly in predominately White institutions (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2007; Cozart & Price, 2005; Grant & Simmons, 2008), necessitates a growing body of research that is particularly concerned with African American women, education and spirituality (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1994, 2003; Mattis, 2000). "Understanding the challenges faced by African Americans in higher education is important because it points to ways in which the academy can create a more just and equitable environment for all of its members" (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005, p. 222). Thus, in taking *action in the spirit of education* we can begin to create environments where diverse groups of students can flourish.

A number of scholars (Bell-Scott, 1994; Dowdy, 2000; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005) have set out to examine the experiences of African American women in light of the circumstances faced in the university setting. These scholars have taken action in changing the landscape of scholarship and research in order to empower African American women (Bell-Scott, 1994), collected and connected the voices of African

American women in support of group advancement (Dowdy, 2000), and looked at ways of mentoring and supporting one another within the academy (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). This scholarly work is invaluable, as it is needed in order to change the landscape of traditional higher education where African American women have been marginalized. Spirituality is a central theme interwoven in the literature surrounding African American women, and is noted for providing people with the "stamina to survive" and "a sense of determination" (Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2009, p. 135). Unfortunately, while spirituality is fundamental to students' lives, particularly African American women's lives, little attention is directed in this area (Astin, Astin & Lindholm, 2010). Students, especially students from marginalized groups, continue to feel a certain disconnect in college that stems from the lack of schooling that honors spiritual needs (hooks, 2003, p. 177-180). Therefore, continued *action in the spirit of education* that stands against any sort of domination is needed to confront the challenges faced by African American women desiring to attend to spiritual needs in the academy. It is only action in depth that allows the culture of domination to be confronted (Freire, 1973/ 2000).

Life notes. In a little story that spoke to the need for taking action, Charles Osgood wrote:

Once upon a time, there were four people…

Their names were Everybody, Somebody, Nobody and Anybody.

Whenever there was an important job to be done,

Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it.

Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it.

When Nobody did it, Everybody got angry because...

it was Everybody's job!

Everybody thought that Somebody would do it,

but Nobody realized that Nobody would do it.

So, consequently, Everybody blamed Somebody...

when Nobody did what Anybody could have done in the first place!

Growing up, this story was posted on the refrigerator in my home. The story was titled *Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody*. Since the refrigerator was frequented on a daily basis, we could not help but to see this little story often. The story spoke volumes to me about the importance of taking action and being responsible, serving as a constant reminder that if I did not take action possibly nobody would. Awareness of the need to be responsible marked many of my decisions both within and outside of my home. If there was work that needed to be done, such as cleaning up and doing chores around the house, I did it for fear that nobody else would. Taking action enlisted within me a social responsibility that linked me spiritually to be committed to the larger culture. I felt responsible to make sure that no job was left undone, and whenever I saw something or someone in need, I attended to that need.

The feeling of commitment spread into my professional work experience. While in college preparing to be an educator, I began working as a cashier at Wal-Mart. Not long after being hired as a cashier, I was asked to take a manager's position due to my initiative and commitment to job completion, customer service and quality work. I was the youngest manager hired.

Figure 2.3. My Employee Photo

After one year as a customer service manager, I was asked to commit to even longer hours that would ensure me job promotion within the company. When I explained that I was a full-time student, dedicated to a future profession as an educator, one of the store managers told me that I should leave school because there was more money to be made in the business of management. While he may have been correct in this assertion, many things flooded my mind. My commitment to the field of education was not about the money, I desired to enhance the educational system for students of color. In addition, this was a middle-aged White male telling me that college was not important because he had made his way up the "ladder of success" without a college degree. I recognized that this would not be the case for me as a woman of color. There would be no easy journey down any road, and a sense of moral purpose was necessary in my work. Remaining in school, and choosing to continue my career in education, has allowed me the *opportunity* to take action – an opportunity that nourishes my spirit and connects me to the larger society and community.

The weaving. Education has been a means for advancement in the African American community for some time (Benjamen, Henry, & McMahon, 2005). However, in the early nineteenth century it was a challenge for African Americans to even obtain any kind of formal education (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). This struggle led Black religious organizations and societies to found and develop Black schools (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Prior to the integration of schools, African Americans maintained a system for educating the community despite the ongoing challenges that stood to prevent this from happening. The trials that confronted African Americans in pursuing equal opportunities in education and social justice did not prevent the creativeness and determination of Blacks to achieve despite those challenges. Challenges have spiraled through the school system and are situated in higher education and other spaces of learning. African Americans have used the creativeness of "soul force" in light of challenging situations (Fielding-Stewart, 1999). Soul force is evident in the "dynamic spirits of innovation, adaptation, assimilation, and transformation that shape the African-American experience and consciousness into positive forces for spiritual and social change" (Fielding-Stewart, 1999, p. 2-3). Soul force was evidenced in my decision to continue schooling and forego the *opportunity* that awaited me in Wal-Mart management as "Human action and interpretations are considered historical by-products of collective experience" (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2003, p. 206). Our lives centered within our history and worldviews as African Americans cause a reaction and response, often unconsciously, from a history of oppression, struggle, and determination which all play key roles in the way spirituality informs today's experiences and practices.

Spirituality, historically relied upon by African Americans, sets forth the notion that progress can be made despite challenge. Amidst the notable struggles suffered by African Americans, progress towards a higher education is a victory that exemplifies increasing opportunities, as well as, political and social advancement (Hutcheson et al. 2010). Trailing behind the health professions, education makes up the largest percentage of doctoral degrees earned, and is a leading area of study for African Americans (US Census, 2012). Recognizing that at one point a career in education was the only opportunity available for African Americans, education has been salient in the fight for a socially just democracy in the United States providing a means of taking action (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Taking action towards endeavors that strengthen and sustain a community assumes that the construct of power is present in order to do so, as power is inherent in all of the work that we do (Loomer, 1976).

"If there is no struggle, there is no progress" (Douglas, 1857, p. 22).

Power

The literature. The traditional view of power assumes the influence of one thing on another (Loomer, 1976). However, as African American women seek to empower one another in various ways such as through research, it is necessary to contextualize the "understanding of power in three dimensions: (a) personal power (i.e., experiencing oneself as an agent of change with the personal capability to effect change), (b) interpersonal power (i.e., having influence over others because of one's social location, interpersonal skills, or credibility), and (c) political power (i.e., effectively utilizing formal and informal means to allocate resources in an organization or community)" (Few et al., 2003, p. 206). Black feminist thought (Collins, 1991) and an endarkened feminist

epistemology (Dillard, 2000) grew from the agency of African American women who, by refusing to accept what is claimed to be valid for all, created a way to conceptualize Black women's ways of knowing. Thus, personal power is assumed by the claim that our unique ways of knowing are valid and should be formally accepted. Conceptualizing our knowledge differently as African American women is invaluable when thinking about personal power constructs.

Interpersonal power, particularly in the process of participatory research, is necessary to be monitored, because while power is an unlimited resource it is also "created, maintained, lost, and/or regained in the process of social interaction" (Few, et al., 2003, p. 206). The relational aspects inherent between African American women's experiences with spirituality, begs that we address the issue of power as Starks and Hughey (2003) assert that African American women derive a significant source of power from spirituality. Negotiating the space of power will be necessary in this spiritual work as our diverse experiences converge. For that matter, it will be of particular importance to locate where power is derived in order to ensure a balance of power in the process of research. Moreover, the work that is done renders the potential for political power where sound research speaks to the needs of African American women. Therefore, political power is to be considered throughout the research process.

Life notes. While reading a Christian spiritual book about women holding power in different ways, I came across a poem with an anonymous author that described how I understood my source of power in the world. The poem entitled *A Chosen Vessel* describes power as it is revealed through the Creator. This poem resonated with my spiritual identity and orientation by placing the Creator as the Giver of all things. The

poem exemplifies the notion that we are simply vessels giving to others only as we have been given to.

A Chosen Vessel

By Anonymous

The Master was searching for a vessel to use; On the shelf there were many – which one would He choose? Take me, cried the gold one, I'm shiny and bright, I'm of great value and I do things just right. My beauty and luster will outshine the rest and for someone like You, Master, gold would be the best! The Master passed on with no word at all; He looked at a silver urn, narrow and tall; I'll serve You dear Master; I'll pour out Your wine And I'll be at Your table whenever You dine, My lines are graceful, my carvings so true, And my silver will always compliment You. Unheeding the Master passed on to the brass, It was wide mouthed and shallow, and polished like glass. Here! Here! Cried the vessel, I know I will do, Place me on Your table for all men to view. Look at me, called the goblet of crystal so clear, My transparency shows my contents so dear, Though fragile am I; I will serve You with pride, And I'm sure I'll be happy in Your house to abide. The Master came next to a vessel of wood, Polished and carved, it solidly stood. You may use me, dear Master, the wooden bowl said, But I'd rather You used me for fruit, not for bread! Then the Master looked down and saw a vessel of clay. Empty and broken it helplessly lay. No hope had the vessel that the Master might choose, To cleanse and make whole, to fill and to use. Ah! This is the vessel I've been hoping to find, I will mend and use it and make it all mine. I need not the vessel with pride of its self; Nor the one who is narrow to sit on the shelf; Nor the one who is big mouthed and shallow and loud; Nor one who displays her contents so proud; Not the one who thinks she can do all

things just right; But this plain earthly vessel filled with my power and might. Then gently He lifted the vessel of clay. Mended and cleansed it and filled it that day. Spoke to it kindly. There's work you must do, Just pour out to others as I pour into you.

The weaving. Thinking about power, in relation to spirituality and African American women's experiences in a doctoral study program, causes a necessary look into how the multiple oppressions (i.e. gender, race, class) African American women face are experienced in the context. Johnson-Bailey (2004) notes that gender, race, and class affect African American women's academic lives. The unmitigated set of rules that exist within academic settings impact the way in which African American women navigate and participate in higher education (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Thus, the issue of power is prevalent within these experiences and therefore must be described and understood. Moreover, as spirituality is related to power (Lindholm & Astin, 2008) we recognize that there is a substantial amount of opportunity that lies in reconciling a focus on spirituality in African American women's lives and higher education.

Hope

The literature. *Now faith is the substance of things* ***hoped*** *for and the evidence of things not seen* (Hebrews 11:1 New International Version). The seventh theme embedded in the opening prayer is hope. Many of us find ourselves hopeful - hopeful that we might engage at a deeper level in our work and in society (Dillard, 2000; Dowdy, 2008; hooks, 2003). Our hope is met with systems and structures that mirror societal challenges, particularly in higher education. Lee (1999) asks the question, "Where do our universities take us?" (p. 175). She notes "democracy is possible but dependent on curricula that balances concern for creative individuality with a commitment to the

common good, provides content knowledge and ways to apply that knowledge for the welfare of self and others, and develops the critical capacities to participate in decisions that affect all who share our world" (p. 175). In other words, our hope can be found in viewing education as the practice of freedom (Freire, 1973/2000).

Education as the practice of freedom allows us to envision our own human potential and the potential held within the environments that we create. Freire (1973/2000) put forth that freedom is the "indispensible condition for the quest for human completion" (p. 47). What if we changed the status of academia by nourishing the intellect, committing to the sacredness of all life, and fostering spirituality (Lee, 1999)? We must certainly believe that there is hope for these things. Kazanjian (1998) found that higher education students described the spiritual dimensions of their education as representative of experiencing moments of meaning in their journeys. As human beings are a meaning-making species (Cacioppe, 2005), meaning is notably sought after within the academy, leading individuals to seek fulfillment towards spiritual needs (Cozart, 2010; hooks, 2003; Kazanjian, 1998). Attention to spirituality allows us to view the underpinnings of our being that are "our most authentic relationship to self, others, the universe and the transcendent…" (Jones, 2005, p. 1).

Life notes. My older brother is an important person in my life, and has played the role of father figure up until he gave my husband my hand in marriage. I have always looked at him admirably for his sustainability and strength, despite troubles that our family has encountered. He is a blessing to my life and has always given me hope and encouragement for the future. In my youth, he opened up and said something to me that changed my life forever. I have never spoken directly to him about this memory. Should

he read this work and this letter that I have thought about sending but never sent, I pray that he will be strengthened by the hope he instilled in me.

Dear Brother,

Did you know that your words carried power the day you told me that I was our family's last hope? Do you remember the day, or even telling me this? I remember as if it were yesterday. You sat crouched on the floor by my side, as I sat crying in the restroom contemplating running away. I told you that I didn't want to be there anymore and I cried while you gently touched my back. Your eyes called out lovingly towards me and you told me these powerful words, "You are our family's last hope". Since, my life has not been the same. I often wonder why you put your hope in me? Your hope in me inspired within me hope for myself. Whenever I doubted the possibility of doing something, I thought about your words. That day, in that moment, life became more real to me. I lived for more than myself, but for our family, and for hope. Your words contributed to my spirituality as they moved me forward and encouraged me to consider the possibilities… So, thank you dear brother…thank you!

With love,

Your Baby Sister

The weaving. Hope can come in a word, an action or in the imagination, it can inspire and contribute to the human journey as spirituality does, pointing individuals forward and beyond self (Benner, 2011). It is with hope that this work is carried out with great care and that a contribution is made to the educational landscape to embrace the multiplicity of our society. Spirituality is a part of African American women's experiences and practices, and for that reason we gained hope that we would build greater knowledge in the area of exploring spirituality in the context of a doctoral program in educational leadership.

CHAPTER III

ETHNODRAMATIC METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

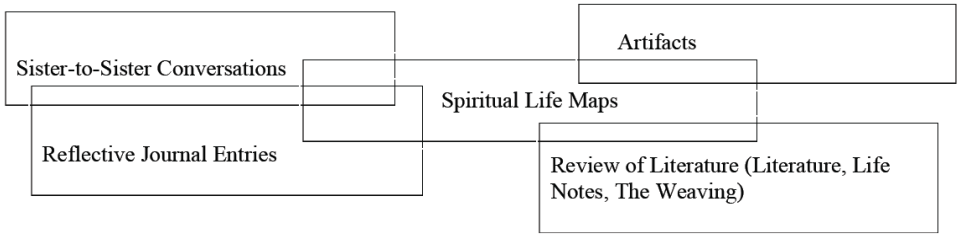
Exploring spirituality in the doctoral study experience of three African American women in an educational leadership program required a thoughtful and creative way of representing a non-traditional set of data. The complex nature of spirituality in the social landscape of the human experience, the restrictive focus of spirituality in higher education, and our dramatic representation as co-researchers allowed this study to best be conducted qualitatively with unique ethnodramatic methods. While qualitative methods allowed us to seek the deeper meanings that emerged from our understandings grounded in our lived experiences, and contextualized within a small group (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), ethnodrama gave us a way to translate that experience through a different form of presentation (Nimmons, 2007). As such, my co-researchers and I explored spirituality personally and relevantly in the context of higher education to answer the research questions: 1) How does spirituality inform the experience and progress of three African American women in an educational leadership doctoral program? 2) Where is spirituality situated when mapping the educational experiences of African American women in a doctoral program? This chapter includes the nature of the research, the theoretical framework, setting, co-researchers, data collection sources, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, contributions, and concluding thoughts.

Collective Nature of the Research

Couched within the family of action research, we used participatory research rooted "in liberation theology and neo-Marxist approaches to community development (e.g., in Latin America) [having] liberal origins in human rights activism (e.g., in Asia)" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 273) to collectively engage, articulate and translate a shared experience. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) promote the attribute of shared ownership of research, which suited this study, as we, three African American women sharing a common experience and interest in exploring the active voice of spirituality in doctoral study, became the unit of analysis for the data. The active voice was brought through an ethnodramatic representation of the data, where participatory research allowed us to explore various cultural phenomena that engaged oppressed and marginalized groups. We, as African American women in the academy, are a historically oppressed and marginalized group. Therefore, participatory research allowed us to act on the right to speak on matters of importance to us, the people researching and being researched (Park, 1993). It allowed us to come together as individual researchers to explore a complex topic such as spirituality, within the confines of an educational leadership doctoral program, and relate our intimate personal experiences to the larger culture. As opposed to the traditional view of research, as something that is "done *to* people" participatory research allowed us to engage together and share in all elements of the research (Patton, 1990, p. 183). This collaborative method of inquiry empowered and allowed us to "co-creat[e] collaborative spaces to examine and discuss individual, school, and community concerns" (McIntyre, 2000, p. 128). As individuals that came together as co-constructors of knowledge, we irradiated engagement as spiritual beings.

