ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: MENTOR TO MUSE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
                             AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE MENTORS

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                             Doctor of Philosophy, 2014

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In this phenomenological study, I explore the lived experiences of six African American female mentors working with African American female youth. The mentors in this study range in age from twenties through fifties and are employed in various fields including education, healthcare and youth development. Having become mentors through formal and informal avenues, the mentors are referred to as muses because of their desire to build meaningful relationships with their mentees and serve as sources of inspiration who are willing to listen and learn from their mentees. The works of philosophers Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Edward Casey are intertwined with the writings of Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Audre Lorde, while Max van Manen guides the phenomenological process with pedagogical insights and reminders.

Through individual conversations with each muse, the power in care and the importance of listening in mentoring relationships is uncovered as essential components. Weaving through the simple, yet profound narrative around sustaining relationships with African American female youth are topics that need continued exploration, particularly in educational settings. Through the muses sharing their own experiences with mentoring, race and working with African American female youth, themes connected to gender,

race, struggle and triumph emerge. The significance of place, the complexities of Black femininity, and the benefits of genuine dialogue are all explored in ways that bring new understanding to African American female experiences and how they connect to today's educational climate.

This study concludes with phenomenological recommendations for educational stakeholders to pursue partnerships with school, family and community. Including the voices of community pedagogues, such as mentors, and other adults who work with our youth outside of the school setting, can help to strengthen the academic experience for both educators and these students. With a primary focus of educational change centered on the ideas of adults, it is also recommended that educational decisions become more inclusive with the insights of students, parents and community members. Continuing the dialogue with community pedagogues can help uncover more of the missing pedagogical insights beneficial to African American female students and their future achievement and success.

MENTOR TO MUSE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
FEMALE MENTORS

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2014

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Dedication

Mom and Grandma, my muses

Thank you for showing me the importance of faith, family and love

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE:
WHAT IT MEANS TO GUIDE: MENTORS, MIRRORS AND MEMORIES

As I drive from Philadelphia to the Garden State after a weekend spent with a friend, I anxiously, yet hesitantly, approach the remainder of the day. My friends and I move toward the funeral home at a snail's pace in the traffic, noticing the flashing police lights, as the officer directs cars into the already overflowing parking lot. After finding a parking space in the hotel parking lot next door to the funeral home, we make our way into the building. The line of people is wrapped around the perimeter of the building and there are a few familiar faces in line. I notice individuals from middle school and others from high school. Adults from my old neighborhood and church are also seen in the line. As I wait in this line, I think about why I am actually in attendance at the wake of Mr. Patterson. I did move away from New Jersey over twelve years ago, and although he served as my guidance counselor for one year during high school, I still wonder what I am doing here. I think about why I am here because I do not enjoy attending any type of funeral or memorial service, and additionally, I have so much reading and writing to complete for school. This is actually the last place that I want to be, but I am here.

As we finally reach the room where Mr. Patterson's body is laid in the casket with colorful flowers surrounding him, I look up to the front and I see Mr. Patterson's widow, Mrs. Patterson. At this moment, I am reminded of the absence of choice for me in this decision. That is when I remember why I am here. I am here to show support, if only briefly, to Mrs. Patterson, my mentor. As my third grade teacher, she has and continues to impact my life in such a way that is almost indescribable, and taking a few moments out of my day to attend this wake is the least that I can do.

1

Mrs. Patterson stands near the casket, with family members beside her, and she greets everyone who passes through the line with either a handshake or hug and a smile. I admire her strength. As I greet her with a hug and smile, she looks surprised to see me, knowing that I currently reside in Maryland. "Are you okay? she asks. "Yes," I reply and as though my answer is not assuring enough for her, she asks, "You sure?" and I reply with a soft "Yes" again. This is just another extension of her concern and care for me, her mentee. To others, that exchange may seem brief and insignificant, but for the both of us it means that the bond made between mentor and mentee over twenty years ago still exists. What could I say in that moment? Being *there* was all that I felt I could do. Being *there* is what she has done for me in the past and that has been more than enough. According to Heidegger (1962), "'There' points to a 'here' and a 'yonder'" (p. 132). In other words, Mrs. Patterson's pattern of being *there* for me not only impacts my present, but has a far reaching affect on my future as well. This has proven true for the past twenty years of my life.

Mrs. Patterson is an African American female mentor. I am confident in stating that she has been a mentor to many females in Neptune, New Jersey, and one of those young women is me. No, I was never enrolled in a formal mentoring program. I did not have a mentor who helped me with homework or took me to museums or events on the weekends. I have had experiences with amazing mentors who may be titled as informal, but have been a very formal part of my life, thoughts and decisions. I am on a journey to explore the meaning of what it means to be an African American female mentor, partly because of my experience with this phenomenon, but also with the desire to gain insight into the complexities of this role. What does it mean to be an African American female

mentor? What does it mean to *mentor* someone else? How does the experience of being an African American female mentor to African American girls influence and shape the life of the mentor? What is the connection between the African American female mentor and the surrounding community?

This phenomenological exploration is framed in Black feminism, bringing forward the experiences of African American women. From the highly educated to those without formal education; from the academics to the grandmothers, aunts and cousins in the African American community: there are African American female intellectuals who contribute to the Black female experience (Collins, 2009). Arguably, the African American female mentors working with African American girls provide intellectual insights exclusive to the Black female experience.

In phenomenology "The essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open" (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 298). As a phenomenological researcher, I am engaged in conversations with the participants of the study as well as engaged in a conversation with the text. Questions throughout the text continue to open up possibilities to the reader and are not to be considered research questions. Van Manen (1997) urges phenomenological researchers to "pull" (p. 44) the reader into the phenomenon so they gain a deeper understanding beyond a mere research question into various possibilities within the lived experience. With this in mind, I am interested in exploring the question, **What are the lived experiences of African American female mentors mentoring African American female youth?**

What Does it Mean to Be a Mentor?

As a third grader, I did not think of Mrs. Patterson as a "mentor," and I am honestly not quite sure when I began to refer to anyone as mentor. The word is very formal and when heard can bring forth different images and perceptions among different people. Even within educational literature, there is no consensus as to what "mentor" actually means, which can lead to either a dismissal of defining the term or a constrained definition that is just too specific (Butts, Durley & Eby, 2010; Eby, Rhodes & Allen, 2010; Haggard, Dougherty, Turban & Wilbanks, 2011). Within the many definitions of mentoring I have had the opportunity to read, there is always a notion of reciprocity and the desire to help someone else. Whether school or community-based with the youth, college students or professionals, the desire to help someone reigns in the idea of mentoring.

A simple, yet thoughtful, definition of mentoring that most certainly fits my mentoring experiences is "caring adults helping young people to see the options available to them, allowing them to define themselves, and then making it safe for them to become the people they want to be" (Dortch, 2000, p. 7). This definition is filled with important elements of mentoring, and yet, leaves space for interpretation and varying mentoring experiences. First, there must be some level of care in a mentoring relationship. Care is further elaborated in this chapter and the next two chapters, since this is significant in building a meaningful mentor relationship. Second, allowing mentees to define themselves is key. A mentor serves as a guide, not one who forces her own opinions upon the mentee. There is a sense of deep connection and active participation necessary for the mentee, so all is not placed solely in the hands of the mentor. Last, making it safe for

mentees is providing that safe space where they can explore, grow, take risks and work towards reaching their own goals. What exactly is mentoring from the African American female experience? What does self-perception add to the mentor literature?

Re-defining Mentor

With the competing definitions among researchers and mentor advocates as to what mentoring is, I turn to etymological references to help deepen the understanding of mentoring. Mentor, from the Greek *Mentor* associated with *mentos* includes intent, purpose, spirit and passion. When I think of mentoring, it is directly connected to guidance and support. From the Old French[1] *guider*, the word means to guide, lead and conduct. From the Latin *supporter*, the word implies to convey, carry and bring up. To lead and bring a child up implicitly and explicitly connects to the role of a mentor. This notes that mentors have an intention when they take on this role and should passionately embrace the opportunity to guide an individual into his/her own particular purpose in life.

So, etymologically speaking, when serving as a mentor, one has to guide, carry and do this with intent and passion. Not all can take on this role of mentoring, because it requires sacrifice, dedication and a certain level of vulnerability within the relationship. This extends beyond parenting or offering advice, but this is a role that requires passionate intent while serving someone else. Etymologically, there is no mention of reward or recognition within mentoring, although mentoring relationships are beneficial. Rhodes (2002) notes, although the mentee or protégé is usually the focus of the mentoring relationship, "Nonetheless, there is often mutual caring, respect, and understanding; and in that sense, the mentor and protégé each benefit from the relationship" (p. 37).

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[1] All etymological references in this document were retrieved from www.etymonline.com.

Within the literature and praise surrounding mentoring and its benefits, the

negative aspects of this phenomenon are rarely highlighted or examined. With mentoring,

as further explored in Chapter Two, it is necessary to unpack the various perspectives.

There are individuals completely unaware that they are engaged in mentoring

relationships, while others proudly wear the title of "mentor," yet are not engaged in

effective mentoring relationships. Jacobs' (1996) poem displays the perception of

mentoring and how modeling behaviors, even negative and undesirable, can lead to

expectation of emulation.

Mentoring

"Being black" he told me,
between mouthfuls of vegetarian barbecue,
"is not as easy as you think.
You ought to work at doing it my way."