Ethnography

Ethnography complimented the participatory research methods by allowing us to look deeply towards personal knowledge, and understand self in the wider social, cultural and political realms within the context of inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Figure 3.1 outlines the ethnodramatic methodological approach that is used to show the way data is gathered to explore how spirituality informed the unique experiences of three women.



3.1. Graphic Representation of the Ethnodramatic Methodological Approach

Ethnography placed us in the position of authority as we told our own personal stories (Patton, 2002). Our stories were deeply interrogative, while remaining within the biological, historical, socio-cultural, and political context of our experience as doctoral students. Through ethnography, we challenged the existing social processes and traditionally held ideas about the way research should be structured, and we embraced the idea of the need to change existing social structures to meet the needs of our group (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). As such, our use of ethnography was critical and moved us beyond the safety net "to life on the margins as we learn[ed], [taught one another] and practice[d] the art of knowing, the science of asking, and the reality of being" (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002, p. 282). Ethnography is used in this study to invite an analysis of "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Patton, 1990, p. 85). As each of us reflected on our written auto-ethnographies, we explored and saw ourselves within the

multiple social milieus as we remained within ourselves. In addition, the data collected and translated through ethnodrama allowed the opportunity for "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), which helped us to use the various research strategies as tools for making sense of our experiences; in short, the analysis of the auto-ethnographic process put the proverbial mirror of our lives in front of us so we could continue to make sense of our long-term sustained conversations within and between ourselves and our ecologies.

Social Cartography

In addition, and complementary to participatory methods and ethnography, a more traditional social cartography methodology was employed for mapping our unique experiences in the "spatial aspects of the educational experience" (Ruitenberg, 2007, p. 22). We used social cartography to provide what is considered the "third eye" of the research. Having a "third eye" is often referred to as an inner eye that is linked to an understanding of the unspoken or alternate understandings that are often closely tied to the spiritual. In this case, we created spiritual life maps that gave us a visual that led us back through these alternate spaces of spirituality that lead up to our participation in the doctoral program in educational leadership. We used the visual image of the spiritual life map to remind us of moments long forgotten (Spencer, 2007). These long forgotten moments were mapped and represented, and gave us meaning that detailed specific events that led us further towards gathering useful information to understand the phenomenon of spirituality within the doctoral journey.

Theoretical Framework

The endarkened feminist epistemology serves as a theoretical framework used to guide this study. An endarkened feminist epistemology builds a foundation for

purposeful research that is grounded in history, culture, identity, and experience, while simultaneously uniting spirituality and intellect (Dillard, 2006). In order to conceptualize the tenets of this theoretical framework, we used the image of the bird Sankofa perched upon a stack of ivory books resembling a cross (Figure 2.1). Sankofa is a West African word and symbol often representative of a bird that is looking behind. The meaning of Sankofa is "look to the past to inform the future" (Mitchem, 2000, p. 177). In this study, Sankofa represents the socio-cultural history embedded within African American women's experiences in doctoral study, and the knowledge that the work being done is possible due to the work of many other women who have paved the way. I have used

Figure 3.2. Conceptual Framework

Sankofa perched upon a cross within my conceptualization to represent my ontology as researcher, and my Christian faith that grounds my knowledge and thinking about the world. The words around the image represent important pieces of the foundational concepts that inform and surround the present research. In addition, the cross is assembled with stacked books to represent the institution of higher education, often

symbolized as the ivory tower. Overall, the image represents the female symbol (Venus) in order to capture the theoretical framework of the endarkened feminist epistemology.

Home is Where the Heart Is

With its recent demographic shifts and goals towards diversity, Texas State University was the ideal location for conducting research of this type. First, the University's demographic statistics revealed over a 50% increase in the number of African Americans enrolled in doctoral study programs over a five-year time span (txhighereddata.org). Secondly, Texas State University ranked three out of the top ten public state universities in the retention and graduation rates of African American's (Texas State University Equity and Access Report, 2009). Next, the increased enrollment of African Americans in such a short period of time, and the University's ability to retain and graduate this population, reflected goals two and five of the institution which are to "Expand access to public education…" and attract and support a diverse student body (www.upa.txstate.edu/university-mission-and-goals.html). Finally, the University has a strategic plan for diversity that is assessed annually for progress, which further underscored the dedication and commitment the University makes towards embodying an institutional focus on multiculturalism. These efforts, on behalf of the University, created a setting that embraced change. This study sought to enhance the University's efforts of embracing change by looking at ways in which particular students had already begun to allow the unseen culture of spirituality to influence and inform their experiences. A study of this sort required an environment that espoused a certain level of readiness and fervency. As such, Texas State University was the optimal setting for this exploration.

Co-Researchers

The emphasis that Texas State University places on the enrollment of students of color in the doctoral program for educational leadership required that we ask such questions as, what does this diverse group of students bring with them, and what is being done to respond to the diversity of enrollment for doctoral students who find their way to this program? The literature finds that when goals change and institutions pursue new initiatives, the climate of the institution should also change to reflect this and provide the necessary conditions for this new population to succeed, or at minimum to make their participation in the process a safe one. The nature and focus of this study required that experiences be explored in a way that is holistic and encompassing of the individuals involved. Due to the specificity of the personal space and institutional setting, the co-researchers could not be randomly drawn (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). A purposeful population sample was required in this type of engagement (Patton, 1990). Patton (2002) emphasized that purposeful sampling is used to "learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 46). Patton described purposeful sampling as a specific group that has information about or experience in the issue that is guiding the study. To this effect, the selection criteria that was used to identify co-researchers in this study included: 1) be an African American female; 2) be enrolled at Texas State in the School Improvement PhD Program; 3) recognize and self-report knowledge of spirituality as it is understood in personal lived experiences; 4) be willing to participate in the study; and 5) provide signed consent to participate. In my initial stages of thinking about the research, I learned that there were two African American women in the doctoral program, within the same program, that also expressed an interest in the topic of

spirituality within their experiences in the academy. These two women were responsible for initiating the start of a new class in the doctoral program that would address their interest in the topic of spirituality and other issues of theology. Due to these women's connected level of interest and initiative in pressing upon the institution to look deeper into the topic of spirituality, I invited them to a pilot discussion on African American women's experiences with spirituality in higher education. Both women attended the pilot discussion and expressed a strong interest in the study topic. Our discussion flowed smoothly, in and out of laughter, with thoughtful and sentimental stories as if we had met and engaged in similar dialogue many times before. I recognized that these two women would add significantly to the research and fit the purposeful sampling necessary for this study. Both women agreed to participate. The nature of the engaged inquiry and self exploration of this study benefited each of us in multiple ways, through the social, cognitive and relational mapping of our experiences uniquely tied to our circumstances as African American women engaging in an educational leadership doctoral study program.

Research as a Responsibility

I served as an active and fully engaged co-researcher throughout the study. I articulated this way of engaging in the research with my co-researchers at the onset of the study so that they would be clear about the process and my relationship as a co-researcher. Aside from sharing with them the organization and process for collecting and analyzing data, I recognized and acknowledged the importance of my negotiating the research relationship (Maxwell, 2005), and my responsibility in this work. I shared how, as a co-researcher, I was committed to engage in the process of critical self-reflection by journaling prior to conducting the research and throughout. I was able to gain clarity

through this reflection, as a natural part of the process, and dismiss any preconceptions I held prior to engaging in the research with my co-researchers (Patton, 1990; 2002). Milner (2006) promotes that researchers engage in a process of reflection for a more appropriate representation of what is learned, especially in research that deals with the spirit. I acted on my responsibility as a committed co-researcher, which led to a deeper spiritual connection with my co-researchers beyond the research as evidenced in our final collective journal writing in Act Five of the ethnodramatic presentation.

What Shall We Gather?

Our data collection sources reflected the multi-dimensional and complex nature of gathering data that shows the interconnectedness of the nature of history, identity and meaning. Milner (2006) notes, "researchers and participants should consider who they are themselves as racial, cultural and spiritual beings through a model of reflection" (p. 374). Through participatory methods, we co-constructed knowledge in relation to our racial, cultural, and spiritual identities in a reflective way by continuously interrogating the research process and our experiences through the collection of different types of data such as: sister-to-sister conversations, reflective journaling, artifacts, and spiritual life maps (Appendix E).

Sister-to-Sister Conversations

"Sister-to-Sister" conversation is described as "Afrocentric slang", closely representative of stories told and conversations held between kindred spirits where life lessons are shared between Black women (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2003). Sister-to-Sister conversations, allowed us to tell stories of our experiences as a way of preserving the oral tradition of our cultural heritage (Dowdy, 2008). The oral tradition of

storytelling keeps the culture alive, and "(a) is a means of learning more about factors contributing to the events that affect African American women's lives; (b) imposes order and meaning on the life events and interpretation of those situations experienced by African American women; and (c) allows us to take fragmented thoughts, feelings, and beliefs and create a timeline for events" (Dowdy, 2008, p. 5). Dowdy (2008) contends "Telling one's story in a safe space encourages an explanation for actions" (p. 5). As we explored how spirituality informs the doctoral journey, sister-to-sister talk served as the platform of discovery as we reflected on and made meaning of our experiences.

Women in the Mirror

Reflective journals allowed us to continue to make meaning beyond our weekend meetings as we captured written notes, reflective poems, and important thoughts that generated "the unusual insights that move[d] the analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 161). In reflective journaling, we used our genre of choice (i.e., poetry, music, prayer, etc.) to capture the experiences, emotions, knowledge and memories at any given moment throughout the process. These communicatory methods created the participatory data that allowed us to reflect on the information gleaned from the review of literature, and the educational space, climate and curriculum we experienced within the doctoral program. Both reflective journal writing and sister-to-sister conversations assisted us in sharing knowledge throughout the exploration into the phenomenon of how spirituality informs our experience and progress in the doctoral program in educational leadership.

Artifacts

Complimentary to participatory methods, we used artifacts such as written papers, journal entries, reflections and auto-ethnography to explore our personal experiences leading up to and within the doctoral program. Since auto-ethnography is an embedded part of the curriculum within the doctoral program at Texas State University, each co-researcher had already created an auto-ethnography and was able to use this artifact for the purpose of research. Thus, we each recognized how our auto-ethnographies assisted in the internal search for meaning that allowed us to gain further insight into the larger culture of which we are a part (Patton, 2002). We began collecting our data by revisiting our auto-ethnographies together, and questioning their content while keeping in mind our research topic of how spirituality informs our experiences and progress. This gave us the opportunity to reflect on a personal project that was framed and constructed as a part of the educational curriculum of the doctoral program. Reflecting on this, we interrogated whether or not we embedded our spirituality into the text, and considered reasons why this did or did not happen. We reflected on how this text might have been created differently had we created it now, given our progress and varied stages in the doctoral program, along with the level of agency that we have established as empowered students who have taken charge of research topics and have requested spirituality be added as a class in the curriculum. The exploration of this authentic work contributed to our analysis of text that allowed us to view the language, and work to make meaning of it. Thus, the use of artifacts, particularly the auto-ethnography, gave a different lens of time within the educational space, climate and curriculum of the doctoral program.

Spiritual Life Maps

Finally, in addition to reflective journaling, sister-to-sister conversations, and text/artifact analysis, we mapped our experiences with the use of social cartography. Social cartography gave us the opportunity to present visual dialogue in the form of spiritual life maps in order to make what is deemed invisible, visible (Paulston & Liebman, 1994). Moreover, it added an additional layer of visual analysis to support the construction of a framework that explored the development of our spirituality in multiple contexts leading up to the doctoral program. We were the primary data sources, three African American women who, through reflection, conversation, journaling, sharing of personal stories, and life mapping, provided information and insight into the phenomenon of spirituality in higher education.

Dramaturgical Analysis

Ongoing data analysis occurred from the onset of the study as we engaged in the theatricals of everyday life throughout our study. While we recognized that there was not one way to analyze data (Creswell, 2002), we metaphorically wove the data, similar to the weaving of a handmade crocheted blanket. Handmade crocheted pieces are often referred to as a dying art. The degree of difficulty, skill and patience one must have to gently hook together threads of yarn to create beautifully handmade useful items such as hats, scarves and blankets, is often rewarded in the comfort these same items offer. My mother enjoys crocheting as an act of service to others. She donates baby blankets, hats and booties to families who have lost a child in the birthing process, and also gives away other crocheted items as she feels inspired to do so. Although she has only recently developed the skills and ability to crochet, many people express to her that her talent

reflects years of practice. What many of these people do not realize is that my mother is sharing this gift that she has acquired because the loss of a child is something that has impacted our family on more than one occasion. In her service of crocheting gifts for other families through "Threads of Love," her spirit and, indeed, her very heart, is reflected in the fabric of each item that she crochets. Therefore, her work moves beyond mere skill to something that is deeply personal and deeply spiritual.

As my co-researchers and I worked collaboratively to analyze the data that was woven together like a crocheted blanket, we engaged deeply, personally and spiritually in the work. Like my mother, we had not had years of practice, but we moved forward prayerfully and allowed our personal lives to be reflected and thoughtfully linked within the academic context of the metaphoric symbol of our own crocheted blanket (Appendix D). This blanket was used to analyze the data we collected in the research process. The crocheted blanket brought together the conceptual framework and guiding questions used to support the structure of the analysis. These guiding questions came together from the overlapping and interconnected six themes of the endarkened feminist epistemology, and from the seven elements of the prayer that was used to guide the review of literature. These questions served to filter the analysis of the recorded, transcribed and written materials collected from our sister-to-sister conversations, reflective journals, artifacts and spiritual life maps. Specifically, we explored what, how, when and where within the data, the guiding questions responded to the elements within the interwoven quilt of data analysis. I spent time independently pouring through the data by listening to the recordings from our weekend meetings, reading and re-reading transcripts to align the themes that we discovered as a group. We identified "salient themes, recurring ideas or

language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 158) in order to represent the rich and detailed information that we gathered and presented in the form of ethnodrama.

Translating the Work: An Ethnodramatic Presentation

Ethnodrama transformed the findings of this research into a written playscript (Given, 2008). We use the written playscript in the form of ethnodrama to promote and anticipate audience participation, an idea borrowed from Augusto's (2000) participatory approach to examine oppressions and build strategies for emancipation. Boal (2000) uses what he terms "Theatre of the Oppressed" as stimuli for audience participation. Boal's Forum Theatre techniques require the audience to participate by reading the scripts and relating their own personal experiences to the data. In turn, audience members are able to derive their own implications from the research. This is the type of audience engagement that will be employed when this data is shared publicly. This type of participation is fitting within the theoretical framework of the endarkened feminist epistemology that has guided this study. With the tenets of the endarkened feminist epistemology focusing on research as a responsibility to the community, individual expression, dialogic expression, meaning in concrete daily experiences, knowledge shaped by history, and gender, race, and identity relations in the academy, Boal's Forum Theatre techniques invite the reader/viewer to *come alive* within our ethnodrama. Therefore, when the written playscript is used audience members can choose how they engage with the data.

The written playscript of the ethnodrama allows for the dramatization of the data that was based upon prominent themes that arose from the transcripts of our sister-to-sister conversations, autoethnographies, and collective journal entries. The themes used

in the ethnodrama were revealed from our collaboration as we collectively tried to make sense of the data. We organized the themes into individual Acts based on the most prominent and recurring themes. The presentation of each Act was then organized according to the quilt of data analysis and in response to the guiding questions. Although all of the questions were not responded to, the goal of ethnodrama was in the presentation of data to "create the most credible, vivid, and persuasive portrait of [each of our] culture and lived experiences and hence [provide] an informative, emotion-generating, and aesthetic experience for its readers and/or viewers" (Given, 2008, p. 283).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established on the basis of ethically sound research that fully explicated the theoretical and methodological orientations that guided the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Our use of multiple sources of data such as reflective journal excerpts, spiritual life maps, sister-to-sister conversations, and participatory approach did not allow data to be "misrepresented, altered or distorted because they are life experiences. They are ethnodramas" (Denzin, 2009, p. 74). The sources and the ethnodramatic presentation of data make this study accessible to various groups. Furthermore, the theories and methods we used were key in establishing credibility and dependability (Rossman & Rallis). Effort was made towards building a framework and road map of this study that laid out the methodology for others who would further the research through duplication, and for those who desire to increase their understanding of the topic and/or methods.