"You mean," I asked,
"be proudly ignorant and bitter
instead of proudly proud,
rattle shackles like jewelry,
wear kente like a black cross
instead of like a robe of rainbows,
seek out chips to shoulder in fear of nakedness,
collect brochures of Africa but never maps,
pretend that your friends and
your found neighborhood are our new nation,
shout whenever possible,
read nothing that does not come from your experience,
misunderstand the Zulu, define the Middle Passage
as the start or end of history,
walk always under palm trees because
you cannot remember,
refuse to learn to spell,
view English as a minefield,
write the same praise poem 100 times, 200,
whatever it takes to recover from who you are,
see musicals entitled 'Momma My Foot Hurts'
and feel your greatness consummated,
call all noise redemption, celebrate only in safety,

chant against the other, mistake familiarity for family,
seek mediocrity as success at discount prices,
make only easy movements,
know only what you know?"

"Exactly," he replied.
"There may be hope for you yet." (Jacobs, pp. 31-32)

This poem is filled with mediocre thoughts, limiting ideas and low expectations of

what it means to be Black. "In some cases it [mentoring] can do more harm than good; in

others it can have extraordinarily influential effects" (Rhodes, 2002, p. 128). This poem

highlights the potential harm that mentoring can have when ineffective and when the role

of mentor is misunderstood. Contrary to popular misconceptions: all mentoring is not

good or effective. Among African American women, how is mentoring perceived and

what does a Black feminist perspective bring to the mentoring experience?

Framing the Mentor Experience: Black Feminist Thought and Phenomenology

The lived experience of African American female mentors is deep and

meaningful. To explore this particular phenomenon, Black feminism serves as the

appropriate framing to coincide with phenomenology. Black feminist thought, in this

study, is used primarily through the lens of sociologist and scholar Patricia Hill Collins'

(2009) work. Black feminist thought is a theory where Black women's ideas and

experiences are central in academia and everyday life (Collins, 2009). This framework

helps to unite both scholarly work and the overlooked intellectual thought of Black

women who are not associated with research and/or the academy. Exploring family,

relationships, motherhood, controlling images and much more through the perspective of

Black women is the objective of Black feminist thought. There are four important

components of Black feminist epistemology that closely connect to both

phenomenological inquiry and mentoring: (1) lived experience as a criterion of meaning, (2) dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (3) the ethic of caring, and (4) the ethic of personal accountability.

Lived experience as a criterion of meaning refers to the credibility of Black women's life experiences (Collins, 2009). The knowledge gained from these experiences are viewed as more valuable among Black women than an "expert" who has studied or simply thought about the experience. The value placed on life experiences in Black feminist thought fits with phenomenology. Phenomenological research is human science research that explores lived experiences, recognizing that our everyday experiences have meaning (van Manen, 1997). Lived experience addresses the meaning of an experience and this deepens the exploration, uncovering what this experience is like so that others can gain a better understanding of something they may have never experienced themselves.

The use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims addresses how knowledge claims are developed through conversations with other Black women, not in isolation (Collins, 2009). In Chapter Three, the art of conversation is explored with the work of Gadamer (1975/2004). He shares that genuine conversation "creates a common language" (p. 371) that leads to understanding the perspective and meaning making of others and their experiences. Open dialogue, in both mentoring and phenomenological research, provides a space for a deeper understanding of the mentee or mentor's experiences and the phenomenon at hand.

The ethic of caring includes expressiveness, emotions, and empathy as essential components in meaning making (Collins, 2009). In both phenomenology and mentoring,

care is essential. Phenomenological questions come from a personal place of care about the particular phenomenon being explored. By turning to the phenomenon in this chapter, I am sharing my own personal connection to this topic with expressiveness, various emotions and empathy. This ethic of care continues throughout this work as an inescapable thread weaving together mentoring and phenomenology.

The ethic of personal accountability emphasizes the significance of personal accountability when Black women make knowledge claims (Collins, 2009). This personal accountability in phenomenological research is exhibited in the interpretive aspect of the work. A phenomenological researcher cannot make knowledge claims without interpretation or unveiling meaning that is hidden within the description of the lived experience (van Manen, 1997) before identifying emergent themes. As a result, there is personal accountability for myself, as the researcher, and my claims of what the experience of being an African American female mentor brings forth. These themes do not solidify the African American female mentor experience, but instead add to the experience and share it in a new and unique way that will hopefully lead to more research from different methodological perspectives.

Collins (2009) asserts that she seeks both an individual and collective voice in her work with Black feminism. I do the same in my work as a phenomenological researcher. Seeking, reflecting upon and interpreting my own experiences, as well as the experience of other African American female mentors, opens up the relevance and hidden connections the experience of mentoring has to education, the African American female experience, and the communities in which we live and serve. Along with mentors, the collective voices of African American female scholars, authors and poets enrich this

work and show the lived experience in a way that moves beyond mere description. In this "showing," I have revisited some of my own experiences and realize how relevant they are to this topic.

Mentor Mirror: I Can See My Reflection

> For stigmatized groups, the social world is not a positive mirror but a carnival mirror, with images of the self stretched or shrunken by a distorting surface that cannot produce an accurate image. (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 132)

Unfortunately, the world that we live in does not always provide the space for us to embrace that which is unique and beautiful about ourselves. With my mentors, I have found that I can fully embrace who I am without question. My mentors provide the positive mirror, while making me aware that the carnival mirror with distorted images of myself as an African American female does exist. This awareness has helped to shape my own life experiences as both mentor and mentee. Thinking about the space provided by mentors, I reflect back on the journey that has allowed me to reach this point academically and maintain interest in this particular phenomenon.

Who I Was

The relationship between Mrs. Patterson and me began over twenty years ago. As one of the only four African American students in her third grade gifted and talented class, I was immediately excited about spending an entire school year with Mrs. Patterson. My immediate connection to her was not only that she was African American, but that we were the same complexion. This was a huge deal. As Bachelard (1994) asserts, "Memory – what a strange thing it is!" (p. 9). I do not remember the exact moment or incident that caused me to not fully appreciate my brown skin complexion, but there was this stigma with being darker skinned, particularly as a young child. While

some assert that skin color is no longer an issue, others recognize that skin complexion still impacts careers, self-esteem and relationships (Herring, Keith & Horton, 2004; Jones et al., 2003; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). Although there is literature around mentors and mentees of the same race and gender and the significance of that pairing, I was unable to find literature emphasizing the relevance of skin complexion in mentoring. Since the awareness of race transpires between the ages of three and five for Black children (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992) it is not strange that as an eight year-old I was tuned into the shared complexion between Mrs. Patterson and myself. Seeing her as my teacher, a woman in a revered position to teach and prepare me for the future, was life changing.

The struggle to ignore the societal mirror and focus on the positive mirror provided by loved ones did not yet exist, but would later become a prevalent part of my life. As an eight year-old, there was an understanding that I would have the privilege to be taught, for the entire school year, by someone who looked a lot like me: dark skin, dark eyes and dark hair. Soon after my initial excitement about having an African American teacher, Mrs. Patterson shared that she was from my hometown, and I soon discovered that she and my own mother were classmates and friends during high school.

The experience of having a teacher that looked like me continues to have an impact on my own perceptions of teaching and learning. Both my third grade school year and my third grade teacher continue to lead me to think about the role of race and gender in education. Beyond those factors, I think about the significance of communal and cultural connection as well. What is the role of these factors in mentoring? What is the

uniqueness of having a mentor of the same gender and race? What can my experiences with this particular phenomenon contribute to this study?

Who I Am

As an adult and doctoral student engaged in researching various aspects of mentoring, it has become even more apparent to me who my mentors are and have been over the course of my life. Before reading about "othermothering" and concepts around familial relationships, I knew there were individuals outside of my biological family who served as mentors and role models. My fictive kin were individuals with whom I shared reciprocal personal relationships and viewed as biological relatives, although we were unrelated (Harris-Perry, 2011).These individuals continually help me to think about the guidance they provide and the standards I set for myself as a mentor. I recognize that mentoring cannot be confined to one particular type of relationship or interaction, nor can the word "mentor" itself fully describe the various representations of guidance in the lives of African American women. Is there space for the renaming of "mentor"? What do African American female mentors' experiences contribute to this renaming?

I have been both the mentor and the mentored. Knowing what it is like to have someone to listen, support and acknowledge my growth as an individual has always translated into my opportunities to mentor others. I have found that "all existence is circular, a Yin-Yang process where black and white becomes [sic] richly gray: The Tao mentor is actually a superb mentoree; the excellent mentoree is a fine mentor" (Huang & Lynch, 1999, p. 3). This provides a unique opportunity to appreciate the mentoring process and relationship because in order to excel as a mentor, it is important to understand the position of mentee. What does a mentor provide to the

mentee? In the experience of mentoring, what does the African American female mentor learn? As a result of what is learned, how does the African American female mentor empower her African American female mentees?

What Mentoring Allows Me to See

Along this journey of mentoring and being mentored, the positive mirror has become multiple mirrors held up by the many influential women in my life. These mirrors help to combat the negative images reflected by society's mirror, particularly in a space where I continue to be one of few African Americans. Both my educational experiences and mentoring experiences tend to come full circle and bring me to a place that is new, while still vaguely familiar. The influence of my mentors from the past and present provide examples of how to continue pushing through the trials and tribulations of life. The undeniable care that has been a part of my mentoring relationships as a mentee continues to guide my role as a mentor. The familial aspects of mentoring continue to expand and influence my own decisions in mentoring both family members and unrelated African American females. Being engaged in the mentoring experience, as both mentor and mentee, has allowed me to recognize my own strengths, weaknesses and the invaluable role of my mentors' advice and support.

Influence. I recognize that life has struggles and hardships, as well as joyful and pleasant moments. Mentors have been great examples of how to handle what clinical psychologist, professor and professional mentor Robert J. Wicks (2000) refers to as positive contamination. Wicks recognizes that mentors "have pain, experience shame, make mistakes – even big ones. But mentors are people who didn't settle in life. They lived it and continue to do so, even though in society's eyes they may not seem

successful or relevant anymore" (p. 72). Approaching this work primarily from the perspective of a mentee, and having more time and experience in the position of mentee, could limit my thinking about mentors. Mentors, too, must deal with the societal mirror that displays distorted images of who they are and what they are worth, but they continue to move forward in spite of the hardships.

One of my mentors, Tanya Marsh, has been an example of how to push through the hardships, particularly professionally. As an African American female principal of a predominantly White elementary school, by both staff and student percentages, Mrs. Marsh often found herself misunderstood and underappreciated. After sharing with her through email the challenges of first year doctoral studies, she replied with encouragement and with sharing her own struggles.

Hi Precious!!!!!!!

Oh, just seeing this e-mail brightened my day. I know you're doing well. I wouldn't expect anything less than that from you :-) The work will be challenging but hang in there. Things are going OK here at (school name), but you know how it can get sometimes. People are crying about the mean old Principal and it comes and goes, but for the most part, everything is well…Take care of yourself baby girl and I'll see you soon!
Love,

School Mommy :-)

Through the challenges of leading a school, Mrs. Marsh found time to encourage me and share her own professional challenges. It has been my experience that actions speak much louder than words. The modeling Mrs. Marsh provided professionally while I was a classroom teacher has helped to shape both my teaching and mentoring. This is to be expected since, "The wise mentor does not impart feelings, attitudes, and knowledge in an ostentatious manner; through modeling and demonstration he or she influences the

surroundings, and by so doing receives praise and the loyalty of others" (Huang & Lynch, 1999, p. 99). Is this influence and modeling unique to my experience or common among African American female mentors? Does the influence of mentors shape African American female mentors' ability to effectively mentor? If so, how and what does this uncover about the circle of mentoring?

Same race mentoring. There is uniqueness in African American female mentoring relationships, beyond the mere presence of someone of the same race (View & Frederick, 2011). Higher education and educational leadership literature explore the mentoring relationships among African American women and emphasize the relevance of same race mentoring relationships. African American female mentees express that their relationships with African American female mentors provide a special type of support, understanding and inspiration that they did not, or believed they could not, receive from a mentor of another race (Davis, 2007; Grant, 2012; Holmes, Land & Hinton-Hudson, 2007; Patton & Harper, 2003). Although, "Race/ethnicity is a shared characteristic between Black students and faculty," it is important to recognize that "it should not be assumed to be a bonding mechanism signifying a commonality of experience" (Holmes, Land & Hinton-Hudson, p. 113). The identity of being African American, which is further explored in Chapter Three, was what the uniqueness within the mentoring relationships seemed to be hinged upon (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; View & Frederick, 2011). There was a shared sense of resistance, understanding and shared admiration within the mentoring relationships, resulting in continued mentoring by mentees who were previously inspired to help others in the way they had been helped (Griffin & Toldson, 2012; Patton & Harper, 2003; Patton, 2009). Very little of the mentoring

literature recognizes the influence both mentors and mentees have on one another, but there is always some aspect of care in the relationships that is initiated and received from both individuals involved in a mentoring relationship.

Care-ful mentoring. When I think about my mentors and my own role as a mentor, one word always comes to mind: care. I know, undoubtedly, that each of my mentors cares for me. Care, from the Old English, *carian*, means to be anxious, grieve; to feel concern or interest. Heidegger shares that care does not "stand primarily and exclusively for an isolated attitude of the 'I' towards itself" (p. 193). In other words, care is about others and not simply focused on self. Because of their care, each of my mentors is concerned about my success. The word success, from the Latin *successus* means happy outcome. My happy outcome has always been the focus for my mentors, and I have recently realized this is my focus as a mentor. When recently asked what my goal is as a mentor, I had to take time and think about my response. I had never thought about my own individual goal as a mentor, since the focus has always been on making sure that my mentees thrive. I now realize that my goal as a mentor is intertwined with the goals of my mentees: their success is my goal. Since "Making a difference in a young life is what mentoring is all about," and "The opportunity to do so is all the reward a true mentor asks for" (Dortch, 2000, p. 43), the concern and interest that I have in the lives of my mentors is directly connected to their overall success. My mentees deserve success in all areas of their lives and my role as a mentor is to help them achieve that success whether it is academic, professional, familial or personal. Another way to answer the question about my goal as a mentor is to recognize that my mentoring relationships will look different with each mentee, since their own personal goals and definitions of success vary.

In chapters two and three the notion of care is further discussed from both the White feminist and Black feminist perspectives. This topic is discussed within the circle of care, emphasizing that mentoring is a reciprocal act and a relationship. In her book, *The Millionth Circle*, Jean Bolen (1999) writes about the power of women circles changing our world and the way we interact as females. When writing about centering the circle, Bolen shares, "The center is what makes a circle special, or sacred. The invisible center as source of energy, compassion, and wisdom. How to kindle this fire and keep it glowing? Begin the circle with something that centers it" (p. 33). Bolen goes on to share that singing, humming or even silence might center the women's circle. After reading about this idea of centering the circle, the question, "What is at the center of the mentoring circle?" came to mind. What is it that the mentoring relationship revolves around and is centered upon? In my experience, it has been the genuine care of the women in my life. My success is truly their goal because they care about me achieving my goals and becoming the woman that I desire to become.

Through this phenomenological exploration, another center for the mentor circle might be revealed. Possibly, there is more than one element of mentoring that centers the circle. Since phenomenology is concerned with essences and "essence is that what makes a thing what it is" (van Manen, 1997, p. 177), through this exploration of what makes an African American female mentor a mentor will be uncovered.

Familial circle of mentoring. As mentioned earlier, fictive kinship (Harris-Perry, 2011), othermothering and women-centered networks (Collins, 2009) have not long been a part of my vocabulary, but the familial aspect of mentoring journeys all the way back to my very own childhood and interactions with my mother. My mother provided the

17

physical necessities for survival (food, shelter and clothing) but beyond that she was a guide, station of support and anchor of care within my life. The first modeling in my life of mentorship was displayed through my mother. I found myself lost in the thoughts of the full familial circle of mentoring shortly before starting doctoral studies. Just one day before I was informed that I received funding for doctoral studies, my family and I said goodbye to my twenty-three year old (young) cousin Jonathan. He was thoughtlessly gunned down one Saturday evening, and that left with me thoughts of what I could have or should have done to prevent this tragic loss.

When Jonathan died, I felt partly responsible. No, I did not pull the trigger. I was not even in the same state in which the tragedy took place, but still I felt as though there was more I could have done. What could I have done to prevent this? Helping him with his homework at my grandmother's kitchen table during his elementary and middle school years crossed my mind. After dropping out of high school he shared with me, "After you moved away there was no one to help me with my homework and my grades dropped." At the time of this conversation, I heard this statement as nothing more than an excuse, but what if it was more? Reflecting upon his words, I wonder what I could have done to make sure that he achieved his goal of success. Should I have connected him with a male mentor? Continued to help him from afar? After he dropped out of high school, why did I not take the time to have a discussion with him about his future and his goals? Tragedy occurs, as Philadelphia principal and educator Salome Thomas-El (2006) shares in his book, *The Immortality of Influence*, but this does not give us an excuse to stop moving forward. While reflecting on the death of a teenage student named Willow, Thomas-El states:

18

> Will we succeed? That's not the question. The question is: Don't we have to try? What will we do to help our inner-city, suburban, and rural kids become successful? If we implement and sustain these programs, I'll feel that Willow's death will have had a purpose. (p. 11)

My cousin's death propels me forward to help others and explore the various elements of serving as an African American female mentor. Regardless of what I did or did not do, Jonathan's life and potential inspires me to engage in work that explores the meaning of individuals who help to uncover potential in the youth they mentor.

My current screen saver rotates between three photos of myself and individuals who constantly motivate this work: my mother, my six-year old sister and Jonathan. My mother causes me to think about and remember those who have come before me. Ashley, my younger sister, inspires me to push forward for the generation behind me. Jonathan helps me to not forget those who will never have the opportunity to maximize their potential. Both my biological family and the brothers, sisters and cousins who are family only because they are near and dear to my heart, inspire and motivate this work, pushing me to think outside of the classroom, textbooks and standardized tests which tend to dominate educational research.

I identify with the communal aspect of care and uplift in the African American community (Collins, 2009; Edelman, 1999; Thompson, 1998; Walker & Snarey, 2004). I also recognize the role of others and how this transitions into my life as a student, mentor and scholar. The role of familial relationships is present among African American females in mentoring. There is a desire to be nurtured in a motherly manner and cared for in a sisterly way, while mentors often take on these familial roles (Angelou, 2008; Collins, 2009; Edelman, 1999; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Grant, 2012; Patton & Harper, 2003). These familial like relationships are not established to weaken the individual, but

19

instead to empower and inspire them. When sharing and reflecting upon her experiences

with effective mentoring, one African American female professor noted the need for a

familial-like relationship and the difference this would have made in the doctoral process.