Ethical Considerations

The University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) vetted the research process, nature of research, and the method of data collection in order to ensure that the research would maintain responsible judgments and exercise ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained prior to the research being conducted with the basis of autonomy and respect for persons (Fischman, 2000). Upon consent, co-researchers were given explicit information regarding the purpose of the research and other pertinent information that outlined the roles each of us would play within the research process. In the first weekend retreat, we addressed all ethical considerations following their verbal consent to participate. We discussed issues such as: identity sensitivity, data, systematic procedures for the participatory process, trustworthiness, and our responsibility to self and each other throughout the process. We made sure that each of us felt comfortable moving forward prior to my asking the co-researchers to sign the written consent to participate. We discussed how we would collect and analyze our data and how we would share the data among ourselves and use it for other scholarly work. Each of us expressed an interest in article publications, book publications and research meeting presentations. However, there was the caveat of identity protection in the sharing of sensitive information. While two of us did not feel that sharing our identity would be harmful, one of us felt strongly that in this written work she would like to use a pseudonym. In the final presentation of the data, we created a different way of describing ourselves in order to characterize our work while respecting the privacy rights of our co-researcher who shared this concern.

Contributions

This study contributes to the field of education by offering critical understandings about the impact of spirituality in the experiences of three African American women in a doctoral study program. The powerful influence that spirituality has in the lived experiences of African American people (Mattis, 2000) attests to the contributions of exploring spirituality in the doctoral study experiences of African American women. To this end, this study offers crucial insight to an intimate area of social phenomena experienced by a small group of African American women and lends itself to further implications for the field of higher education based on what can be learned from our research that can benefit the preparation of other graduate African American women.

The Weaving

The research plan (Appendix B) and methodology was set-up to gather the data necessary to answer the research questions, and to empower my co-researchers and I as we embarked upon an intellectual and spiritual journey of inquiry. As we met during each weekend retreat we developed a natural process that flowed from our varied perspectives and provided a closer understanding of the research questions. Our participatory method of engaging added life and fullness to the rich and textured data that we collected and allowed us to reflect our stories ethnodramatically. My eagerness at the onset of the study mirrored the likeness of a toddler who eagerly awaited her parent's return home after a long day of work. In the well-known words of my Lord and Savior, "Behold, I [stood] at the door, and knock[ed]" (Rev 3:20 King James Version) as I awaited the opportunity to be filled with a spirit of inquiry and exploration as I embarked upon the research journey.

CHAPTER IV

THE ETHNODRAMATIC REPRESENTATION OF DATA

Here be dragons! is a phrase that was used in ancient times when one approached an unchartered territory. Having explored the ways in which spirituality relates to and informs my experience and that of two other African American women-scholars in a doctoral study program, we recognized that we were in territory unchartered. Spirituality within our educational experiences had not been considered. The data we collected and analyzed using the interwoven quilt of data analysis (Appendix D), allowed us to respond to the guiding questions that were developed from the overlapping and interconnecting six themes of the endarkened feminist epistemology and from the seven elements of the prayer, which have outlined the review of literature. Table 4.1 shows the elements and themes that produced the guiding questions.

Table 4.1. Data Collection/Analysis Elements and Themes

Elements of Prayer	Themes of the Endarkened Feminist Epistemology
- Humility - Identity - Community - Knowledge/Awareness - Action - Power - Hope	- *Self-definition* forms the participation and responsibility to community - Research is a *pursuit of purpose* that is both intellectual and spiritual - *Becoming* takes place through dialogue and within the context of community - There is *meaning in the concrete experiences* of everyday life. - *History* shapes and influences knowledge and research; it should be looked into and extended out - *Gender, race and identity relations* in the academy are impacted by the power structures

These prayer elements and themes undergirded our work. The data presented in this chapter shares our journey of exploration as we set out to understand how spirituality informed our experience and progress in doctoral study.

Five Acts comprise the data that is revealed through the ethnodrama. While the storyline of the ethnodrama is not a sequential build up towards a specific plot, it is organized in response to the theoretical framework and the themes that were used to create the interwoven quilt of data analysis. Each Act is titled using those themes, and each Act presents themes found to be prominent in response to the questions that guided the research. The prologue for the ethnodrama introduces us, the co-researchers, using a visual from our spiritual life maps. The images taken from our spiritual life map serve as both a visual enhancement, as well as something to build on the ethnodrama. Following the prologue, Act One shows the prominent theme of humility that is captured within the

data, while Act Two captures the theme of identity. Following, Act Three shows the relationship of power in the doctoral study experience, while Act Four shows how action is a necessary part of the journey. Finally, Act Five captures prominent themes responded to within the data that fit within the category of Hope. Each Act begins with The Weaver, representative of a narrator in traditional theatrical performances that weaves together information to promote understanding of the storyline. The Weaver is my voice that sets a context for the data translated into each Act. The Acts then end with the weaving, which gives any additional background and adds a researcher's perspective for the data captured within the Act.

Prologue

We found that each of us could be represented metaphorically as one of three natural elements: wind, fire and water (Table 4.2). The elements of wind, fire and water, when combined, are understood to represent the spirit. Therefore, we used these elements in place of our names for the ethnodrama. Rather than personifying these elements of the natural world as if they have human characteristics, each of us is named after one of the elements to show the characteristics of the natural world within us.

Table 4.2. Co-Researchers

	Sometimes I am just not the one to speak up and other times I am. I don't know why this is so different all of a sudden.
	I am just now seeing, through Wind's situation how and that I am to bear my parents' cross: how we are to bear one another's burdens is not an easy task when we have held on to past hurts and have written our own metanarrative…
	Too many before us, and perhaps after, believe that their work is not going to change anything. They almost do it for a livelihood, but here we are doing this research because we believe that it is going to make a difference.

These elements show our connection with the earth and the land. The making of ourselves into these natural elements is relatable to the novel The Alchemist (1988), whereby spiritual unity binds us together. In this novel, Santiago who is the main character must learn to tap into the soul of the world. Our research was our attempt to do the same as we learned from one another, grew in knowledge, and shared our personal experiences to understand how spirituality informs our experience and progress in doctoral study.

Wind

I am Wind. We chose the element of wind to represent me because I described a particular experience that happened to me in my late teens where I questioned God, and I felt God's presence as the wind encircled me. I am also named Wind due the to times in my life where I felt that I had been tossed about, to and fro, with the wind. For example, at the age of five, my family relocated from Kentucky to Corpus Christi, Texas. Although we remained in that city, we moved within the city often. It seemed that every two years I attended a new school. I felt that as I was tossed about and I was always searching for my place. This led me to be swift at getting things done at a younger age than many. I have experienced and accomplished a number of different things that are unexpected for a young African American woman in my mid thirties. I have a teenage daughter that is about to graduate from high school and a son that will soon be in middle school. I have been married for over ten years. I have had two careers, one in business management and currently in education, and I am nearing the completion of a PhD. Although there is a vast difference in age between the co-researcher Fire and I, my track record has led us to share a number of commonalities such as, mothering young adults

and job experiences. My bout with motherhood began at an early age, and I have been in school for the entirety of my oldest child's life. I also married at a young age and plunged through two careers with swiftness, like the wind. I have a strong conviction towards the things I value most in life, which are my faith, the love of family, commitment to friendship and my moral and ethical responsibilities as a human being. Following this introduction of me as Wind, I have provided a visual image (Figure 4.1) from my spiritual life map to offer a connection to my character portrayal in the ethnodrama. I have also used pieces of my spiritual life map in Act One, Humility: Words with our Mothers, and Act Four, Power to give a greater visual representation of experience to the data. My full spiritual life map is found in Appendix F.

Figure 4.1. On the Move: From My Spritual Life Map

Fire

She made what was invisible, visible through shedding light in dark spaces. As fire is an element known to refine and make metals stronger, this co-researcher became a beacon of strength for all of us through her wisdom and knowledge that she openly shared. Though she moved often in her childhood, she claims Denver, Colorado as home. We had the opportunity to revisit her childhood home in Denver while attending an educational conference there. As the spirit would have it, after the sharing of our lives together in conversation, reflection and spiritual life mapping, we were able to visit the physical location of the places she told us about. She is the most mature in age in our group. We were reminded of this during one of our weekend retreats when we went out to lunch and the waiter gave her the check because he said he thought she might have been our mother. While she is not our mother, she is, however, a wife and mother of three children. She is a refined woman of poise and great strength, which was evidenced as she shared her lived experiences with us in our weekend data collection retreats. She is also a school administrator. Notably, she does not let the politics of her position of leadership persuade her moral judgment and treatment of the students and the colleagues she serves. Like fire, she is a powerful force of nature, and recognizes her ability to influence life in both good and bad ways. Following this introduction of Fire, I have selected a piece (Figure 4.2) of her life map to add a visual enhancement to better understand her character and interactions within the ethnodrama. This visual shows an example of the decision Fire made as an adult woman in the military to open her bible and pray for the salvation of the Lord. Her full spiritual life map is found in Appendix F,

and an additional piece of her spiritual life map is used as visual enhancement for Act Two, Shaping Identity: Spirituality as a Way of Life.

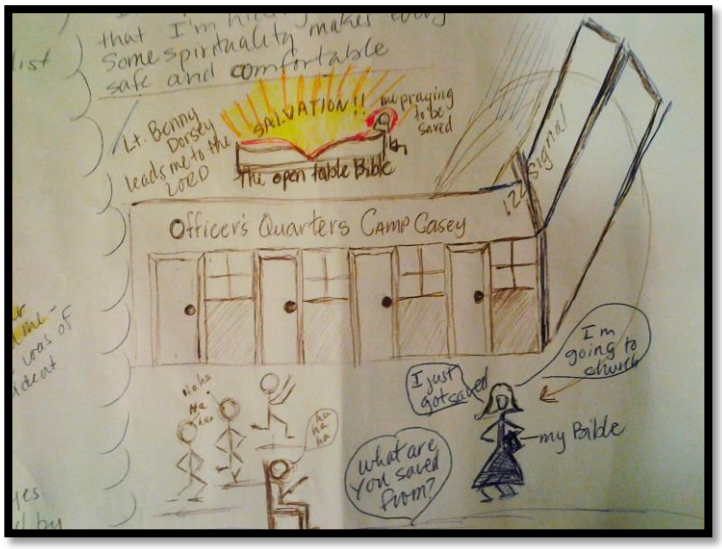


Figure 4.2. Salvation of the Lord: From Fire's Spiritual Life Map

Water

Reared in the area of East St. Louis, Illinois, Water believes her spirit led her to the doctoral study program at Texas State University. She shared with us that God spoke to her telling her that the school that she would attend would have a river running through it. Thus, we named her Water. Similar to the excitement of a toddler splashing around in a wade pool, she brought a youthful eagerness and excitement to the research. Water is the youngest co-researcher of the group. Her youthfulness penetrated deeply into our souls adding laughter and the sincerity of youth to our work. Like the element of water she was fluid and ever changing in her behavior, personality and directionality. Water is in her early thirties; and while she came across as having a strong personality, she had a gentle, softer side, like that of calming water. This part of her personality was most often witnessed only in a smaller group. Water was in a formidable stage of life where she was

determining her direction for her future after the completion of her doctoral degree. Her interactions with us during the research reflected the struggles of her childhood, which she described as often having a negative effect on her in close relationships with people. She exemplified a life filled with promise as is reflected in her talent as a spoken word artist. She related to our learning and growing together in artistic ways. She often quoted movies, songs and stories to make sense of things.

Her spirituality was reflected in her desire to connect with others. Like the element of water, she could be understood as a source of strength or fear due to the strength of her current, or rather her strong personality. The visual image (Figure 4.3) that we use to describe Water is an image from her spiritual life map. This image of the film Antwone Fisher reflected the troubled background that Water faced in her youth. In this movie an adult man goes back to the home of his youth to confront the abuse that he suffered as a child. In essence, sharing her life story through spoken word and through this research, Water has confronted her painful history of an abusive environment, multiple foster homes, and parental neglect. Since her spiritual life map was originally created in the form of a video, we used still shots to represent the images in place of the video for this written document. Additional visuals created from her spiritual life map are used in Act Three and Act Five to add visual enhancement to the ethnodrama.

Figure 4.3. Antwone Fisher: From Water's Spiritual Life Map

Common Grounds

The reader of this ethnodrama will also find that we, as co-researchers, have common grounds that have influenced the data. Each of us grew up in single parent homes or had an unstable home environment. We connected and understood education as one stable part of our lives. We are also Christian women. Our Christianity is represented throughout the data where we made connections between our faith beliefs and understandings of stories from the Christian Holy Bible. Oftentimes, within the data, we used stories from the Bible to place a greater emphasis on something within our personal life experiences. The adaptation of the data that we collected into the ethnodrama shows how we placed an emphasis on what we have understood through our challenging upbringing and our ontology as Christian women.

Act One

Humility: Words with our Mothers

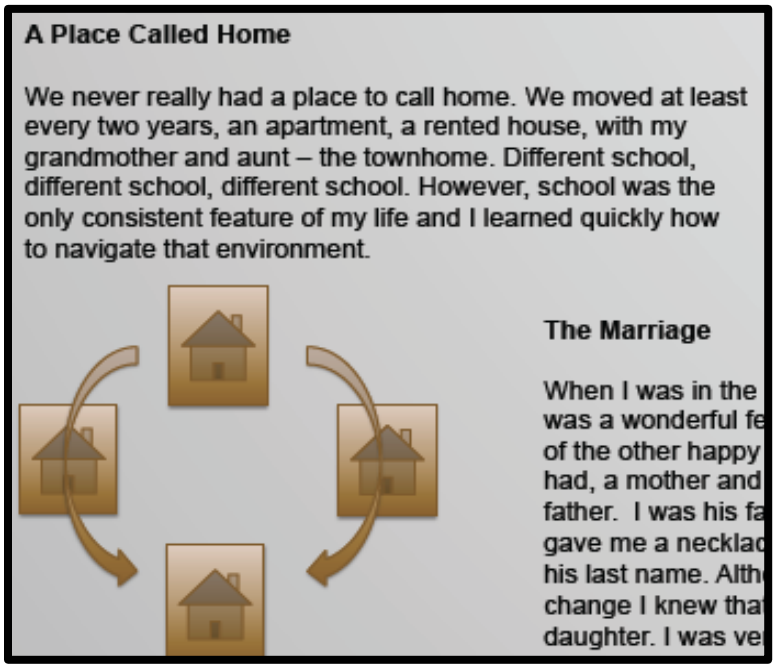


Figure 4.4. A Place Called Home: From My Spiritual Life Map

The weaver. The data captured in our sister-to-sister conversations exemplified humility that each of us shared from having been raised in an unstable home environment. This image from my spiritual life map shows the struggle of growing up highly mobile. Each of us faced high mobility, and each of us faced trials in the humble beginnings of our youth. We recognized that the humility that we have today is reflected in the struggles our mothers faced as African American women. Reflecting on the literature in Chapter I of this dissertation that discusses the humility that stems from the historical oppression of African American people, and a stolen humanity, we understand the challenges our mothers faced. Thus, we recite our Mother Monologues to pay homage to them. While we show no outward signs of historical oppression and/or of a stolen humanity, we recognized the struggles and hardships of our mothers. Each of us is

living evidence of the impact that history has played in the lives of African American women. We each share stories relating to our experiences growing up in single parent households with our mothers and how the unstable conditions of home humbled us.

Water: I am thankful for the heritage and cultural diversity of my mother. Through my mother I have gained a love for the arts. Brilliant, well spoken and well read, she tried to ensure her children would have a strong head. She removed us from school, but did not remove the opportunity to learn. She gave us literature, movies and music.

Wind: Someone to depend on; that's who she is and has always been. Influential in my life in a number of ways; that's who she is and who she has always been. Fitting in and coping with life adversities; that's who she is and who she has always been. Unfortunately, a single mother of four, instability and hunger came knocking at our door. The painful memories are not something that I should hold on to today, but that is what I have today – and that is my mother. My mother still lives and is steady making her way. I am offered a chance at forgiveness in the ultimate way. To love her beyond any past hurts and pains, and to recognize that despite happenings of my past, she tried her best and it was for the love of her children.

Fire: "You can be anything you want to be." These are the words my mother told me. Strong in her will and strong in her way, my mother was fiercely independent. My mother could not provide the stable refuge that I needed, and she left one day - my sadness conceded. Forgiveness is a stronghold within me –

given the hunger for a mother's love. Today, I provide all that I can as a mother to my own children.

Fire: …but they're not getting the nourishment they need…I mean, does that make sense? Our mothers, they were the self-sustaining trees. Like roots from the ground, stealing all the nourishment from the grass so that it does not grow. I now see that my mother did what my mother had to do. She was that self-sustaining tree. All that they had been going through took everything that they had just for them to be…

Water: It is amazing just for them to survive because they were going through a worse history than we... and at times when that history was unspoken and unheard of to speak. We spoke.