She shares:

> With the exception of the personal and social support of other African-American
> women, all of the traditional mentoring components…[listening, encouragement,
> sponsorships] have been beneficial to my progress in the academy thus far.
> However, because of the socio-historical aspects of American educational
> institutions, I have found more of a need for emotional support, understanding, or
> *sistering* (relationships with other caring and nurturing women of color for social,
> professional, and spiritual support with networking opportunities). (Grant &
> Simmons, 2008, p. 509)

The familial aspect of mentoring offers a special kind of support that is unique

within mentoring relationships, particularly among African American women. This type

of nurturing in a professional environment serves as space where mentees can share

without the fear of being misunderstood, while moving forward in their professional

endeavors. Does this desire for familial relationships that exists in higher education have

a place in mentoring youth? Do these relationships help to keep mentors and/or mentees

on the "right path"? One would think that mentoring relationships would alleviate or

eliminate pressure, but this is not always the case. Pressure can and does exist in some

mentoring relationships and it is important that this pressure, both from the mentor and

mentee perspectives, is addressed and unpacked.

Fall nor Fail: Pressure to Stay on the Straight and Narrow

PUSH

I PUSH
Through the pain
Through the tears
Through the anger
Through the hurt

I PUSH
Through the loneliness
Through the sleepless nights
Through the anxiety
And thoughts of never loving without the past
Lingering in my head

I PUSH
Through feelings of inadequacy
Through doubt
Through frustration and weariness
Through fear of vulnerability diminishing in my life

I PUSH
Through sadness
Through lies
Through past mistakes
Through sorries and goodbyes

I PUSH
Through the tasks that will never be accomplished
And the dreams that will never come into fruition
Along with the failures I've seen and will see

I PUSH
Through the dragging of my feet
Through the questioning of my own abilities
Through the hope that is nowhere to be seen

I push…Through it all…
And there is You
(Gamble, 2010b, p. 31)

Harris-Perry (2011) writes about the crooked room in which African American women are socially positioned, based upon race and gender stereotypes such as mammie, jezebel, angry matriarch, welfare queen, among others. This crooked room is "bombarded with warped images of their humanity," so "some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion" (p. 29), while others may not even recognize the room is crooked at all. What exactly am I pushing through? I wrote about the context of pushing through the

distorted images provided by both society's mirror and the crooked room in which I dwell as an African American female. Inevitably, painful, disappointing and frustrating circumstances will arise in life, but how do I deal with them? I continue to push. In mentoring relationships, I push only to find that there is more good, bad and ugly around the corner from the storm that has just passed. As a mentee, there is immense pressure to maintain the pride of my mentors. As a mentor, there is also immense pressure to maintain the adoration and respect of my mentees. This pride, adoration and respect is all mutual and not the objective in mentoring, but without it, I would feel like a failure. With this, it seems as though there is no room for me to fall or fail. This immense pressure that I mention is self-imposed. Never has a mentor said she would walk away from me if I did not live up to some invisible standard that I have placed upon myself. Neither has a mentee ever shared that she would no longer want a relationship with me if I in some way disappointed her, but this is my own internal struggle.

In the past, as a young mentee, I made poor choices which, if revealed to mentors, would have caused them some level of disappointment, but in my mind, it would have destroyed our relationship. Now, as a mentor, there is pressure to succeed and be a "good" example to my mentees because if not, that relationship can be damaged. Growing up in church, I learned about this straight and narrow path which Christians are to remain on while they journey through life. I often wondered if it was possible for me to remain on the straight and narrow path before me. Similarly, in mentoring, I feel there is a straight and narrow path on which I need to remain in order to keep my mentors proud and maintain the position of a positive role model for my mentees. With this in mind, I wonder, is it necessary to stay on the 'straight and narrow' path to be an effective

mentor? What is the "straight and narrow"? Who is defining that path? Where does it lead? I am discovering that this path is one that can be defined by one's own ambitions, desires and goals, while believing that others have created this path for them. Without a clear distinction between the two, focusing to stay on a path which is not easy to navigate, and possibly confining, can lead to regrettable choices and decisions that ultimately help to shape our future selves.

Los(in)g: With the "In" Crowd

This was supposed to be a fun night out with friends. This night was not supposed to end with my hands spread out pressed against a cold brick building. As I stand in the criminal posture of legs and arms spread for a pat down, I have never been more ashamed of myself. After being caught attempting to drink while underage, I and about four other friends were now face to face with two police officers in a position to permanently stain our clean records or give us a warning and let us go. The only thought that crossed my mind while standing with the bright light in my eyes and hearing the background voices of my friends answer the officer's questions was the look on my mother's face once informed about this idiotic choice I made. She would be angry that her fifteen year old daughter was caught attempting to drink alcohol, but she would be more disappointed than anything else. After the officers wrote down our names, telephone numbers and addresses, they decided to let us go with our promise to never attempt this again. Fortunately, we had not opened any of the liquor bottles and had yet to start drinking. I immediately thought I would keep this information to myself. Why tell my mother something about me that would disappoint her and cause our relationship to be strained and altered? Undoubtedly, there would be a lack of trust if she ever found out I was not

mature enough to obey the law when out with friends. Although the officers took down our information, this did not mean they would actually follow through with contacting parents of a few rambunctious teenagers, so I thought maintaining this secret would be the wisest choice for me. If the officers, by chance, contacted my mother, then I would confess to my wrongdoing. But what were the odds that the officers would have time to make phone calls about our foolish attempt to drink alcohol when the community has more pressing issues to deal with: distribution of illegal narcotics, robbery and violence?

Over the next few days, I battled with the thought of confessing to my mother what had happened over the weekend. Van Manen and Levering (1996) ask, "What does the keeping of secrets do to a person's inner life and conscience?" (p. 7). The keeping of this particular secret had me on edge every time the phone rang and each time I heard a knock at the door. The fear of police officers calling or randomly stopping by the house forced me to confess. I knew that "Sharing a secret with someone may carry many subtle consequences for the relationship in which we stand to this person" (p. 7), but having my mother hear it from me and not the police was worth the risk. When and how I confessed to my mother is all a blur, but I remember that she was not as angry as I thought she would be, and she also did not seem too disappointed. I think she felt as though I learned my lesson from the fear and embarrassment I had faced at the hands of the police officers, their intimidating presence and the criminal stance in which I was positioned. There was a sense of relief after confessing to my mother, but I still worried about her sharing this information with my grandmother and my mentor from church, Mrs. Linda. The fear of their disappointment in my poor choice was something that I did not want to face. My mother is a permanent fixture in my life and would not turn her back on me,

regardless of the mistakes I made. However, I was not quite sure about other mentors in my life. This would change their view of me and my level of maturity. In the end, this incident with the police never went beyond my friends and mother. Today, my mother probably does not remember this incident at all, but I do and always will.

Does the pressure of meeting a mentor's invisible expectations of mentees lead them to become the distorted images presented in society's mirror? Are the expectations themselves distorted by the mentee? Although not about mentoring, Janet McDonald's (1999) struggle with failure after being kicked out of college after successfully transitioning from the projects to the university setting speaks to the self-imposed standards some African American women may place on themselves. Once back at home in her neighborhood, McDonald shares:

> I avoided hanging out in the neighborhood because I hated hearing, "Hey, college girl! Good to see you! How long you gonna be home?" Not only had I let down the family, I told myself, I had failed my community by robbing them of a role model for anyone. People saw me as a sort of brainy freak, someone unlike themselves, an "other." Among those who knew what had happened, the reaction was along the lines of, "So what, you fxxxed up. Since when is *that* out of the ordinary in the projects?" A leave of absence from college was laughably negligible compared to prison terms and dope deaths. (p. 79)

Even McDonald realized that she still had the support of those she felt were disappointed by her actions. They connected her failure to her upbringing and community, but failure is inevitably a part of life for everyone striving to do more than average. It is interesting, because even within her failure, she recognized that it was not as detrimental as other circumstances. Thoughts about this sense of shame connected to failure lead me to think about the pressure upon mentees and whether or not they recognize this struggle to stay on an invisible path. Do African American female mentees feel pressure to stay on the "straight and narrow" path, and if so, what is the source of this pressure? If mentors

25

recognize this struggle, what conversations or interactions get to the source of the issue? Interestingly, as a teenage mentee I felt this pressure, but even as an adult mentor, I feel similar pressure to thrive in my role as a mentor.

The Good Teacher Mentor is a book that highlights the mentoring relationship between mentor teacher Sid and novice teacher, Maureen. Maureen's experiences, although occurring in a different context, are filled with similar feelings of pressure and failure I experience as a mentee and mentor. Maureen struggles with this idea of not meeting her own or Sid's expectations as an effective teacher. Even though she claims to be positive and optimistic, Maureen admits, "I'm simply worried about Sid witnessing my successes and failures" and after a failed lesson, she shares, "At that moment of confusion, crushed pride, and lopsided effort, I don't think I'd appreciate my mentor sitting in back of the room" (Trubowitz & Robins, 2003, p. 35). It is interesting to think that because one lesson was unsuccessful, Maureen is ashamed to share this with her mentor, Sid. Sid has a completely different view of things and recognizes his role in reminding Maureen of the difference between failure and inevitable situations. As her mentor, Sid strives to build her confidence and not focus solely upon areas of improvement. Sid does what I believe most effective mentors do: he notices the small successes within what might be deemed failure. Sid's perspective and openness in sharing this with Maureen is what causes her to become a more confident and competent teacher. Maureen has a responsibility to her students and herself as an educator. Will my responsibility to mentors, mentees and self help to shape my willingness to accept the success within my own self-proclaimed failures and shortcomings?

Doctoral Duty: Greater Responsibility

Circa 1400, *quit* became the word associated with leaving or departing. Although I have the option to quit most things in life, I really feel as though that option does not exist. While in pursuit of a doctoral degree, challenges arise and there are moments when I wonder why I am actually here, and although the thought of departing arises, it is never a real option for me. Surprisingly, around the 1200's, *quit* meant to repay. I think this definition is more fitting for my own experiences. If I were to quit, there would be a huge debt for me to repay to those who continue to support me. My being indebted would far exceed finances, but the time, support, effort and energy that my mentors have provided would be included as well. How can you repay for time, support, energy and effort? Most importantly, how can I quit academically and maintain my position as an example for my mentees to push through the challenges and complete college?

This self-imposed pressure mentioned earlier stems from a determination to be a model example to my mentees and to make my family and mentors proud. Granted, my family is and will always be proud of me without a doctoral degree, but being the first member of my family to pursue graduate studies places me in the position of trailblazer, and this is an honored position. Moreover, knowing that in 2008-2009 only 6.5% of all doctoral degrees conferred were held by Blacks (U. S. Department of Education, 2011), this becomes an even more honored position. My pursuit of doctoral studies has always been driven by helping others and shifting educational norms and ideals, but the knowledge of honoring my family and loved ones is also motivation for completion. With this motivation also comes a greater sense of responsibility as a mentor to African American youth. I do not want to allow my fear of failure to inhibit my ability to be an

effective mentor. According to Wicks (2000), failure is inevitable: "Mistakes and failures are part of full involvement in life. Paradoxically, if we are not failing in life, we are probably not being assertive and creative enough. The more you're involved, the more you fail: case closed" (p. 34). Being involved in this doctoral program, loving relationships and ambitious endeavors can lead to failure, but this does not mean I remain in that space.

Their Pride vs. My Shame

"I/we are so proud of you" are words that I often hear from my mentors and family members. It is ironic that while they are proud of me, I find myself in a space of shame. There is this fear of shaming my mentors and causing my mentees to be ashamed of me. This becomes an internal struggle to maintain what I think is the ideal posture of an outstanding mentor and mentee. Our being-in-the-world with others is what Heidegger (1962) refers to as *Dasein*. Heidegger's philosophy is strongly related to how we see ourselves in the world with others. *Dasein* is otherwise known as "everyday human existence" (Dreyfus, 1995, p. 13). Within our human existence, we can find ourselves in a struggle between the one-self and the they-self. The one-self is who I authentically am as a person, whereas the they-self is who I am for others. Heidegger shares:

> This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of 'the Others', in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they [man]* take pleasure; we read, see and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking. The 'they', which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness. (1962, p.164)

I find myself in a struggle between my authentic self and who I think others want me to be in my mentoring relationships. This struggle is real and can become problematic in my

28

interactions with others. These false conceptions of who my mentors and mentees want me to be causes fear of shame in the presence of their pride for my life.

Etymologically, *fail* from the Latin *fallere*, means "to trip, cause to fall." This idea that I can neither fall nor fail as a mentor is unrealistic and accounts for unnecessary stress in my mentoring relationships. To fall is fine; it is just a matter of getting back up and moving forward. It is imperative that I recognize that mistakes are inevitable, but learning from them and moving forward is the key to helping my mentees become successful, as well as thriving in my own achievements. Maya Angelou (1994) wonders, "How often must we…confront ourselves in our past" (p.116). I have this same thought. My answer is we might have to confront ourselves many times in the past and continue to grow stronger from the lessons learned. With the support of both mentors and mentees, this is possible. This continuous confrontation ultimately comes back to fear: a fear of repeating mistakes, a fear of disappointing others, a fear of failing. Recognizing the power of fear, I wonder, is there a fear of failure that drives African American female mentors? Is this fear connected to stereotypes and controlling images of African American women? What does society's mirror contribute to African American female mentors' approaches in mentoring?

Searby (2009) writes about the assumptions often found in mentoring relationships. These assumptions, from both the mentor and mentee perspective, can harm the relationship, simply because of faulty expectations. Searby found that women were worried about being unsuccessful in their mentoring relationships. Thoughts of inadequacy, lack of trust and competition were just a few of the areas of concern. Overall, the "fear of failure" (Searby, p. 11) was the most prominent issue among women in

29

mentoring relationships. I am not alone with the fear of straying off the invisible "straight and narrow" path, but are my feelings of shaming and disappointing my mentors or mentees based upon "faulty assumptions" (Searby, p. 11)? "The power of assumptions does not rely on assumptions being true. They can be faulty and still be powerful" (Searby, p. 12). The underlying assumptions in mentoring relationships can cause problems with preconceived notions and unrealistic expectations. Assumptions, although powerful, should not guide mentoring relationships. Open dialogue and communication among mentors and mentees prevents the disruption of unrealistic assumptions and unnecessary anxieties that can take place in the African American female mentoring experience.

Lived Experiences of African American Female Mentors: So What?

Early along the doctoral journey, two professors shared two very important pieces of advice that resonated with me throughout this process. One professor shared that in my research, I should be both passionate and pragmatic. She said that the passion will drive me to completion and the practicality of the dissertation project will gain the interest and support of others, as well as serve as a feasible task. Another professor shared that I should always adhere to the "so what" question? In other words, it is imperative that I can clearly articulate why this topic is important and particularly relevant in educational research. I have grasped both the passion and pragmatic pieces, but I struggle with the "so what" question.

Individuals question my research interests by asking how this topic is related to education. These inquiries remind me that education has, in the minds of many, been confined to the classroom, when actually to educate from the Latin *educere* means to

bring out, lead forth. To bring out new ideas, goals and dreams in youth far extends

beyond the four walls of the school building. Moreover, leading individuals most

certainly takes place, for many, first and foremost in their own families and communities.

This study of African American female mentors mentoring African American girls seeks

to bridge the gap between community and schools. Exploring the lived experiences of

African American female mentors also highlights the reciprocal nature of mentoring that

is also connected to education.

Freire (1993) writes that "People teach each other" (p. 80), while dismissing the

banking concept of education in which the teacher is the giver of all knowledge and the

student simply receives. This exploration also highlights the mentoring experience from

the perspective of the mentor, which has been understudied (Hansford, Ehrich &

Tennent, 2004). This phenomenological study provides an opportunity to shed light on

the African American female mentoring experience that will allow the co-researchers in

this study to give voice to their experiences, which are far more than the stereotypical,

crooked room and distorted images so often presented through media and which also

serve as the source of dominant discourse in society.

Brown, Gray and Abrams (2011) share their thoughts on the perception of women

in our society and allude to the dominant images, which conflict with the true essence of

women.

<div align="center">

WOMAN

Woman that's me.
Created to give birth to a nation.
Honored to be the mother of all creation.
Yet this world has still not gotten the revelation
Of all that I truly am.

</div>

How do I know?
Because all across the land
I'm called out of my name
And my body is only seen
As a symbol for pleasurable gain.

How easily you forget the many roles I play.
Every day
Mother, sister, daughter, wife, friend
And the list does not end
But the respect has.
Honoring me has become a thing of the past. (p. 62)

This study recognizes the many roles of a particular group of women in society, as well as providing space for them to rename who they are based upon their own lived experiences as African American female mentors.

While exploring the "so what" question for this particular phenomenon, there are three specifics to consider. First, mentoring itself must be examined. The impact of mentoring based upon educational research and personal narratives highlights the significance of mentoring in a variety of spaces, including communities and schools. Second, it is imperative that the role of African American females is discussed. This discussion must include more than African American women as an oppressed group, but also as a group who resists stereotypes and have experiences far beyond the marginal reports of media outlets. Last, schools and communities are interconnected to impact change in the lives of students. Exploring the significance of school and community partnerships, while understanding how mentors fit into this relationship is necessary for better understanding the contribution this particular study will make to current educational literature.

Mentoring Makes a Difference

> Have you really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back. Sometimes it is only in your head. Sometimes it is right alongside their beds. (Albom, 1997, p. 192)

In the non-fiction novel, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom (1997) finds himself reunited with his former college professor and mentor, Morrie, who is currently dying from Lou Gehrig's disease. In the remaining weeks of his life, Mitch decides to complete his final "course" with Morrie each Tuesday. Engaged in discussions and lessons on communication, love and relationships, Mitch begins to take on a whole new view of life. Morrie serves as a mentor who was able to recognize Mitch's special qualities and uniqueness. Discussing Morrie's life and fruitful experiences help Mitch to better understand his responsibility in offering himself to others.

President and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman (1999), shares lessons learned from her many mentors in the book, *Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors*.

> I cannot recall a single one of the mentors I share with you in this book ever talking to me just about how to make a living or to get a job – worthy and necessary goals. They all stressed how to make a life and to find a purpose worth living for and to leave the world better than I found it. (p. xv)

Some mentors hailed from her racially segregated southern community, while others nurtured her along in various academic and professional settings. Edelman realizes that each of her mentors wanted her to understand the importance of making a difference in this world. Yes, a thriving career was good, but not the purpose of life. Making your mark on the world by improving the lives of others was the message instilled in Edelman.

As an individual who fights for the rights of children, it would seem as though she

received the message.