Wind: Uh huh.

Water: Um.

Fire: And maybe that's why there was always the fear of speaking, the words don't tell it from my mother ringing in my ear.

Wind: Right, we don't tell our stories for the public to hear; we don't speak our truths to draw others near.

Fire: Cause it's root stuff…it's underground stuff.

Water: We understand now that you just can't keep all that stuff in; nothing ever gets healed. And that! That's the internal battle between our mothers. That's the internal battle; that is the fight…for us to become. As Tyler Perry says in one of his movies, "ordinary brown woman become yourself." We have the fight to be who we are and to share our stories that have humbled and hurt us in order to

become our self. Although some of us still struggle to figure out who self is, because we have been hiding from our own identity for so long.

The weaving. In our Mother Monologues we each expressed and related to one another the experiences we had with our mothers, and the need to move beyond hurts of the past in order to speak the truths of our lives. hooks (2005) tells us that "healing takes place within us when we speak the truths of our lives" (p.11), but so many of us fear talking about those moments where we were made humble. We recognized that our mothers gave all that they could, and to respect that, we were to remain silent about any hurts we endured as children. However, we recognized our voices as a way of helping each other and possibly other women who have experienced, or are experiencing the lives we led and can see hope in us. When Fire expressed her pain from the abandonment of her mother who left her to be cared for by her grandmother, she also recognized that her mother had a strong will and independence that she learned from. Each of us expressed characteristics that we took from our mothers, and recognized the growth in ourselves despite some of the characteristics that were not so good. While I understood that I grew up with instability due to my mother being a single parent of four children, I credit her with being a major influence in my life for showing me hard work, public communication skills, and a commitment to family. Similarly, in our sister-to-sister conversations when Water told the story of her mother taking her out of school, she still credited her mother for her own love of literature. Each of us recognized humility in our understanding that where we have come from does not have to hinder where we go in life. We also recognized that ultimate forgiveness, although difficult, can be understood from our

relationships with our mothers. The Mother Monologues represent the molding and shaping of humility within our lives as co-researchers.

Act Two

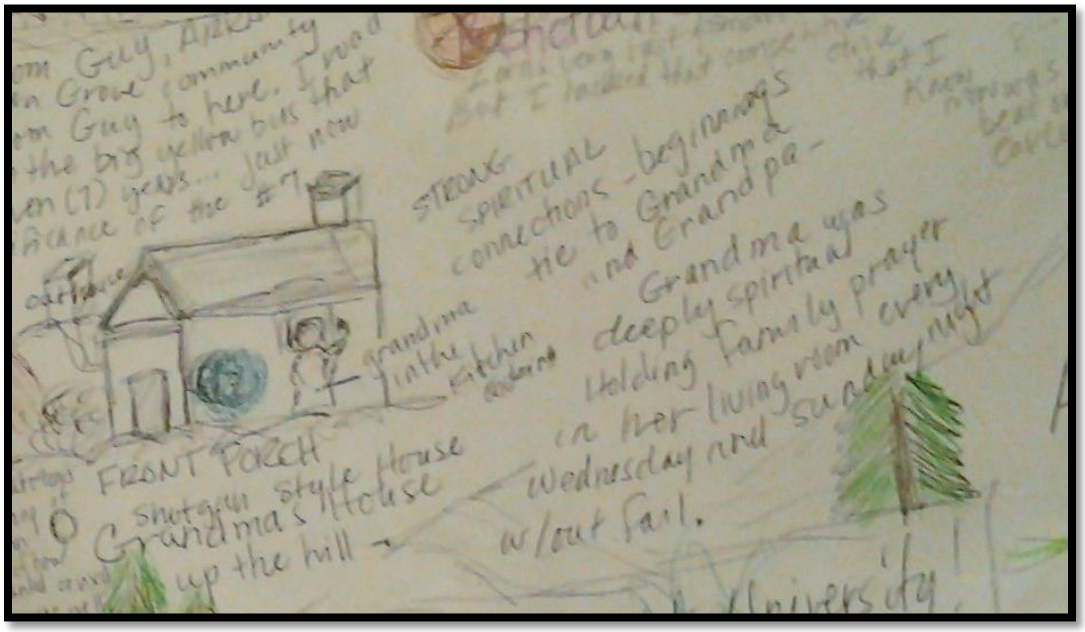


Figure 4.5. Spiritual Identity: Fire's Spiritual Life Map

Shaping Identity: Spirituality as a Way of Life

The weaver. This image (Figure 4.5) represents a section of Fire's spiritual life map. This image shows how she was spiritually connected to her grandparents. In our sister-to-sister conversations, she recalled the intricacies of the spirit in her grandparents' home and the connection that this home had to people and the earth. As she noted, "my grandmother was always teaching about spiritual things…whether she was wringing a chicken's neck or picking peas in the garden, everything was always spiritual." Regardless of the activity, spirituality for us was understood as a way of life. We recognized that if spirituality allowed us to be in connection to all things, it was inherent in all that we did. These conversations helped us to see how our interactions in the doctoral study program were impacted by our spirituality, and we recognized that every

part of how we engaged with people and with the curriculum was informed by our spirituality. Thus, every part of our experience in the doctoral program is infused with our spirituality as our way of life.

Wind: So, what is it about your family history that has shaped your spiritual identity today?

Fire: Well my grandmother was a deeply spiritual woman. And as I think about it…this is all pretty funny because I started writing my autoethnography talking about my grandmother's impact years ago.

Wind: Really? Wow.

Fire: Yes, as a matter of fact it was when I was at a conference and the presenters threw out these little prompts to help get kids to write and one of the prompts was "What is one of the fondest memories you have of your grandparents?" So in that little short moment I wrote about my grandparents. You know, it was just a little piece. Then later on there was something else; I think I was writing for a family reunion. Anyways, I took the same piece and expanded it. And then another time I was writing for a class…like a fifth grade class to help students with writing and there I expanded it more. And then by the time I got ready to come to Texas State for the doctoral program, and had to do that little 500-word essay…

Wind: It must have been easy with the story already developed.

Fire: That's right! I used that same piece. I didn't realize until I had gone through that first class that... dang that was autoethnography! It showed a large part of my life with my grandparents, because it influenced me so much. My grandmother had seventeen children.

Wind: How many?

Fire: Seventeen.

Wind: Wow.

Fire: Yep, seventeen. So, my mom was right in the middle of all that.

Wind: She was by far the black sheep of the family. You know my mom…by now we know she was bi-polar; she was an alcoholic; she had trouble with drugs; she was always in and out of trouble with the law…

Wind: This was your grandmother or your mother?

Water: Her mom.

Fire: Yes, my mom. Like I said earlier, my grandmother was deeply spiritual, a powerful praying woman. So my mom…everything was just so…so off kilter, so dysfunctional. I was born in Denver, Colorado. And both my parents are from Arkansas. But when they moved to Colorado they got married there. So, my dad is still there. But my parents divorced for the second time and we moved to Boulder, Colorado, which is a lot like Austin. Colorado University, real laid back hippie town. It was like the stuff we went through was unbelievable. You know, but my mom leaving us, and my sister whose only thirteen months older than me who holds a lot of resentment now because she was watching us. But one thing for sure in those earliest years, my mom would always get us home in the summer to my grandmother.

Wind: Do you think that is where your spiritual identity was most shaped?

Fire: Well…you know, I think back on that now and I'm so grateful because I mean I was doing stuff that impacted me. I remember standing on the porch with

my grandpa. They had this shotgun house. You know, shotgun? Where you walk through the front door and you could see…

Wind: all the way through the back!

Fire: So, you know I remember, the front door's right here…and grandma and grandpa's bed was right there…the bedrooms in the next room that you could see they'd watch T.V….And I remember at the time when we were growing up they didn't have indoor plumbing a lot of folks didn't so we'd have to go to the outhouse.

Wind: Right.

Fire: Well, you know they had two gardens. They had one garden on the right of the house; that was more greenery stuff. Then on the left of the house they had peach orchards, or peach trees along the fencerow. And I remember they had cows and chickens and I remember those milk jars, milk jugs, or what you call 'em? They're like this tall (motions with her hand). And so they would milk the cows and put the milk…Milk cans! That's what they would call them. And I still remember today. Who knew those would be night jars, you know?

Wind: Yes, I can picture it.

Fire: Yep, they were those little white jars and they're about this big (motions with hand) with black rims and that's where if you had to go to the bathroom at night….

Wind: Then that's where you went.

Fire: You just went there. And I also remember, it was probably in the late 70's when they got running water. I would go out there with my grandmother before

they got the running water and help her pull the bucket up from the ground and drink that cold water. That was the coldest water; it was unbelievable.

Wind: Um huh.

Fire: …water would come out of the ground like that. But my grandmother was always teaching about spiritual things, whether she was wringing a chicken's neck or picking peas in the garden, or whatever it was, everything was always spiritual. And with seventeen children, well you can imagine. I think it was 1975 when we had one of the family reunions there, and there were eighty-five I think, eighty-five grandchildren at that time.

Wind: That is something.

Fire: Isn't that something? My grandfather died in 1992; my grandparents had been married 68 years.

Wind: Wow.

Fire: So of course it wasn't, it wasn't 18 months before my grandma died because they had been married so long. But she, again the reason I say she has so much of a spiritual influence on me in my education, was because she never got past the third grade; but she was so intelligent. That was an intelligent woman. My grandparents, they influenced me so profoundly. In fact in my autoethnography, I talk about their singing and I call it the harmony of sweet tomato pie. And the reason I do that is because my grandmother's voice was a contralto and my grandfather, well he had the most incredible baritone voice.

Water: hmmm…

Fire: Sometimes when I sing I hear my papa.

Water: hmmmm…

Fire: But when they'd sing together, they would sing acapella. And they'd sing all over this Cypress Creek district, in the church and in the community. They were well known. They'd sing duets. And one that they would sing was Peace in the Valley. Anyway, I call it that in the autoethnography, the harmony of sweet tomato pie. The reason I talk about sweet tomato pie is because my grandma could take anything in the cupboard and come up with something to eat from it. She would go get tomatoes out of the garden…I am not kidding you, and make this tomato cobbler that tastes just as good as any peach cobbler (laughing in the background). I am not kidding and I say in my autoethnography that I'd never tasted anything like it.

Wind: Yeah.

Fire: …and I've heard very few people… over the years I'd bring it up different places and you know maybe, maybe one or two people, probably about two or three people have said, "Ah yes, I've heard of that!" but evidently that was something. Because you know old people say tomato is not a vegetable it's a fruit.

Wind: Huh.

Fire: Yeah, and…you couldn't go in her house on Wednesday and Sunday's. Wednesday and Sunday evening if you got caught there you were going to be in Wednesday night prayer.

Wind: Uh huh.

Fire: …and she'd be saying y'all come on it's time for prayer and we'd be like oh no! And then you'd see the grandchildren trying to sneak out or whatever, but that influenced me greatly because I just remember them on their knees praying and then papa would start singing or humming. Then when they'd start calling on the Lord it was just amazing, just amazing [Pause]…yeah.

Wind: And those were your summers, the visits with your grandparents?

Fire: Uh huh, those were the summers and then when I was seventeen we moved there. We moved back to Arkansas. My mom, we think, was probably in trouble with the law. So, we moved back to Arkansas. We moved just down the hill from my grandparents' house into a trailer on their land. And [voice shaky], one summer, one summer morning, I got up and…everything was gone out of the trailer. My mom had left… and she'd taken my little brother.

Wind: Wow.

Fire: My sister had graduated. I was seventeen. And I just remember walking up that hill to my grandparent's house. I was… I was so hurt…I couldn't breathe.

Wind: Yeah.

Fire: And I just walked up the hill and I remember it had to be like seven in the morning. I walked up the hill and when I opened the door, of course it was that shotgun house and I could see and I could smell the breakfast cooking. I could see my grandma's back to me also. She was at the stove. At the front door you could look straight through and see everything… past the dining, formal dining, your big freezer and then the kitchen was back there. So, I could see her because the back door was right there but the stove was right to the…and so I could see

> her. She still had her head wrapped up with a night cap. And I just remember walking. The floor was all warped or whatever. And I just…I talk about it in the autoethnography. I just walked back there and I just stood there and I guess I was weeping so hard.

The weaving. As Fire tried to explain how her family history shaped her spiritual identity, she recognized that her grandparents influenced her immensely. This act portrays her relational closeness with her grandparents while also exemplifying a childhood experience where she is faced with her mother's abandonment. She shared this experience with sadness, but she understood the influence that her grandmother played in her life through that experience. As we reflected on Mackeracher's (2004) definition of spirituality, which is "the experience of feeling beyond the normal limits of body and mind, of feeling connected to aspects of the external world that are of value to me – to others, to earth, and to a greater cosmic being (p. 172), we understood Fire's connection with her grandparents as what influenced her spiritual identity. Her experiences took her beyond the normal limits that she was prepared for us a child and into a spiritual realm much deeper, which has sustained her through other challenging moments in life.

Intermission

Using Spiritual Life Maps to Gain Knowledge/Awareness

The theme of Knowledge/Awareness is represented within the presentation of our spiritual life maps, which can be found in Appendix F. Each of us developed knowledge and/or awareness of self, represented in our spiritual life maps. Thus, we gained a greater knowledge/awareness of the world around us. As we developed the spiritual life maps and discussed the information that we decided to include, we gained the ability to view

pivotal moments of our lives from a spiritual lens. We began to understand the spiritual resources that have been present throughout our lives and that, until now, we had not publicly acknowledged or validated for informing our educational work and supporting us in the doctoral journey. The spiritual life maps illustrated for us, through visual images, those spiritual aspects that were otherwise left out and not commonly recognized.

My spiritual life map. In my spiritual life map, I showed where determination and persistence to accomplish certain life achievements were important, and I acknowledged that much of the determination was in response to the responsibility of motherhood that began soon after I finished high school. The images of books, family pictures, transcripts, artifacts, newspaper clippings and other materials that were associative of my spiritual life journey were included, along with the narrative text that showed the spiritual underpinnings in the connection between people and events found to be deeply meaningful in my life. I started the process of creating the spiritual life map in one of the weekend retreats, but later continued to develop it over a series of weeks. I spent countless hours looking at pictures, reading journal entries I had written, and hand written notes that others had written to me that I had kept as memories. In conversation with my co-researchers, I began piecing together my spiritual life map as a reflection of critical life experiences and occurrences that held deep meanings for me. Once I captured those images that were either in the form of pictures, books, notes and other memorabilia, I took a picture of them all together and then began writing script that accompanied the feelings that were associative of the images. The spiritual life map captured both the images and words that were most revealing of my spiritual journey in leading to the doctoral program.

The spiritual life map of Fire. Fire created her spiritual life map by thinking about the pivotal moments throughout her educational experiences in her youth and adult life. She immediately took to using map pencils and a large piece of paper to map out her journey at one of the weekend retreats. While she sketched, she stopped and shared with us the stories that she was reminded of as she reflected on her lifelong spiritual journey. The pieces she captured and presented for her spiritual life map showed that her reflections led her to notice a large representation of fire in her life. She is named Fire due to the fires in her life that are representative of the trials and tribulations that she faced. One experience that she remembered and shared from her childhood was that she set her home on fire. For fear of getting into trouble, she closed the door in the room where she started the fire and left the room to burn. She also witnessed a fire that consumed her small childhood church due to faulty wiring. She recalled standing outside the church watching it burn as she and the other church members waited for the firefighters to arrive. Then she witnessed a fire purposely set by her mother at another childhood home in an effort to get insurance money. These instances helped her to see her own personal and spiritual development. Therefore, these moments were included in her spiritual life map because they were all significant and pivotal moments in her life. Each drawing took her deeper into understanding herself more fully and what these incidents did for her spiritual life. Her spiritual life map gave us witness to the encouragement and hope that we find beyond the *fire* in the everyday experiences of our lives.

The spiritual life map of Water. Water created a video to represent her spiritual life map. In her video there were meaningful images from movies, songs, and books that

were important in her spiritual life journey. When we gathered to watch the video, it was emotionally moving for each of us as we related to one another on multiple levels. Where there were instances of abuse, sadness, and heartache in Water's life, she chose a quote from a movie, a soundtrack from a song, or a piece of a poem to represent her spiritual journey. Those images spoke about the pain associative of her troubled childhood, and her fear of being unable to move beyond the abuse in adulthood. All of the images, songs, and poems gave us witness to the strength that is evidenced in her spiritual life map. The visual of the movie reels in Appendix F shows the cover of some of the movies, people, songs and ideas that were represented in her video. Found peaking through the movie strip on her spiritual life map, are words such as orphanage homes, crack pipes, broken bones, unity and the title of the song, *We Made It*, which are words that express her pain and her spirit that emerged from that pain. Through those images and words, Water gave us witness to resilience and hope.

Act Three

Action: Finding Voice in a Sea of Silence

Figure 4.6. Freedom Writers: From Water's Spiritual Life Map

The weaver. The image of the film cover from the movie *Freedom Writers* that is represented in Water's spiritual life map told the story of how she struggled to find her voice from an abusive past. She used this movie as a reflection of her high school educational experience where after enrolling herself in school when her mother had taken her out, she found her voice. Thus, she viewed education as a way of liberating herself from the negative experiences of her past. In her autoethnography she writes, "Education is freedom; it has the power to liberate nations, and it has liberated me." While education can be seen as a liberating force, it has also silenced and marginalized culturally diverse groups. Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) note, "Marginalized students are often familiar with their groups' voices being silenced in the classroom discourse or with having their personal and/or group experiences and beliefs discounted" (p. 71). The context of this Act shows how silencing is corruptive beyond the classroom where doctoral students grapple with making decisions that impact progress.

> Wind's Mother: How much longer is it going to take you to finish school? Aren't you almost done? It seems like you've been doing this for a very long time now.
>
> Wind: I know; it does feel that way sometimes. I should be finished soon. I have just been kind of down lately.
>
> Wind's Mother: I hear it in your voice. Did I tell you about the dream that I had about you the other night?
>
> Wind: No, what was it about?
>
> Wind's Mother: Well, you were in this black hole and I kept yelling your name. You wouldn't answer no matter how loud I yelled. I remember waking up out of

my sleep being afraid that something happened to you. I called you that day, but you didn't answer.

Wind: Oh man, I'm sorry. I don't even remember. I have had a lot on my mind lately. I'm trying to make a really big decision about changing the direction of my dissertation work and it has been weighing heavily on me.

Wind's Mother: Well, what's holding you back from making this decision?

Wind: Well, I just don't want to ruffle any feathers or cause anyone any harm.

Wind's Mother: It sounds like it's causing yourself some harm.

Wind: Well (Wind looks down at the floor).

Wind's Mother: If the decision that you need to make is causing you harm then you need to move beyond it. Maybe that is what my dream meant.

Wind: Maybe. I have often felt like I am stuck.

Wind's Mother: Do you have any help from the professors at the school?

Wind: That's the thing. I have professors that have been very supportive of my work from the very beginning and would do anything that they can to help me, but it is hard to know who is genuinely there for you, or has another agenda.

Wind's Mother: What's the problem then? Just get the help you need from the professors that you know are there to help you, and speak up and find your voice to get out of that black hole!

Wind: (chuckles) You're right. I think it is really about me being silent and not speaking up when I know that I should have changed direction a long time ago.

Wind's Mother: I've told you about that. Silence is a killer. If you remain silent and you know that speaking up can change the outcome for the better, you best

get to talkin' out there. I've always taught you to speak up. You just need to do it.

Wind: I know mom (The phone line beeps). Hey mom, there is someone calling me on the other line.

Wind's Mother: Okay, take the call but you call me back later.

Wind: Okay (Wind hangs up the phone with her mother and presses to answer the other line). Hello?

Water: Hey girl, what are you doin'?

Wind: I was just talking to my mom.

Water: Oh, how is she doing?

Wind: She's doing well. We were talking about my needing to make this decision about whether or not to change the direction of my work. Sometimes I am just not the one to speak up and other times I am. I don't know why this is so different all of a sudden.

Water: You know silence is married to power. This woman once told me…and she was quoting from the Bible when she said it, because you know the story of Esther right? She was told that if she did not speak up then surely her people would perish and I remember this woman telling me that. And she was like, "It can't be no more keeping silent." We have to take action and speak up for what we need and what we want. That scripture is important.

Wind: I know right? Listen to what I was reading just the other day by Audre Lorde, "We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way that we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been

> socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition. And while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, that weight of silence will choke us." (The phone line goes dead. The ACT ends as Wind searches for Water on the other line). Did you hear me? Hello? Hello? (She looks at the phone receiver and looks up as if to reflect on what was just said). Wow (The Act ends with Wind having a slight smirk on her face).

The weaving. In this Act, Wind recognized the need to find her voice. However, she was silent and stuck in what her mother called a black hole. She needed the encouragement of those around her to speak up for herself and what she needed to do in order to progress in the doctoral program. Since education has historically silenced marginalized groups, it is beneficial for those of us who fight for social justice to encourage others. When we think about people taking action and finding voice, we forget about the background work that has motivated such action. Action is often a follow-up from decisions that were well thought out and determined while in communication with others. Rarely do we make decisions in isolation. We need the support and communication of others to move us towards finding our voices and taking the actions that we know need to be taken. Behind a number of great movements there have been a community of supporters and people providing insight before action was taken. This is the spirit of communing. This is the spirit of learning and the spirit of action.

Act Four

Power: Moving Beyond Boundaries of Tradition

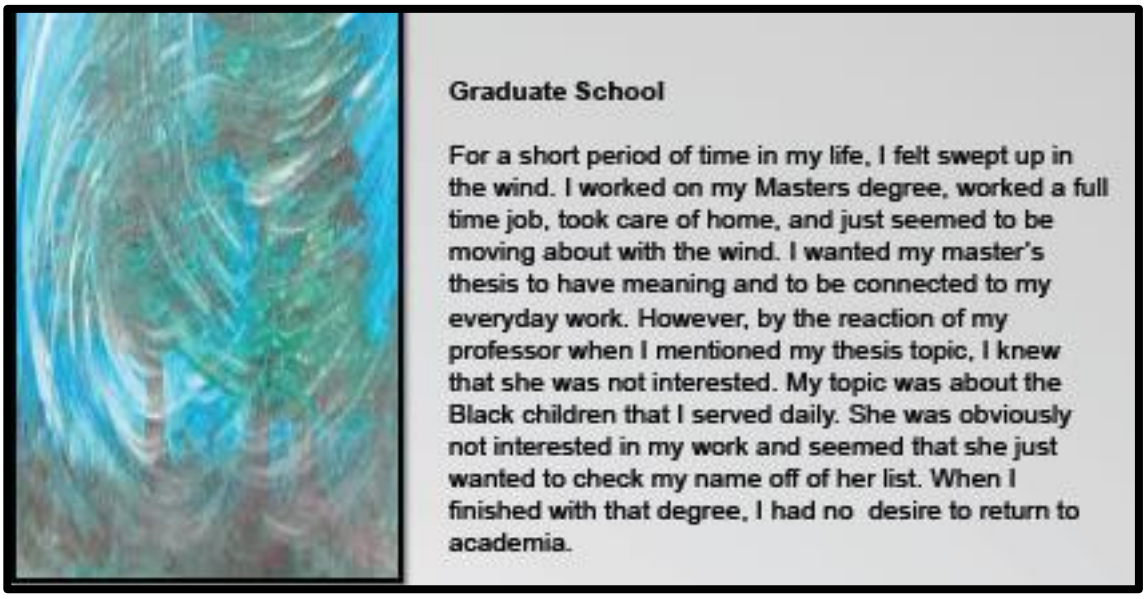


Figure 4.7. Graduate School: From My Spiritual Life Map

The weaver. Unfortunately, African American women find incongruences between the interests that we have in the academy and the interests of those who are there to support us. The image above from my spiritual life map is a recollection of an experience that I had when I was working on my master's degree. When a professor showed a lack of interest towards my work, I became discouraged. In this Act, Water reports a similar incident. She walks into a professor's office seeking direction and learns that the professor does not view her work as work that is going to "change the world," causing Water to question the work she is committed to doing, and the power that she has over the control of her work in the process.

Water: (Knocks on the door). Excuse me.

Professor: Come on in. How is the thinking about your dissertation proposal coming along?

Water: Yes, that is what I stopped by to talk about. You know, I just want this dissertation to be something that is going to make a difference in people's lives. I see other people doing different kinds of research that has such meaning and I just want my work to be the same way.

Professor: See, that's where you're missing the mark. Don't think of your dissertation as life changing. It's not going to change the world. I mean, this is not your opus magnus. You are just trying to finish school and get out there and get a better paying job so that you can support yourself. Stop dwelling on figuring out a topic and just choose any topic.

Water: I don't' think that I will be able to do that, because that's not really how I see it. This doctoral study process is a meaningful journey for me and I just want my dissertation to reflect that. For me this is life changing and I don't know if it's cultural or what, but I feel differently than what you are describing.

Professor: Look…do you want to finish this thing or not? If you want me to help you, then you have to understand the kind of work you are committing to doing and the investment of time that it will take.

Water: I do understand that, which is why I want to be really careful in my selection of a topic. You see, when I enrolled in the program, life-changing work is what I was committing to do. I came from a difficult background. I wasn't supposed to be here. If somebody would have told me five years ago that I would have been in a PhD program, I would have thought that they were crazy! So, to

me this is so much bigger then getting it done and just moving on. This journey is life changing and it's spiritual for me.

Professor: Ahhh, I understand where you're going and I think I have a better picture of what it is that you may need. While I would love to support you, maybe your needs are more compatible with another professor who delves a little more deeply into the kind of work you're interested in doing. I am working with so many students right now and my plate is really full. I don't have the kind of time to ponder away on figuring out a topic. To me it makes more sense for you to jump into a topic and we move forward from there.

Water: I'm not saying I want to be working on this dissertation forever. I mean, don't get me wrong, I would like to move this thing pretty quickly. However, what I am also saying though, is that I want the work to touch hearts. I want the work to be a collective endeavor, and something that I can grow from and others who work with me can grow from.

Professor: Why don't you check and see if Dr. Handhold can work with you. I have a lot on my plate in the upcoming semesters. I'm not going to get you done quick and dirty. I just have so much going on.

Water: Well, thanks for your time and for your understanding of this whole thing.

Professor: Anytime. My door is always open. Let me know if there is something I can do.

The weaving. Power is gained in our ability to use our voice to express difference as we speak and as we act against things outside of our fundamental beliefs. In this Act, Water continues to push the professor to see her dissertation work as she

does. Although the professor does not budge, Water continues pushing and allowing herself to be empowered in the process of making decisions that impact her life. Traditionally, students are expected to take the advice of the professor and move along the journey as expected. However, where is the power in such experiences when students set aside their thoughts and beliefs? Had the professor acknowledged the meaning and purpose that Water felt from the doctoral journey, the arrangement might have ended differently leading to growth on behalf of all involved. The challenge becomes when anyone in a position of power, such as the professor in this case, fails to recognize that they too have something to learn. Learning is continuous and fluid.

Act Five

Hope: Collective Engagement for Continuous Change

Figure 4.8. For Colored Girls: From Water's Spiritual Life Map

The weaver. This Act tells of the hope that we have as African American women in the academy. The image (Figure 4.8) above from Water's spiritual life map is an image that represents that hope. The film cover for the movie *For Colored Girls* was selected because each of the women in that story lived through a challenging history, yet

together searched for hope in the sharing of their lives. In our collection of data we recognized that we were always searching for the hope in the sharing of our lives and our stories. We wanted to have hope in our personal spiritual survival beyond any pain in our lives, and have hope that our past experiences would benefit our present ones. Most of all we wanted to allow our spiritual selves to be revealed through our stories to help us understand how spirituality helped us to persist in our lives.

> Wind: Today, I am thinking of you. I am thinking of the intimate spaces of your lives that you have allowed me to share, the similarities of our experiences and the deep pains that have plagued our lives.
>
> Fire: Wow–What an incredible blessing and experience this has been! The opportunity to work with you on your dissertation and tell my own story at the same time has been a gift from above. Ours stories are so similar, yet unique, but they intersect in so many ways. I can't help but think of the lives coming behind us that will be touched or even changed because we have been allowed to tell our stories. Our first encounter, on Lake Travis, and just being able to talk about our lives, noting those pivotal moments, was revealing. Those discussions about how we as Black women, need to encourage our Black men - after recognizing and healing ourselves, are still resonating with me. The final morning - out in nature watching the sun come up with the deer listening to me sing was amazing. Our second encounter, starting the spiritual life map at your house, blessed me...I had no idea that there had been so much "fire" in my life until I began to look at the pictures I drew. The idea for my conceptual framework was born - a tree being self sustained through the root system and back up again through the roots, trunk,

branches and leaves - gave me a picture of a Black woman going thru the storms of life then sucking up the nourishment for itself through the roots. I cannot believe how much I am getting from my spiritual life map!

Water: This all makes me think about the songs that have been the soundtrack to my life, or songs that are playing in my head while I am writing this. *Change is Gonna Come* by Sam Cooke or *Hold On* by En Vouge. JayZ's *Ambitious* where he says " I felt so inspired by what the teachers said, said I'd either be dead or a reefer head/ i'm not sure if that's how adults should speak to kids/ especially when all I did was speak in class/ I'll teach his ###. The motivation to me is them telling me what I could not be. This session has been freeing as we unearthed the deep things that caused us to succeed and be where we are in the academy as Black women. These are the deep spiritual things that often go unheard. When we discussed how a professor told me "This is just a dissertation, not your opus magnus, you will not change academia, and you will not change the world," that was pivotal for me. That is my shared experience with lyrics from JayZ. Those words that were meant to deflate me have in turn empowered me to finish and to change the world!

Fire: Wind, when we met your mother on our third data collection weekend retreat, the experience was so emotional for me as I watched you struggle with wanting your mother to "pay" for what she had done to you in your childhood. I totally understood, because I too, have wanted my parents to pay, to acknowledge their wrongs to me. I feel numb…I feel dumb…I feel as if I have completely missed the mark of being a follower of Christ. Like I am just now seeing, through

your situation how I am to bear my parents' cross. How we are to bear one another's burdens is not an easy task when we have held on to past hurts and have written our own metanarrative, our sad, sad story about what happened to me. I must forgive my parents if I want my Heavenly Father to forgive me. Dang, this forgiveness thing ain't playing! I am gonna have to walk my walk and stop just talking the talk.

Water: Sometimes I believe that spirituality makes everyone feel safe and comfortable. You know it is more than religion because some experiences are deeply spiritual, and religion cannot explain them. Even though I know they are correlated. When thinking about spirituality and religion as a connection to another's experiences, words that resonate understanding for that are interchangeable for me. So, I have just not figured it all out yet.

Fire: Wind, I am thinking about how you have been such a blessing to Water and me through this spiritual study. I can't find the words to express how much it meant meeting your mother and sharing that pain with you through tears of reminiscence. I could not stop the tears, they came from a very deep place and I was weeping for all three of us, and our mothers. I was weeping for them and how they were trapped for so long, inside shells of indifference, anger, fear, pride and only God knows what else. I saw my mom in your mom's eyes; I heard my mom's voice when your mother spoke and I began to understand her. I saw my mom's legs in her cutoff shorts when your mom got up to bring that bag over to me. I felt my mom's pain in your mom when she recounted "her version" of that lean Christmas where she did not have enough money to get many gifts, or even

buy a Christmas tree and she took that anger and sadness out on you–but most powerful to me was that I felt my own rage and determination to "make her pay" and tell the truth about how she took her emotions out on you. I watched her squirm when you reminded her of what she did to you...then ...snap! Just like that, I felt myself siding with your mom, our moms! I found myself understanding her pain. She, like my mom, can't tell the story the way it hurt us; they have desperately tried to forget that. Let her tell the story the way she remembers it! I love you Wind and I am so happy that you can finally find peace through this dissertation, but your peace is not alone, it is dependent upon the healing and restoration that Water and I are finding in this process as well.

Wind: It gives me chills that the encounter with my mom impacted you so much. I did not expect to leave the visit with my mother feeling such a heavy load myself. You're right Fire, I wanted to have my mother pay for the hurts of my childhood. I did not want her to pretend that everything was okay with how she responded to her own pain with me as a child, but why? I am an adult woman now. And I know that forgiveness is important. I said that I had forgiven her for hurting my feelings as a child. Then, when we were there with her I reminded her of the pain that she caused me as a child. When something is forgiven, truly forgiven, can it be forgotten?

Fire: When I saw the sadness in your mother's eyes all these years later I thought, clearly, she had already paid the price. Do not do what I did with my mother. Let her tell the story the way that she wants to tell it…the way that she wants to remember it…and you bear the burden.

Wind: I've always searched my heart for a place of peace with my mother. This is an area that I will continue to pray for peace in. Thank you Fire for helping me see that I needed to pray in this area. Good night Fire and Water, good night.