Thomas W. Dortch, Jr. (2000), former president of the 100 Black Men of

America, Inc. shares his own philosophy on mentoring in *The Miracles of Mentoring*:

> We all want to live on in some way after we have gone – in words, deeds,
> monuments, memories. We want a part of ourselves to be woven into the fabric of
> the world. My way of doing this has always been to give the best parts of myself
> to the people around me by serving as a role model, a guide, a trusted friend – a
> mentor. That was what I had learned growing up: that we all stand on the
> shoulders of the people who came before us and that it is our duty to support those
> who come after. (p. 2)

Dortch not only has been mentored, but understands that as a result of that mentoring, he

too must help to provide support for the next generation of leaders behind him. Similar to

Edelman's mentors, Dortch understands the significance of impacting the world in which

we live, and it seems as though the best way to do this is by serving as an example,

influence and mentor for others.

Each experience and story shared by the above authors supports the relevance of

mentoring. Mentoring does make a difference in the lives of both adults and youth. This

experience needs to be explored further and examined from the perspective of mentors,

particularly those working with youth. A professor once asked me if I had hope in the

educational system. Of course, as an educator and prospective scholar, I have hope in the

educational system, believing that "Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness"

(hooks, 2003, xiv). If not, this whole endeavor would be meaningless. Freire (2004)

writes extensively about hope, its limitations and relevance in human relationships. He

asserts that hope alone, although necessary, will not sustain us in fighting for change in

education. I agree with Freire that to "unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the

obstacles may be" (p. 3) is necessary, particularly when exploring various educational spaces and relationships. The important piece is that my hope stems beyond the classroom, school grounds and textbooks. My hope lies in many spaces and individuals, including mentors. There has been an unveiling of hope in mentoring relationships with the continued desire to mentor others displayed among African American graduate students (Griffin & Toldson, 2012; Patton & Harper, 2003; Patton, 2009) along with the number of positive and increased outcomes connected to mentoring in leadership cultivation (Bonner & Jennings, 2007), strength development (Higginbotham, MacArthur & Dart, 2010) and school engagement (Holt, Bry & Johnson, 2008). The question has been raised and answered as to the difference mentoring makes in the lives of mentees, but what difference does mentoring make in the lives of mentors? As African American female mentors, what does this *difference* mean and how is it relevant to the education of African American girls?

African American Females: Much More than an Oppressed Group

BLACK WOMAN

I am woman, sittin' tall
I am a woman, greater than all.
I am Black woman standing straight.
I am Black woman, the Black man's bait.
I am Black woman, the queen of all others.
I am Black woman, the lover of all brothers.
I am Black woman standin' tall,
I am Black woman the greatest of all.
(Brown, Gray & Abrams, 2011, p. 60)

This brief poem highlights the confidence of Black women in a positive light, not always recognized in today's society. Being "the greatest of all" can include the many roles and responsibilities Black women have within their families and communities,

while being able to balance them all. "Standin' tall" is about pride and strength. This pride and strength should not be mistaken for total independence and a proclamation that the Black woman does not need anyone else (Harris-Perry, 2011), but as recognition of self-love and fully embracing self.

In Chapter Two, I use a number of references focused on the historical experiences of African American women from slavery to present day, but it is important to note that the "continued devaluation of Black womanhood" (hooks, 1981, p. 51) is alive and well today. I have witnessed this when watching reality television shows where the main characters are African American women. After watching for only ten minutes, I have noticed the stereotypical portrayal of the characters: women who cause strife while fighting for control (matriarch), women who sleep with another woman's boyfriend or husband (jezebel), women who are not gainfully employed, but frivolously spend money on shoes, bags and other material accessories (welfare queens). This is problematic since the image of African American women shared in the above poem and that presented in the media are completely different. Granted, there are positive images of African American women presented in the media and popular culture, but the most dominant images are negative and stereotypical.

It is imperative to recognize that African American women are much more than an oppressed group. The communal relationships of othermothers, the push back and resistance of social activists and the unity among African American female intellectuals in their communities are just a few of the images of African American women that are unfortunately, often overlooked. Arguably, the role of the African American female mentor can fit into the othermother, social activist and female intellectual. Working with

36

African American female youth serves as an avenue to implement change, resist stereotypes and share the hidden transcripts (Scott, 1990) within the African American community. What impact do the dominant images of African American women presented in society have on the mentoring experience? What are the entry points for resistance in the mentoring relationship? What do the African American female mentors experience in their mentoring relationships that lead to resistance and rejection of stereotypical, controlling images among African American women?

African American women have noted that racism and stereotypes are subtle, yet present in their professional lives (Bova, 2000). African American women in mentoring relationships have also recognized the importance of mentoring in resisting racial stereotypes. Mentees found that their mentors helped them to "reject negative stereotypes that have been traditionally used to characterize African American women" (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 71) and found strength to go through their "racial identity development" (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005, p. 235) from the support of other African American women. With mentoring relationships creating a space for resistance against stereotypical and controlling images of African American women, these mentoring experiences need to be explored further, particularly from the mentor perspective. Also to be further explored is the potential space for resistance and change created among community and school partnerships.

Schools and Communities: Partners for Change

Studies around building school and community partnerships have noted improved student academic success (Sanders & Lewis, 2005), bonding of families, community members and students, particularly among Blacks (Morris, 2003), improved student

attendance (Sheldon, 2007) and the critical role of African American school leaders in effectively communicating with all stakeholders, while implementing policies leading to improved student behavior and achievement (Brown & Beckett, 2007). These studies highlight the significance of education and community partnerships that ultimately benefit all involved, particularly students. In his book, *Black Youth Rising*, Ginwright (2010) promotes community-based organizations and their ability to provide a space of healing for urban Black youth. Ginwright asserts that "Collective responsibility to improve community conditions" (p. 62) is necessary in order to produce societal change. This study exploring the lived experiences of African American female mentors will help to uncover what school and community partnerships mean for adults and youth. If "collective responsibility" drives the partnerships, everyone involved holds a crucial role and is influenced by the relationships built among schools and their surrounding communities.

School and community partnerships are not always so formal and often take place through the local churches, particularly in African American communities (Rhodes, 2002). The role of the church had a pivotal impact on my self-confidence, freedom of expression and ability to build meaningful relationships. Though many churches have formal mentoring programs (Rhodes, 2002), my church did not, but had adults who served as mentors to encourage, support and inspire the youth. What does this space for mentoring mean for an African American female youth? This support means that there is a place in which I can embrace and nurture the gifts I am beginning to recognize as a youth. With this support came nurturing for my love of writing. It was and still is such a wonderful privilege to put pen to paper. As bell hooks (1996) writes, "I tell myself

stories, write poems, record my dreams. In my journal I write – I belong in this place of words. This is my home. This dark, bone black inner cave where I am making a world for myself" (p. 183).

With words, I too, create a world for myself. From childhood to adulthood, written words have provided me the therapy, laughs and release that I so desperately need and desire. It took me a while to recognize writing as a "gift." "Anyone can rhyme words, can't they?" I thought that this so called "gift" was given to everyone and nothing special, but my very first mentor, outside of my family, Mrs. Linda, reminded me that this was not the case. Outside of my mother, she was the only woman who read my poetry, and to this very day, she serves as a mentor, example and inspiration in my life.

The bridge that exists between school and community for some students did exist for me because of the continued support from both school and community. In what manner do we understand the meaning of this for African American female mentors? What happens when there is a disconnect between these two vital spaces for youth? What is the role of African American female mentors in bridging the gap, particularly for African American female youth? What do African American females instill in their mentees to strengthen both the academic and community spaces? This space might not literally be a physical space outside of the school building. The space I am referring to might be in the form of discussion, sharing and openness about family, school, goals and dreams.

The partnering of schools and communities will hopefully invoke the notion that everyone plays a significant role in mentoring, whether a formal volunteer or not, since mentoring "…is who we are and what we do and say every day in our homes, classrooms,

work places, congregations, cultural, civic, and political lives that children absorb to develop their sense of worth" (Edelman, 1999, p. 45) This is a serious responsibility in which school officials, families and community members are all included. As a researcher, what is my role in this? Phenomenological inquiry has provided me the space to engage in meaningful dialogue and self-reflection to explore the lived experiences of African American female mentors. Through this exploration, my role will better be defined.

My Uncovered Phenomenon: The Power of Self-Reflection

People are often interested in hearing the process of selecting a dissertation topic. I have found that this is difficult for me to explain in only a few moments, because my topic was not randomly selected, but instead uncovered as I reflected upon my path to graduate studies. Thinking about the factors that helped me reach this point academically, I remember the people who have and continue to impact my life the most. This reflecting merged with the various texts, narratives and studies being read in my courses surrounding the education, experiences and perseverance of African Americans made clear the topic I would explore. The question, **What are the lived experiences of African American female mentors mentoring African American female youth?**, can be mistaken as a question that emerged solely from reading the literature on mentoring and recognizing the absence of the mentor experience or remembering the mentors in my life and the significant role they have played in my life. It is a combination of many different factors, including my own experiences in the role of both mentor and mentee.

Phenomenological inquiry "is always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to

make sense of a certain aspect of human existence" (van Manen, 1997, p. 31). This real person, me as the researcher, has started the journey of exploring human existence based upon my own life experiences and those which are connected to both social and historical experiences of African American female mentors. With this autobiographical component of phenomenological research, the methodology aligns perfectly with my research interest. Van Manen has created six research activities that guide this process and are further unpacked in Chapter Three: (1) turning to a phenomena that seriously interests us and commits us to the world; (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (pp. 30-31).