Fire: (Scene two–The next day). You know my pastor at church preached an awesome sermon today! She said verbatim that "humility is our attitude before God, and meekness is our attitude before man." She also said that humility is the stepping stone to growth! She also said that, "TO UNDERSTAND ALL THINGS IS TO FORGIVE ALL THINGS." I mean, how profound is that given the weekend we had? I believe that God our Father is pleased with our efforts and He is going to continue to bless us! May God continue to bless you so that you keep finding those gold nuggets of truth. This has GOT to turn into a retreat or workshop setting. Perhaps a conference presentation to start with.

Water: I know! This research that we are doing on spirituality is done to change a system that has always been colored with White ways of knowing, and non-spiritual ways of doing. Too many before us, and perhaps after, have believed that their work was not going to change anything. They almost did it for a livelihood, but here we did this research because we believe that it is going to make a difference. We believe that spirit is the foundation of everything that we do, and that we must turn our ears to it. We do not want to "academetize" this research. We want to create a pathway in the path for the other women going after us. We must tell our stories! We must tell the deep things, and the stories of survival that got us here!

The weaving. Freire (2005) speaks to hopelessness as an immobilizer. Therefore, we find it critical that we continue to hope, find hope in our work, and continue in our efforts to collectively engage in the process of inquiry. We used collective journal writing in the form of a shared Google document to continue making meaning throughout the research process. This ethnodrama came from that process. We found that the written notes, reflective memos, reflective thoughts and important insights that we generated from our coming together and reflecting on our stories and experiences leading up to, and within the doctoral program supported our collective engagement and inquiry. We used any genre of our choice. For example, if we were inspired to write a poem, or the lyrics of a song, or a prayer, we used the collective journal to record the inspiration so that we could share in the experiences together. Through this process we were able to capture the experiences, emotions, knowledge and memories at any given moment throughout the process. The data from our collective journal gave us a prevailing hope for the future and for the implications of this work.

Encore: Our Spiritual Song and Prayer

Inspired by the events in the first weekend retreat, Water was moved to say a prayer for the group. We found her prayer moving, heartfelt and personally affirming for each of us. Therefore, we share her prayer here as an encore to the ethnodramatic presentation of data. Her prayer was for things that we encountered, and for things that have yet to be encountered. When we finished praying, we slept until the next morning. We arose early to watch the sun rise together. We considered this our first spiritual walk. Fire sang an old spiritual song that she recollected and added new words that were fitting

to our experience there together. We joined her in song as the deer walking near the lake stopped and gazed towards us.

Figure 4.9. Sunrise at Weekend Retreat

Our Spiritual Song

Melodic humming…And the sun comes up in the morning (repeated) Hallelujah, God I praise you for all you have done….For the healing we found in our stories…And one day soon we'll see your sweet face…Praise the Lord, praise the Lord God we praise you…God we thank you for all you have done….The connections you've revealed through our stories and for this moment you know we've been spared… And the sun's coming up in the morning every tear will be gone from our eyes…

We sang together and praised God for our spiritual connection that allowed us to learn from one another through the sharing of our stories. The song, the skyline of the emerging sun, and the natural elements of the world around us gave us peace. We recognized that this research had allowed us to experience something that we had not imagined we would ever encounter in an academic context. This was more than Freire's

(1973) notion of "banking education" this was the "engaged pedagogy" (hooks, 2003) that we each desired.

Our Prayer

Father we just thank you for this time of reverence to you. I feel like we're honoring you by telling our stories back to you. God, thank you for our stories of resilience, and the stories that have made us who we are. Father, we thank you for laying out the path. God, we thank you for everything that has ever happened to us, because without those things we wouldn't be the people that you've made us to be today. God, we thank you for who you sent; you sent us your Son. How you sent your Son Father, because without your Son we wouldn't be who we are today or be where we are today. So, Father we just thank you for this time. And Father, I ask that you open up our ears and open up our minds to see you more clearly in this process. Hallelujah and I pray Lord that you allow us and anoint us to go through this process, this journey. Lord, we thank you for the individuals that you've made to come alongside us. Father, we just pray that if there is anything that we don't see, that you just remove those things. We pray that you'll remove people that aren't supposed to be a part of this intimate process and we thank you for those you are calling alongside us God, to walk with us. And God, I just thank you for the strength in the journey and the strength with even what's going on with Fire at her school. God, we thank you for that because we know that all things work together, and we know that you're leading her to even a greater pool of individuals. You're allowing her to build up her story so that she may be able to go and consult, that she may be able to go and train individuals on things such as this and that you know that you've given her…almost like you allowed her to be weak in these times knowing that

you're her strength, and that you're the one who lifts her up. So, Father I thank you for Wind and allowing her to be in this place, and allowing her to just offer us a place, almost a sanctuary to worship you, God, to praise you together. Father, I thank you for just cementing her in Your word in this time and just cementing her in seeing You and making her be able to stand strong and I thank you for letting her prepare the way for individuals such as Fire and myself, and all the other individuals….women coming after her.

CHAPTER V
REINSCRIBING A CULTURE OF LEARNING

Our ethnodramatic methodological approach allowed us to use methods of participatory research, ethnography and social cartography. In response to the data that we collected and analyzed, we derived implications for higher education, African American women in higher education, and those interested in the participation and retention of African American women in doctoral study programs. We sifted through the data using the interwoven quilt of data analysis and allowed our data to tell a story that was transformed into the ethnodrama. The theoretical framework of the study allowed us to employ a weaving technique that took us from the data we gathered and through the literature to connect the major themes we discovered. The themes are, the collective nature of development, forgiveness as a means for moving forward with hope, and drawing strength from the spirit to take action. Figure 5.1 is a graphic representation of the understandings that emerged from the data in relation to how spirituality informed our experience and progress as African American women in doctoral study.

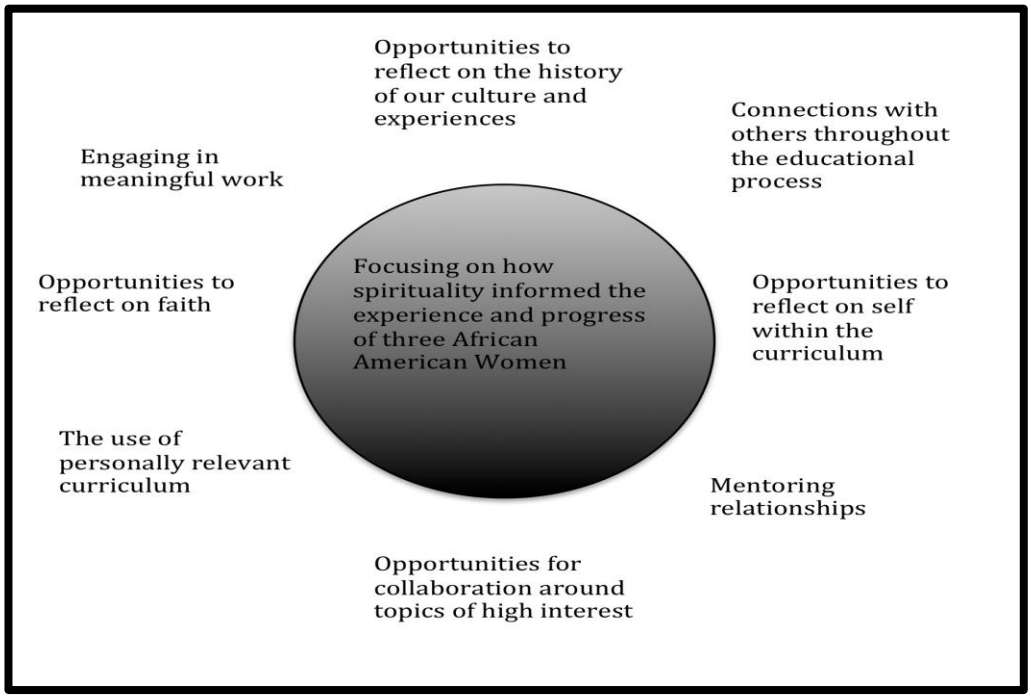


Figure 5.1. Graphic Representation of Emerged Understandings

Implications for Higher Education

The implications from this study for institutions of higher education are that we include a focus on spirituality within the curriculum, content of classes, and institutional practices in order to utilize "other ways of knowing" (Shajahan, 2006, p. 694-695) that meet the needs of culturally diverse groups. Clear evidence points to the changing demographics of higher education, and doctoral study in particular (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Trend lines found within the data of the U.S. Census Bureau show a gradual shift in the enrollment of diverse groups into graduate school and higher education in general.

Among other culturally diverse groups, statistics show an increase in African American Ph.D.'s in the U.S. over a ten-year time span. Unfortunately, graduate students from culturally diverse groups are faced with higher education environments that are neither prepared nor equipped to handle the challenges that are presented from institutions that have catered to the dominant culture (Ayers et al., 1999; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Therefore, we find ourselves seeking ways of responding to the subtle social injustices, inequities and the isolation that are unfortunately still experienced within academic institutions. For me and two other African American women, spirituality has supported our experience and progress in withstanding the negative effects of the tolls faced in our graduate study experience.

This study provides one example for how other ways of knowing can be embraced to take action in the spirit of education, which as noted in Chapter II "create[s] a more just and equitable environment for all" (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005, p. 222). Higher education throughout the nation, especially within states who have traditionally had fewer culturally diverse groups, must be cognizant of the increasingly diverse academic setting and the need to change beyond traditional practices (Anderson, 2003). Furthermore, universities looking to respond proactively to the demographically changing student body should use the stories and experiences of culturally diverse groups to inform the direction of their work. A proactive stance made by the university to prepare for all students regardless of gender, race, and background experience should be a top priority. While it can be noted that higher education is the place where new research, ideas and thought are introduced into society, it can be argued in some cases that it is also the place where the research, ideas and thought are least likely to be practiced.

Reporting on the research focus of this dissertation, we allowed our exploration of spirituality in doctoral study to show us places where we connected to aspects of the external world, others and our deeper most selves (Mackeracher, 2004). We sought to find our connection to the external world by understanding how our identity shaped and impacted our participation with others. The interwoven quilt of data analysis allowed us to respond to the question: How is humility evident in the mapping of African American women's participation and responsibility to community? Through the data that was revealed in our spiritual life maps and our sister-to-sister conversations, we share our understandings in Act One of the ethnodrama. Act One allowed us to reflect on our responses to our mothers' own challenging childhood experiences and the impact of their experiences in our lives. Each of us determined a connection to the external world from our experiences of deeply understanding the relationships with our mothers that humbled us. I discovered a hard work ethic, while Water discovered a love for literature, and Fire found words of encouragement. Thus, we took those discoveries and understandings and have used them to impact our participation and responsibility to community because, as Water shared, "We want to create a pathway in the path for the other women going after us."

This study suggests that a reflection of the self and our historical identities leads us to nurture the wholeness and humanness of students. Therefore, we suggest a cultural shift in the educational landscape that includes a focus on spirituality. In doing so, we attempt to reach the inner being of one another so that we might connect more deeply with our experiences in learning and our progress as learners. When we can think, practice, and research in ways that are culturally relevant, personally fitting, and

spiritually fulfilling, we acknowledge the promise of moving our work forward beyond self. As discussed in the literature of Chapter II, within the section entitled: *Forming a Spiritual Identity*, soul force or the strength that preserves free expression and creativity in Black culture can be utilized beyond doctoral study and towards the leadership roles that are carried out in education. Thus, we look towards individuals to capitalize on their own spirituality and "other ways of knowing" (Shajahan, 2006, p. 694-695) to improve multiple environments for learning. Soul force expands the practice of freedom described by hooks (2003), which restores our sense of connection and builds community. The cultural value of community was highly recognized in this study as we expanded on the discussion of connecting with others throughout the educational process.

Collective Nature of Development

Drawing back upon the endarkened feminist epistemology, we find that we are responsible to ourselves and to those around us as we conduct and learn from our research. As we embarked upon a collective journey of exploration, we developed a stronger sense of self, a growing awareness of the ways in which our history impacts our present experience, and a collective understanding of how our ontological differences are uniquely tied to one another as individuals. The ability to understand self in the context of the larger higher education experience supported our ways of knowing and awareness. We understood that large-scale efforts towards positive change came from the work of many people coming together with different experiences, yet recognizing their similarities. That knowledge and awareness gave us a sense of the powerful possibilities of a collective effort. Our research allowed us to work in a participatory way that formed the collective nature of development towards understanding how spirituality informed our

experience and progress. Through this experience we understood that the collective nature of development was an added value to our doctoral study experience. For example, Fire shared, *I love you Wind and I am so happy that you can finally find peace through this dissertation...but your peace is not alone, it is dependent upon the healing and restoration that Water and I are finding in this process as well.* Our work together was a spiritual endeavor that allowed us to experience research and learning from the research collectively.

Writing Groups

In addition to the experience of working through the process of research with my co-researchers, I found an implication for higher education in a writing group established to support the process of doctoral research. This writing group was established by a doctoral student who, in her own process of working on her dissertation, began a process of bringing other students together to work on their individual research. This group ended with a group of professors and students who were each conducting their own research on various other topics. Although my co-researchers did not participate in this small group, the learning and experience that I gained from that group effort offered me insight towards how I could duplicate a similar process with my co-researchers. Thus, the collective nature of development is a building process where the African proverb, *each one reach one,* comes to life.

Implications for African American Women in Higher Education

What does knowing and awareness look like in everyday life? This question used within the interwoven quilt of data analysis, supported implications for us as African American women in doctoral study. We found that our ability to share and learn from

one another's experiences allowed us to personally grow and develop knowledge that would then help us to progress. Fire understood that she also struggled with forgiveness from the experience that she was able to share with me concerning my mother. In Act Five, she shared that her experiencing meeting my mother, and watching my interaction with her as I was reminded of childhood trauma, allowed her to connect to her own life experience. She said that as *I watched her squirm when you reminded her of what she did to you...then ...snap! Just like that, I felt myself siding with your mom, our moms! I found myself understanding her pain. She, like my mom, can't tell the story the way it hurt us; they have desperately tried to forget that. Let her tell the story the way she remembers it!*

Through our research together, we understood a cultural nuance that we have faced as African American women, to be the caregivers of others beyond what that means for self.

African American women are notoriously noted as being good caregivers of others and leaving little time for self. In an *Essence* magazine article concerning the redefined role of Black women, clinical psychologist Aby Washington notes, "Black women are extremely undisciplined at focusing on our self-care" (Daniels, 2011, p. 147). She further states that we model this behavior to younger African American women and it is a cycle that should be broken. While I find these statements representative of my own experience in many ways, this study also helped us to understand the ways that we do nurture self through our progress.

Within that same *Essence* article, African American women are noted as being well accomplished in our professional efforts and achievements. This presupposes that we do allow ourselves to focus on our own personal and professional success. Second,

we look at how studying the ways that spirituality informs the experience and progress of African American women in doctoral study allowed us to view the way we take care of self in relationship to our care of others. As noted within the spiritual life map of Fire and through the further conceptualization of Fire's experience, there is a need to sustain self that hinders our ability to nourish others. This understanding can be theorized to explain that we provide "topical nourishment" for others by acts of service. However, since so much is taken from us in the process of helping others, the time that we commit to ourselves is in trying to accomplish other things. In other words, we do things to help others while still striving for personal success and achievement, thus we exert ourselves beyond normal limits. As such, the personal seeking within doctoral study for something greater is magnified, due to the experience in doctoral study being a personal sacrifice and challenge. Therefore, we seek the spirit in order to nourish what has been lost in the process of the journey. The implications of this for African American women in higher education comes down to being aware of self and what is taking place in the process of the experience of doctoral study in order to sustain self. Personally, I found that unlike the middle aged White male that explained to me that life went on around him as his family made due while he put his entire focus on the doctoral study program, all that I do to support my family and remain involved in my community did not stop when I enrolled and participated in the doctoral study program. I have found myself seeking personal nourishment in the form of the spirit as a way of sustaining myself throughout the doctoral study process.

History speaks to the downtrodden trail that African American women have taken to further advance the culture of African American people. This history has required us

to be forgiving amidst the struggles we have faced. Forgiveness as a means for moving forward with hope is also a major theme and challenging undertaking that speaks to one's true personal and spiritual growth. However, what does forgiveness have to do with the implications of higher education and African American women in higher education? It is the ability to move beyond the pain of collective and individual historical struggle so that others can benefit from the learning that African American women have to offer within the higher education setting. There is only a small percentage of the U.S. population that has achieved the level of the Ph.D. This is due in part to the challenge of undertaking such an achievement. So, what can be learned from a group such as African American women who have done great things beyond great obstacles? History has a way of stifling progress when we do not forgive self and others in order to move forward. Forgiveness of ourselves when we have failed to accomplish things in our past has a way of creating doubt within the mind to believe other things are unachievable. As we fool ourselves into believing this we have a difficult time moving forward. Therefore, we must allow ourselves forgiveness beyond past failures, hopelessness, and doubt in order to take action to achieve great things. In addition, we must continually be forgiving of others. The past and present day injustices that we face as African American women who are gendered and raced beings in academic institutions, means that we must allow ourselves to forgive as we proceed on a daily basis.

Forgiveness

Merriam Webster defines forgiveness as "the act of forgiving" or in other words "allowing room for error or weakness" (m-w.com). Vanier (1998) speaks of forgiveness from its Greek understanding of liberation or release from bondage. As we began as co-

researches to view ourselves in the broader historical social context of African American women, we began to discover the necessary attention that is needed towards the act of forgiveness beyond any ill will harbored towards us from others, and the self-inflicted harm we cause ourselves by not giving ourselves permission to be okay with self in whatever capacity that may be. We in essence sought to be released from bondage. Understanding our lives as spiritual beings meant that we would allow ourselves to uncover certain pains of our past that exposed human weakness, and in some cases human wickedness. In both instances, however, we recognize the need to think critically about what it means for us to forgive in order to move forward. In the case of our Mother Monologues, we understood that although we went through trials, we were able to forgive, and needed to be forgiven. Forgiveness is then represented as something that moves us forward in terms of personal growth and awareness. The data also reveals personal revelation, whereby Fire recognized that forgiveness allows her to better lead in her position of educational leadership. She states in one transcript that had she not been fully forgiving of one young student who purposely set out to verbally attack her, the resulting consequences of the situation may have been devastating for this student. In this case, her ability to forgive gave her the power to positively impact a situation that had lasting results for more than just her. In any such case, I argue that forgiveness retracts power. When one wrongs another, be it intentionally or not, they are attempting to assume power over that individual whether it is emotional or physical. However, when forgiveness is given, power is retracted and transferred back to the individual who is being wronged by not allowing the wrong doing to impact in the way it was intended to. African American women in doctoral studies who pursue equal footing and attempt to

challenge the traditional structures of institutions ascertain power through forgiveness. We, as co-researchers, ascertain power as we recognize and understand the role of forgiveness in our lives and the power available to us through ultimate forgiveness.

Participation and Retention

Johnson Bailey (2004) reports that major issues effecting Black women in participation and retention are: encouragement by the department, recruitment strategies, supportive faculty, networking with Black peers, and respect from faculty and funding. While several of these issues were noted within some of the data that we revealed in this study, supportive faculty and networking with peers was highly evidenced as an important factor that we discovered in conducting research together as three African American women. We noticed within the data that we often referred to the support we received from teachers along our educational journeys. Fire noted in one transcript, "There are teachers all through this and I haven't even began to mention the coaches." I also made mention of a teacher who believed in me in a section of my spiritual life map shown in Figure 5.2. I recalled how I strove to make her proud.

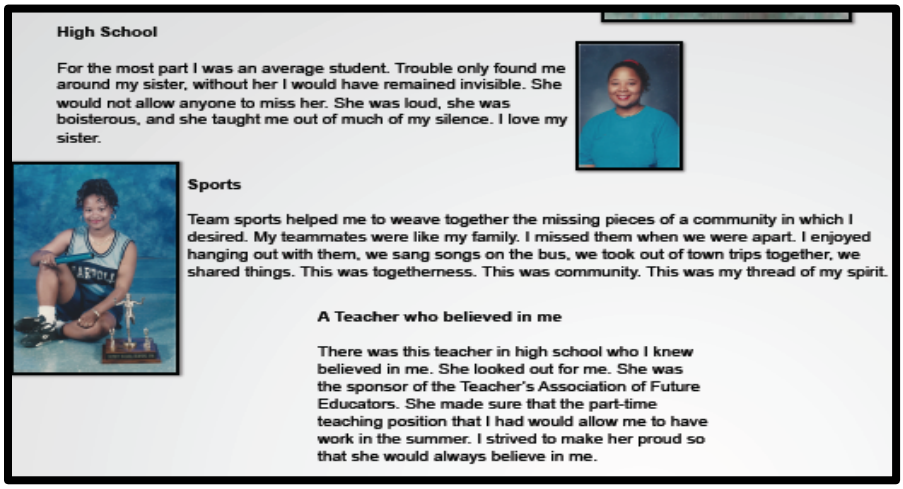


Figure 5.2. Making My Teacher Proud: From My Spiritual Life Map

These examples show that having support at all levels of learning in academic institutions is necessary and often noted when trying to understand participation and retention issues that effect African American women (Johnson Bailey, 2004; Young & Brooks, 2008). Understanding the value and importance of having support from professors in graduate school is an implication of this work that closely relates to our understanding of spirituality.

Mentoring Relationships

In their study, Grant and Simmons (2008) found that African American women doctoral students require more than traditional methods in terms of mentoring. The present study reveals that students can serve as mentors for one another. Thus, mentoring is not based on a professor/student, mentor/mentee relationship, but rather a relationship that is built on mutual trust, shared ideologies and a willingness to learn together. As we engaged together as co-researchers, we encouraged one another, we supported one another to progress in the doctoral study program, and we assisted one another in networking. All of these things are a part of a mentoring relationship that is often looked at between a professor and student. Seeing that there are often not large numbers of African American female professors, we can use the model of student-to-student or peer mentoring to advantage a process of functioning in a non-traditional way to support African American women doctoral students.

Since African American women professors are fewer in number, yielding a necessary look into the utilization of peer mentoring, it is also important to determine how peer mentoring can also positively impact African American women in the practice school leadership. de Casal and Alba Mulligan (2004), in their research on emerging

women leaders, found mentoring to be worthy of further research in women facing challenges in educational leadership. They noted "In the last several years, mentoring has surfaced as one means of assisting new women in leaders in working through the male-dominated system" (p. 31). Mentoring relationships that are developed and built upon the foundation of spiritual traditions support African American women as we navigate systems that have been oppressive.

Linked by the Spirit: Collective Action for Social Change

As Horton and Freire (1990) asserted, "We make the road by walking [it]"(6). Subsequently, a part of our research collection included a spiritual walk. The spiritual walk was planned to give us the opportunity to share personally spiritual experiences together. Although each spiritual walk looked differently, each walk linked us by the spirit. This link encouraged us to think about ways that we might collectively take action for social change that included new ways of conducting research and communicating at the doctoral level. For Fire this spiritual walk was literally taking a walk through her childhood neighborhood. We went from one of her childhood homes to one of the memorable elementary schools that she had attended as a child. She recalled her experience of her dependence on her sister who walked her to and from school. When we arrived at her childhood home our expectations were that we would see the home and perhaps even take pictures from the outside. However, when we arrived at the home the current owner let us go inside and walk throughout the home as Fire recollected memories of her youth. This was the childhood home that earned her the pseudonym Fire, because as a child she had set fire to the backroom. The new owner recalled that the home inspector told him that a fire had been set there. This spiritual walk revealed

memories of pain and hurt, but also the hope that we gain beyond our pain. We connected with Fire through this experience as did the current homeowner. Another symbolic experience during the spiritual walk with Fire was her description, prior to our arrival, of a large hill that she remembered running down as a child. When we arrived at the hill we noticed that it was really no more than a small mound. While we found this amusing, it was symbolic as it represented the pain and hurt of past experiences as small mounds that must be understood as life changes and we grow more mature.

Maturity of thinking is something that Water discovered and shared with us during her spiritual walk. As a spoken word artist, Water took us to one of her spoken word events. We witnessed her poetic knowledge and power through her word. This opportunity gave us insight into personal struggles that Water faced, and how through her voice she spiritualizes the world. Similar to Fire, my spiritual walk was a visit with my mother. Although the visit was unplanned and we did not know what direction the conversation with my mother would take us, we learned the importance of forgiveness in our lives from the visit. Had Fire not carefully observed my communication with my mother and revealed her observations to me, I may not have had the ability to see this experience through another lens. We together learned that forgiveness is necessary in moving forward in our lives. Whether we are progressing as doctoral students, or in our roles as educational leaders, we recognize that spirituality informs the journey by bringing individuals together in order to recover, discover, and endeavor to achieve collective action towards social change.

APPENDIX A

Definition of Key Terms

African American (AA) women refers to United States born women of African descent who classify themselves as African American women, thus experiencing race, gender and class marginalization based on a group identity.

Christian refers to a person with a Judeo-Christian faith base, believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Cultural competence refers to having an understanding of and the ability to interact in various ways with diverse cultural groups.

God refers to the supreme creator of all things; powerful force of the universe. (New International Version)

Journey refers to life's quest or mission in fulfillment of a purpose.

Religious Faith refers to beliefs that are centered on the premise of religious ideals and practices; also connected to the belief in a higher power.

Soul Unrest refers to a general malaise (depression) that infiltrates all areas of life (Sanders, 2009).

Spirit refers to the experience of the individual that is outward looking and able "to connect to relationships and realities beyond the immediacy of body and mind" (Mackeracher, 2004, p. 172)

Spirituality refers to "the experience of feeling beyond the normal limits of body and mind, of feeling connected to aspects of the external world that are of value to me – to others, to earth, and to a greater cosmic being (Mackeracher, 2004, p. 172).

Spiritual Force refers to a strong motivation and encouragement to do something that is divinely or otherwise inspired.

Spiritual Guidance refers to God's divine intervention in the creation of opportunities.

Traditional Structures refer to institutional structures that function within hegemonic paradigms centered within a White male Euro-Centric worldview.

APPENDIX B

Research Plan: Spiritual Retreats

Phase 1: Weekend One

Day 1- Friday: Setting the Stage for Research (3 hours)

- Ethical Considerations
- Participation/Protocol for Research
- Discussion of the two page research statement
- Outlining methods of research
- Determination of Spiritual Walk

Day 2 – Saturday: Sister-to-Sister Talk (7 hours)

- Sharing/Discussion of autoethnographies
- Reflecting on the guiding themes for the focused conversation
- Continued reflection and discussion of autoethnographies and spirituality within the doctoral study experience

Day 3 – Sunday: Spiritual Walk (3 hours)

Acknowledgement of the journey ahead: Reflecting, Singing and Praying as we overlooked the lake

Phase 2: Weekend Two

One All Day Retreat

- Discussion of the data gathered from the first weekend retreat
- Creation/Sharing/Discussion of Spiritual Life Maps
- Reflect on the guiding themes for the focused conversation

Phase 3: Weekend Three

Day 1- Friday: Sister-to-Sister Talk (3 hours)

- Sharing/Discussing guiding questions in collective journal
- Determination of Spiritual Walk

Evening of Day 1: A Spiritual Walk

- Water's spoken word event.

Day 2 – Saturday: Bearing the Fruit (7 hours)

- Weaving the data
- Look at various examples of ways that data has been shared in diverse ways with diverse sets of data
- Discuss what actions we would like to take towards sharing the data that we have collected

Evening of Day 1: A Spiritual Walk

Impromptu, A visit with my (Wind) mother

Follow-up in Denver, CO: A Spiritual Walk

A visit with Fire's dad at her childhood home and school

APPENDIX C

Research Process: Sister-to-Sister Conversation Framework

Themes
Humility *a reliance on the spirit/ moving beyond oppressive structures*
Identity *the role of spirituality in identity development*
Community *spirituality and cultural values within community*
Knowledge/Awareness *"Black woman's power and knowing can't be understood without a knowing of her spirit and spiritual life" (Omolade, 1994, p. 112).*
Action *grounding work in spirituality/empowerment*
Power *in relation to spirituality/ the impact of multiple oppressions (i.e. gender, race, class)*
Hope *in the doctoral program/potential/the quest for something more*

Sharing the Autoethnographies

Each co-researcher decided to share their autoethnography in a read-aloud. We then discussed each autoethnography. We dedicated one hour for the presentation and discussion of each autoethnography. However, we did not stop the discussion when we went beyond one hour. The following questions served as guiding questions for our focused conversation.

Guiding Discussion Questions for Autoethnography:

- Is spirituality embedded within the original text of your autoethnography? If so, how is it embedded? If not, why do you think it was not embedded?
- Which of the seven themes that guide our focused conversations, if any, are embedded within your autoethnography?
- How does the information in your autoethnography relate to the research question: How does spirituality inform the experience and progress…?

Sharing of Spiritual Life Maps

Each co-researcher determined their method of sharing the spiritual life map with other researchers (read-aloud, discussion of written document, performance, etc.). We dedicated one hour for the presentation and discussion of each spiritual life map. Questions emerged as we engaged in the process, however, we went back to our guiding themes of our focused conversations to support the discussion of the life maps when necessary.

APPENDIX D

Interwoven Quilt of Data Analysis	**Self-definition forms the participation and responsibility to community**	**Research is an Intellectual and Spiritual Pursuit of Purpose**	**Becoming takes place within Dialogue and within the context of Community**	**Meaning from concrete daily experiences**	**History Shaping Knowledge**	**Gender, race and identity Relations of Power in the academy**
Humility	How is humility evident in the mapping of African American women's participation and responsibility to community?	What is the role of humility in the intellectual and spiritual pursuit of purpose in higher education?	What does humility look like and when is it present within the context of community and it conversations?	How is humility exemplified in the concrete daily experiences of living out spirituality?	Where does humility become evident in the personal history shaping the knowledge of AA women?	Where is humility situated in the relations of power in the academy (having to do with gender, race, and identity)?
Identity	How do AA define their identity through engagement with and responsibility of giving to community?	How does the research agenda and identity of AA women converge/co-exist and while engaged in the intellectual and spiritual pursuit of purpose within a White stream research institution?	How is the spiritual identity of self represented within dialogue and the context of the community?	When does spiritual identity become a way of life?	How has history shaped identity and knowledge of three AA women?	How is the spiritual identity negotiated within the power relations in the academy?
Knowledge/Awareness	How does responding to community participation and responsibility impact the knowing & awareness of defining the self for AA women's self-definition in?	How does knowledge/awareness impact research as an intellectual and spiritual pursuit of purpose?	What role does knowledge/awareness play in the becoming that takes place in dialogue and within the context of community?	What does knowing & awareness look like in everyday life?	How does knowledge/awareness impact the conscious understanding of the African American experience in history?	How does knowledge/awareness impact the relations of power in the academy?
Community	How does community define the self of AA women and what how does this inform their role in the participation & responsibility to community?	What is the role of community within research as an ontological tool for intellectual and spiritual pursuit of purpose?	How does community play a role in the becoming that takes place in dialogue and within the context of community?	What examples can be drawn from the meaning in the concrete experiences what is the role of community in living & contributing to the spiritual journey?	How has community history informed the shaping of knowledge?	What is the impact of (gender, race, and identity) power relations in the academic community?
Action	What does action look like for AA women in response to participation and responsibility?	How does action look like and what role does it play in the intellectual and spiritual pursuit of purpose within research?	Where do we see action in the becoming that takes place within dialogue and in the context of community?	Where is action manifested in the daily concrete experiences along the spiritual journey?	What action has been taken or needs to be taken in response to the historical shaping of knowledge?	How is power practiced in the academy (having to do with gender, race, and identity)?

Digital Quilt[1] with Visual Images

[1] Images used in the Digital Quilt were downloaded and retrieved from the following sites:

http://www.4-hobby.com/product.php?productid=16350&cat=300&page=1

http://lazygalquilting.blogspot.com/2008/12/hope-quilt.html

http://www.handmadeinpa.net/2012/10/second-fabric-of-peace-quilt-handmade-in-pa/children-holding-hands/

http://tlc.howstuffworks.com/home/school-days-quilted-wall-hanging-pattern.htm

http://emsewandsew.blogspot.com/2011/10/my-twilight-quilt-earthbound-sun.html

http://www.flickr.com/photos/49053002@N02/galleries/72157626051602103/

http://artandcreativity.blogspot.com/2011/06/american-idol-quilt-creates-community.html

http://colourmefiji.wordpress.com/vasu-pacific-women-of-power/

http://www.saginawstreetquilts.com/store-detail.php?cat=2

My Spiritual Life Map

One Big Family

My family history is filled with rich stories of faith, love and hope. My grandmothers parents had 11 children who were entrepreneurs, business owners, and share croppers. With that number of children the diversity of the work was spread far and wide. All of the children, women and men, had a trade, except for my grandmother. She was the baby.