Walking Through the Chapters

In Chapter One, turning to the phenomenon that drives my phenomenological exploration, has been my beginning. Phenomenological inquiry requires turning to the phenomenon or telling the story that brought me to this phenomenon using autobiographical narrative, poetry and other sources that help guide the reader to see the significance of the phenomenon of being an African American female mentor to an African American female youth. This turning allows space for the researcher to become vulnerable, while sharing why phenomenological inquiry is the most useful methodology to employ for exploration of this topic. Since human science research explores the lived experiences of human beings, phenomenological inquiry is the best road to travel on this journey.

In Chapter Two, the existential investigation allows for an opening up of the turning and eliciting more relevant sources to explore the lived experiences of African American female mentors. The opportunity for renaming of "mentor," and the identity of African American women, is unpacked further in this chapter. The educational researchers, poets and novelists contribute to this chapter while I, as the researcher, remain connected to both the research and the phenomenon by continuing in my roles as both mentor and mentee. I am most certainly an insider in this process, alongside those participants who take part in this research process.

In Chapter Three, the work of philosophers and Black feminist scholars guide me to understanding phenomenology and its interconnectedness with this particular phenomenon. Using the metaphor of a circle to explore the phenomenon of being an African American female mentor, I examine the circles of care, language, identity and relationships. Each area highlights the various aspects of the circularity of mentorship with the voices of both phenomenological researchers and African American feminists and scholars. Moreover, the six research activities and process of engaging in conversations with participants is further described.

In Chapters Four through six, the voices of the African American female mentors are brought forward and interpreted. The themes that emerge from engaging in conversations with the participants are the grounds for revealing the phenomenon and what it means. These themes bring voice to not only the lived experiences of African American female mentors, but also allow for further pedagogical exploration. In the final chapter (Seven), pedagogical insights allow for a connection to the responsibility and role

of education, particularly that which takes place outside of the classroom and empowers

both mentors and mentees.

Revelation in Reflection

Alone

Lying, thinking
Last night
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

There are some millionaires
With money they can't use
Their wives run round like banshees
Their children sing the blues
They've got expensive doctors
To cure their hearts of stone.
But nobody
No, nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Now if you listen closely
I'll tell you what I know
Storm clouds are gathering
The wind is gonna blow
The race of man is suffering
And I can hear the moan,
'Cause nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone.
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.
(Angelou, 1994, pp. 74-75)

I have not and will not make it alone. "Out here" in this world, there are individuals who help us to make it through the relational (*How to find my soul a home*), emotional (*To cure their hearts of stone*) and societal (*The race of man is suffering*) challenges in life. These individuals come with different experiences, callings and labels. Each of these individuals look different and vary in their approaches, but the outcome is the same. African American female mentors make it so we are not here alone. The next chapter addresses who African American female mentors are and how their mentoring relationships are presented in educational literature, novels, poetry and the lives of two African American female mentor participants in a preliminary study to uncover the phenomenon of mentoring prior to my formal study upon which this dissertation is based.

CHAPTER TWO:
EXISTENTIAL INVESTIGATION: LANTERNS LIGHTING THE PATH

O God, I thank You for the lanterns in my life
who illumined dark and uncertain paths
calmed and stilled debilitating doubts and fears
with encouraging words, wise lessons, gentle
touches, firm nudges, and faithful actions along my
journey of life and back to You.
(Edelman, 1999, p. xiii)

This short, yet poignant prayer of thanksgiving sounds like words that I would speak or have spoken about the "lanterns" in my life. While frantically thinking about what life experiences and interactions to include in an autobiography assigned for one of my graduate classes, I had time to think about the individuals who have helped shape my life trajectory, morals and interests. While reflecting, I realized that African American women have and still hold the most prominent role of influence in my life. Each one of these women has served as a mentor and helped me to experience life in a new and more exciting way. Opening my mind to new levels of creativity, my African American female mentors have encouraged me with statements like the following: "You can do anything you set your mind to;" and "Be yourself and don't ever let anyone try to change you." I say "my" because they have become a part of my life and I am unwilling to let them go. Although I know that the mentors do not belong to me, I tend to discuss them with a sense of deep personal connection. This is how much they mean to me.

The foundation for my own self-perception was knowing the strength of African American women within my own family, but these mentors outside of my familial relationships helped me to understand the significance of having adults in my life who valued my opinion, cared about my gifts and talents and listened to the many concerns I

experienced as an adolescent, and currently as an adult. The pride they exhibit when I share *Words of Wysdom*, my first poetry book, with them and the joy in their eyes when we discuss my doctoral studies confirms that we both benefit from this relationship. These experiences are immeasurable, not solely to be determined by my academic achievement, career path or financial status, but instead by many exchanges of encouragement, wisdom and support. I could never say that what we, mentors and mentee, receive from the relationship is equal, but I can say that it is invaluable and life-changing.

It has been difficult for me to position myself solely as a mentor and think only about my mentor experiences since I am more familiar with being mentored. I think of myself as one who is on both sides of the fence as both mentor and mentee. This unique position gives me insight to both experiences and how the mentoring relationship truly is reciprocal. I carry the expectations, words and hopes of both my mentors and mentees with me and this is what motivates me in this work.

<div style="margin-left:3em">

You Are There

i shall save my poems
for the winter of my dreams
i look forward to huddling
in my rocker with my life
…knowing my life
you'll be there

…you'll be there in the rain
like an umbrella over my head
sheltering me from the damp mist

you'll be there in the dark
like a lighthouse in the fog
seeing me through troubled waters

</div>

you will always be
                              there
                               (Giovanni, 1997, pp. 53-54)

In *Love Poems*, poet Nikki Giovanni writes about one who is always there, not just

physically, but mentally and emotionally. Upon reading these words, I immediately

thought about the women who drive me to be my absolute best. Through it all, they are

with me, whether they realize it or not. Their voices, hopes and admiration "will always

be there." In damp mist, troubled waters, through the tears and the smiles, I know that

they are there wishing the best for me and doing the same for others.

        In this chapter, I continue the illumination of being an African American female

mentor engaged in mentor relationships with African American female youth by

incorporating voices from a variety of sources, including educational research, fictional

works and poetry. The myriad of voices helps the writing process, since "voices are

abuzz all around me – remembered voices, biographical voices, editorial voices, doubting

voices, traces of every voice I have ever heard or read or spoken or written" (Leggo,

1991, p. 124). These voices come from my own personal experiences, as well as

educational literature, autobiographical texts, fictional novels, phenomenological

writings, Black feminist assertions and poetic expressions of lived experiences.

        In addition to these voices, I draw upon the voices of two African American

female mentors from a preliminary conversation to help deepen my understanding of

what it means to be an African American female mentor. Both Ms. Karen and Tasha[2] are

currently mentors for U. S. Dream Academy Inc., a national mentoring organization built

on helping youth in inner-cities with at least one incarcerated parent. Ms. Karen is a

middle-aged single mother of two and has been a mentor through formal programs, both

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[2] Participant names used are pseudonyms to help maintain anonymity of participants.

in Pennsylvania and Virginia, but also has served as an informal mentor to countless women, young and old, over the course of her life. She has opened her home and her heart to those in need of her support, encouragement and guidance. Tasha, a single woman in her mid-twenties, has worked with the U.S. Dream Academy Inc. for the past two years and recognizes the ability for her to mentor individuals younger and older. She values and excitedly awaits the time spent with her mentees because she has a desire to see them succeed and reach their fullest potential.

Through our preliminary conversations, I learned more about the experience of mentoring which uncovered questions to explore. How has mentoring been discussed in the African American community? Is there space for a renaming of mentoring? In what ways do the experiences of African American females engaged in "othermothering" enrich the mentoring phenomenon? Has the (un)silencing of African American women been addressed, and what yet are we called to do?

Mentoring: A Space for Renaming

While growing up in a small, blue house at 1419 Tenth Avenue, I would rise early in the morning as my mother got me ready for the school day. Early in the morning, particularly during the winter months when the sun had yet to rise, I would find myself at 1520 Eighth Avenue. My second family occupied this house, two blocks over from my own home. I only came to recognize them distinctly as non-blood relatives later in life because to me Mrs. Emma and her children were my family. Mrs. Emma, the woman I refer to as my third grandmother, was tall with dark brown skin, long, thin fingers and dark brown eyes. Each time she looked at me I could not help but smile because I knew that behind those eyes were thoughts of love and encouragement. My relationship with

Mrs. Emma and the rest of the family started when I was just an infant, before I can even remember. While my mother worked her full-time government job during the day, they took care of me. As she transitioned into her part-time retail job for additional income, four to five evenings out of the week, they took care of me. Their home was my home. This was a safe space in which I engaged in personal relationships, balanced with love and discipline. I did not have the language to identify them as mentors, "othermothers" or even as a women-centered network (Collins, 2009), but I knew that they were important women in my life who loved me and empowered me to do great things. Succeeding academically, becoming more socially open and embracing natural gifts and talents were largely a result of the influence of African American women early in my life. When Mrs. Emma was out for an appointment or had another obligation, one of her daughters would look after me. There was never a shortage of laughter, love and affection in this family. Their children, my "play" cousins, provided a space for me to grow and interact socially with my peers outside of the classroom. They are still my family and will always be considered as such.

It was always important to me to make Mrs. Emma and her children proud of me, based on my life and accomplishments. The relationships with these women and the women within my own family most certainly helped to shape my current relationships with women. My place as both a mentee and mentor stems from the loving interactions with African American women from the earliest memories in my life. What is the role of familial relationships in later mentoring relationships? Do the relationships built among African American women in childhood influence the mentoring experience as an adult?