The Women of My Family

My grandmother, third from left, and her sisters who are all now deceased. My grandmother was the youngest of her 11 siblings and treated as such. Therefore, she never learned to drive or be self-sufficient. She was married off at a young age and has depended on her children to take care of her.

My Grandparents

My grandmother and grandfather with my mom and my uncle around 1952. My grandmother's marriage to my grandfather was arranged by her sisters due to the fact that my grandfather was considered to be well-off for an African American during that time period. He died while my grandmother was still young. She never remarried and has remained a widow.

My Grandmother

Although my grandmother never learned a professional trade outside of the home, she took care of her children and had pride in doing it well.
As a child, in the care of my grandmother, I always felt well taken care of. She always had everything we needed and she would preach to us about the importance of always being prepared for anything.

My Mother

Like my grandmother, my mother pressed upon me the importance of preparedness in life. In addition, she taught me to value hard work ethic,
skill and persistence. This image is of my mother in her younger years working the cotton gins.

My Birth/My Name

I was born the third child of my mother, in Lexington, Kentucky. My mother had a total of four children. She told me that the time of my birth was a time of new beginnings in her life. So, she named me Genesis after the first book in the beginning of the Christian Holy Bible. My birth name held a spiritual meaning for my mom and for me. However, I'm not sure how long after my birth that my mom changed my name. All I know is that she had a son and named him Omega. This was a testament to me that the new beginning that I was supposed to have brought ended and unfortunately it ended in the passing of my younger brother Omega, who was stillborn. My name was changed to Brenda Genise, although this was not official until I married at the age of twenty-three. My first name, Brenda, was given to me as a namesake of my Aunt Brenda, my mother's only sister. Then, my middle name changed to Genise instead of Genesis. I understood this to mean that I was no longer the beginning of any good thing, especially since I was labeled the bad seed and often referred to as such by my family.

A Place Called Home

The Move

As if swept up into the wind, at the age of five, I left the cozy comfort of my small private school in Kentucky to move to Texas. From a mixture of what I was told from my youth and what I remember, my family came to the state of Texas to start over. My mother traveled the distance to escape the abuse of my father and start a new life for herself and four children. My aunt had recently left a job working for the FBI and relocated to Texas along with my grandmother. My mother believed this move would be the best thing for us too.

Invisible

There were years of my life that were muted, invisible, silenced, that are forgotten. I believe I was invisible then.

Drama

Theatre allowed me to be another person. I could pretend. I could make myself cry easily. I harvested my pain through the script. I was a great actress. I could pretend I was anyone. Darkness cast me as the villain, but I was still good at it. My theatre teacher came to watch me perform at the community theatre. He exclaimed, "I wish I had students as talented as you in my class" I told him, "I am in your class"

High School

For the most part I was an average student. Trouble only found me around my sister, without her I would have remained invisible. She would not allow anyone to miss her. She was loud, she was boisterous, and she taught me out of much of my silence. I love my sister.

Sports

Pregnancy

I started to show the summer after I graduated from High School. I felt like I had let everyone down. Afraid and uncertain of what I should do, I looked to God for the answer. As I was crying and driving down the road one day, I was nearly cut off by the vehicle on side of me. The bumper sticker on back of the suburban that almost cut me off read, "It's a baby, not a choice". Scared, I pulled off the side of the road and it seemed as if everything around paused except the wind and the leaves that swirled around my car. I sat there in the parking lot and cried, but no longer tears of fear. I knew I was not alone.

The Gift

Her name is Bryanna. She is beautiful and she is mine. I will love her ever so dearly. I will keep her safe. I will tell her that she is beautiful everyday, "Where's the pretty girl?" I will say until she knows that she, she is the pretty girl. I will tell her that she is smart. I will tell her that she can be anything that she wants to be and do anything that she wants to do. She is God's gift to me. I will work hard so that she will have a happy life.

A Teacher who believed in me

There was this teacher in high school who I knew believed in me. She looked out for me. She was the sponsor of the Teacher's Association of Future Educators. She made sure that the part-time teaching position that I had would allow me to have work in the summer. I strived to make her proud so that she would always believe in me.

The Threat

College

I have to enjoy this time and make it fast. You name it I was in the club. I pledged a sorority, I was a cheerleading captain, homecoming queen, Miss Black and Gold, and consistently maintained a good GPA. I also worked full-time and became a support manager at Wal-Mart. Dr. Small believed in me. She told me that I could be anything I wanted to be. She told me I was smart. She told me I had a good heart. She told me the future awaited. Dr. Toliver believed in me too. I changed my major. I graduated in three years. It was time to be a mother. The fun was over.

Marriage – Work – Parenthood

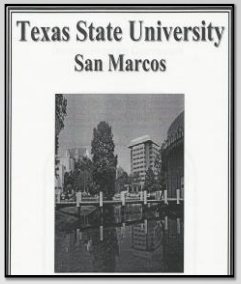
The business of life kept me ill equipped for the life I wanted to lead. Tired and unhappy - unhappy and tired. I hid everything from the world to see. Until I began to put nothing before the Lord. I went to bible study. I prayed daily. I spoke to the Lord and spoke to me. I knew the Lord was pleased with me.

Teaching

The energy and inspiration of the classroom feeds my soul. – I loved my students, each and everyone. I wanted the best for them and I prayed for them. My sister began working with me at a charter school. We prayed together. We invited other teachers to pray with us. One teacher told me that I was glowing. I was walking and saw myself walking. Somehow I was looking down on myself from above.

Motivating Friendships

I have always separated and categorized my life. I love organization. I try to keep my friendships organized as well. This began in my childhood. Kickball friends were kickball friends, they called me B.G. Track friends were track friends, they called me Genise. My classmates and co-workers were my classmates and co-workers, they called me Brenda. However, in college I felt a different sense of community within my friendships. The categorization began to change slightly. Especially, since I met a colleague who began to blur those categorical lines and became a friend. She was a motivating friend who mentored me towards pursuing a doctoral degree. We are kindred spirits.

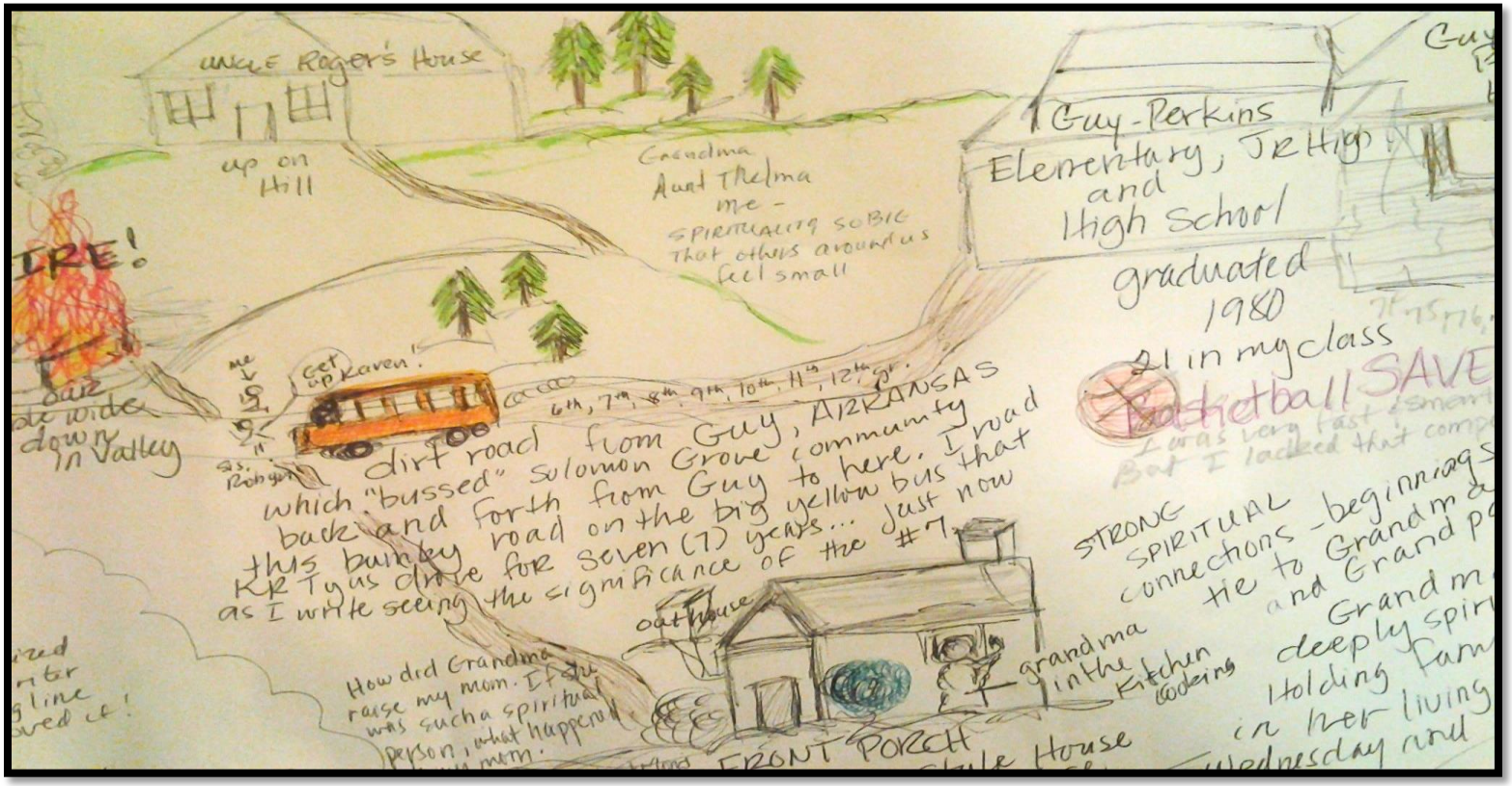


Graduate School

For a short period of time in my life I felt swept up in the wind. I worked on my Masters degree, worked, took care of home and just seemed moving about with the wind. I wanted my master's thesis to have meaning and be connected to my everyday work. By the reaction of my professor when I mentioned my topic and interest, I knew that she was not interested in my topic. My topic was about the Black children that I served daily. She just wanted to check my name off of her list. When I finished with my degree, I had no desire to return to academia in that capacity again.

Fire's Spiritual Life Map

Roger's House
up on Hill
Guy-Perkins Elementary, Jr High and High School
graduated 1980
Guy-Perkins High Gym
pain
Lee & Lenois
Blue & Gold
off to Henderson STATE!
1980
80 miles from Home
ARKADELPHIA, ARKANSAS
dirt road from Guy, ARKANSAS
which "bussed" Solomon Grove community
back and forth from Guy to here. I road
this bumpy road on the big yellow bus that
KR Tyus drive for seven (7) years... just now
as I write seeing the significance of the #7
STRONG SPIRITUAL connections - beginnings
tie to Grandma and Grandpa -
Grandma was deeply spiritual
Holding family prayer
in her living room every
Wednesday and Sunday night
w/out fail.
FRONT PORCH
Shotgun style House
Grandma's House
up the hill
Henderson State University!
Home of the Reddies.
Fountain at the front entrance of this beautiful School
generational curses


UNCLE Roger's House
up on Hill
Grandma
Aunt Thelma
me -
SPIRITUALITY SO BIG
That others around us
feel small
Guy-Perkins
Elementary, JR High
and
High School
graduated
1980
21 in my class
Basketball SAVE
I was very fast & smart
But I lacked that comp
IRE!
Get up Karen!
6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th gr.
dirt road from Guy, ARKANSAS
which "bussed" Solomon Grove community
back and forth from Guy to here. I road
this bumby road on the big yellow bus that
KR Tyus drove for seven (7) years... just now
as I write seeing the significance of the #7.
STRONG
SPIRITUAL
connections - beginnings
tie to Grandma
and Grand p
Grandm
deeply spir
Holding fam
in her living
Wednesday and
outhouse
grandma
in the
Kitchen
cooking
How did Grandma
raise my mom. If she
was such a spiritual
person, what happened
FRONT PORCH
style House

Visual Representations[2] from Water's Digital Spiritual Life Map

[2] Images used in Water's spiritual life map were downloaded and retrieved from the following sites:

https://www.google.com/search?q=queen+latifah+unity&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&hl=en&tbm=isch&source=og&sa=N&tab=wi&ei=HFEIUdDDLsfB2wWfi4HQBA&biw=1320&bih=665&sei=H1EIUbqXLcjq2QWS14GABA

http://www.impawards.com/2002/antwone_fisher.html

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0463998/

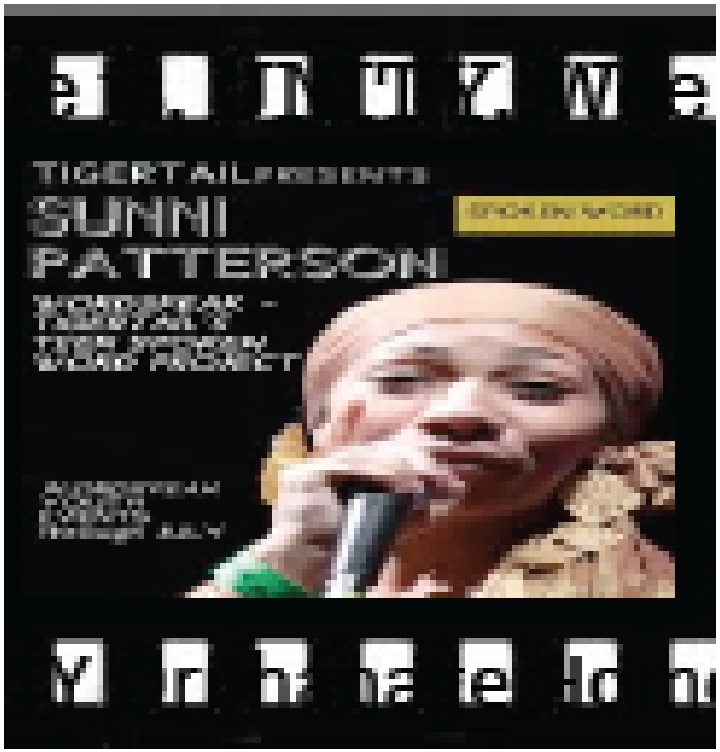
https://www.google.com/search?q=for+colored+girls+images&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&hl=en&tbm=isch&source=og&sa=N&tab=wi&ei=AVAIUb3eK-Xg2QXp84A4&biw=1320&bih=665&sei=H1AIUc7UGNPE2QXu7oG4DA

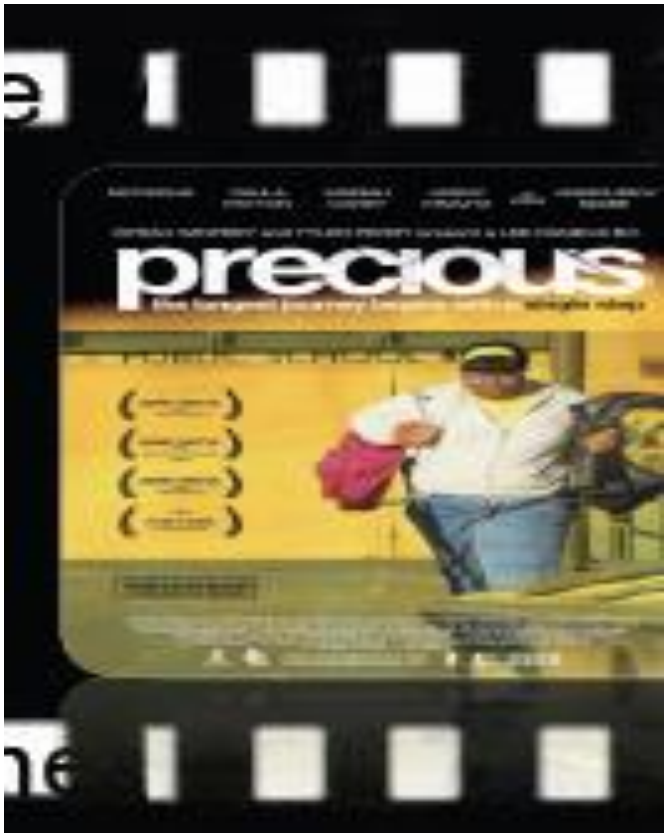
http://www.soulofmiami.org/2011/03/page/8/

http://pic.tv/community/2011/03/03/top-5-movies-about-self-love/

FREEDOM WRITERS

FOR COLORED GIRLS


TIGERTAIL presents
SUNNI
PATTERSON


precious

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