Is it common for African American women to find mentors within their own family or fictive kin (Harris-Perry, 2011) during childhood and young adulthood?

The familial nature of mentoring, mentioned in Chapter One, exceeds blood relatives and addresses the communal aspect of raising and nurturing African American children. In the African American community, part of this relationship building among women starts in the family with a very significant figure: mom.

"This is My Other Mother": Familial Contexts in Mentoring

Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me

It is true
I was created in you.
It is also true
That you were created for me.
I owned your voice.
It was shaped and tuned to soothe me.
Your arms were molded
Into a cradle to hold me, to rock me.
The scent of your body was the air
Perfumed for me to breathe…
I thank you that
You still find something in me
To cherish, to admire, and to love.
(Angelou, 2006, pp. 1, 15)

In the Black community, in most cases, the relationship between a mother and a daughter is one that is truly unique and special (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1996). My closest friend, supreme role model and ideal mentor is my mother. The honesty that upholds our relationship is the foundation for all other relationships I share with African American women and women in general. The closeness shared in Maya Angelou's poem for her mother perfectly describes my feelings towards my own mother. The closeness, ownership and admiration all remain in our relationship. Seeing day in and day out the sacrifices she made and continues to make for my success is empowering and reminds me

50

that when it seems as though all have forgotten me, I know she is there. I can only write about the African American female mentors in my life and my own experiences as mentor because of my relationship with my mother. Again, I am not sure when the word mentor became a part of my vocabulary, but I have always been surrounded by Black women who have instilled in me the same values and confidence as my mother. As a teen, I can recall stating that my closest friends' mothers were my "other mothers," completely unaware that there was sociological work around this very concept. My claim of "other mothers" did not simply stem from a woman being my close friends' mothers. No, it was the connection between those mothers and me that allowed me to claim them as second mothers. Had I not had that foundational relationship with my own mother, I would not have been so open to calling other women "mom." What does it mean to call someone else mom? What does this naming announce?

Mother and child(ren). *Letter to My Daughter* is a book Maya Angelou (2008) wrote for her "thousands of daughters" who are "Black and White, Jewish and Muslim, Asian, Spanish-speaking, Native American and Aleut…fat and thin and pretty and plain, gay and straight, educated and unlettered" (p. xii). Angelou admits that she has given birth to only one son, but is thankful for her many daughters. Angelou's perspective of mothering aligns closely with the root definition of the word mother. Etymologically, to be a mother means to take care of someone else. What does it mean to take care of someone? This is a very broad definition and can be extended beyond one's own children and family. To take care of someone can be financial, physical and emotional, among other things. I recognize that my friends' mothers did take care of them, and the most

important thing was that this sense of care was reflected in my interactions with these women.

Communal mothering is a very important relationship in the African American community (Collins, 2009). In sociological, educational, fictional and poetic works, African American researchers, scholars and writers have highlighted this unique role of African American mothers. Langston Hughes (1931/1990) writes about "The Negro Mother" which incorporates historical experiences and struggles of African American women while empowering and encouraging African American children:

> Children, I come back today
> To tell you a story of the long dark way
> That I had to climb, that I had to know
> In order that the race might live and grow.
> …Now, through my children, I'm reaching the goal.
> Now, through my children, young and free,
> I realize the blessings denied to me…
> I had only hope then, but now through you,
> Dark ones of today, my dreams must come true:
> …Make of my past a road to the light
> Out of the darkness, the ignorance, the night…
> But march ever forward, breaking down bars.
> Look ever upward at the sun and the stars.
> Oh, my dark children, may my dreams and my prayers
> Impel you forever up the great stairs –
> For I will be with you till no white brother
> Dares keep down the children of the NEGRO MOTHER.
> (pp. 16-18)

In "The Negro Mother," Hughes writes as though he is speaking for all African American mothers solely through the voice and experiences of one woman, while she addresses "all you dark children in the world out there" (p. 17). This woman is not speaking solely to her own biological children and interestingly, although the poem is titled for the mother, the poem is actually more about the children who will come behind her to push forward through struggles, oppression and hardships to achieve their dreams

and greatly impact the world. With the connections to the historical experiences of African American women, this poem also emphasizes the uplifting of the African American people. Through Hughes' words, this is an effort to "take care of" the next generation. By instilling words of encouragement, while sharing her own struggles, this mother is helping the next generation along.

The mothers in my life have taken care of me – through their emotional, spiritual, and physical support – they have taken care of me. Does this "taking care of" look different among different mothering relationships? When there are "other mothers" in the lives of African American girls, how does this influence their perceptions of self? What is the connection between mentoring and othermothering in the African American community?

Why "othermothering"? Connecting the concept of othermothering to mentoring is significant because in the mentoring literature, there is very little about the mentor experience (Hansford, Ehrich & Tennent, 2004). There is even less about the African American mentor experience. The concepts of othermothering, community othermothering and women-centered networks (Collins, 2009) greatly resonate with me and this work. Mentoring, particularly among Black women, starts with one's own mother and then other mothers in one's communities. This is why the term "mentor" itself can become problematic and constrained if not further explored in different contexts. Othermothers are "women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (Collins, 2009, p. 192). This is not limited to clothing, feeding and babysitting someone else's children. Othermothering is not only about empowering the children, but taking part in a system that strengthens the Black community.

Edelman (1999) recalls the communal effort of raising children in her small, southern community:

> My parents did not have to raise me and my sister and brothers alone. The whole community helped them and me just as they helped other people raise their children. Every place I went, there were eyes watching me and people reporting on me when I strayed into places or company or engaged in behavior they knew or thought my parents would not approve…They [Black adults] provided buffers of love and encouragement that helped combat the negative influences of segregated small-town southern life. They helped keep the outside messages from Whites that I, a Black child, was inferior from being internalized. (pp. 13, 16)

Edelman notes that in her community there was a concern for the children that included keeping a watchful eye on their interactions and daily movements, and protecting them from the negative influences that would have hindered their own self perceptions. A women-centered network of grandmothers, aunts, sisters and cousins becomes a support system and makes the community, not only the mother, responsible for the growth of the children (Collins, 2009).

In K-12 settings (Case, 1997; Dixson, 2003; Loder, 2005) and on college campuses (Bernard, Bernard, Ekpo, Enang, Joseph & Wane, 2000; Guiffrida, 2005; Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters & Strayhorn, 2008) othermothering is actively employed. Building strong, personal relationships with students from elementary school through graduate level work is key among the success of Black students. The othermothering tradition is about "mothering the mind" and creating a "shared sisterhood" that connects African American females (Collins, 2009, p. 207). Case (1997) recognizes that "othermothering and community othermothering are evolutionary, forging a direct link between the lessons learned from mothers and grandmothers and the othermothering activities engaged in within the classroom" (p. 37). The nurturing and genuine care instilled in these African American female educators is then passed on to their students, and the

54

students can benefit from that support. This type of support is what I received in the classroom setting as a third grade student and in the community setting from Mrs. Emma and her family. The reminders of who I was and what I was capable of were endless and long-lasting in effect.

According to Ms. Karen, this role of mothering is inevitable in mentoring relationships. When asked if her mothering has any role in her mentoring, Ms. Karen shares:

> It comes into play a lot. I think every person that I've ever mentored being young or old, boy or girl, male or female, I've always, and that's just me, taken on the role of mother. Adult women that I mentor now and I have a girlfriend and she's fifty and I mentor her in areas where she looks to me for mentoring in that area. She's older than I am, but I've become that mother, cause that's all mentoring is. It's nurturing, raising up, establishing that relationship and get feeding into. That's what nurturing means, to feed. As a mother, you can't help but become that mother figure.

Later in our conversation, Ms. Karen wanted to make clear that not all mothers are mentors. She considers herself effective in raising her children, but also in mentoring them. This is not the case for all mothers, so there can be no blanket statement that all children with mothers are mentored. According to Ms. Karen, mentoring is embedded in her mothering because this is the type of mothering she received from her mother while growing up.

Community othermothers, such as Mrs. Emma, and other Black women are powerful and play a crucial role in "uplifting the race" of African Americans (Collins, 2009, p. 208). This is a unique and special role for a mentor and not one that is typically explored and read about in the voluminous amounts of mentor literature. Arguably, it would be difficult to write about the steps of othermothering or how to become a part of a women-centered network. These are roles that have been taken on in response to the need

for the support system, as well as the desire for future generations of Black children to "get feeding into" that will help to empower, protect and motivate them. What, then, is this special place like in this network? What is the role of care in this place?

Our Care: Black Feminist Care

In educational and psychological literature, care has been conceptualized largely through the White feminist lens. Nel Noddings (1984, 1992) and Carol Gilligan (1982) are two of the leading voices in the discussion surrounding care, particularly in education. Gilligan's work, *In a Different Voice*, seeks to examine women's development and the way that women deal with moral conflict. Gilligan found that women define their identities through relationships of intimacy and care. Although she sought to give voice to women who were "the group left out in the construction of theory," (p. 4) her work excludes women of color. With the White middle-class representation, this is a narrow perception of care that "misses or misunderstands important aspects of an African American voice of care" (Walker & Snarey, 2004, p. 12). Noddings' work on the ethic of care, which is expounded upon in Chapter Three, is expansive and broadly highlights care for self, others, animals, our planet, among other things. Noddings' conception of care includes four components: (1) modeling, (2) dialogue, (3) practice, and (4) confirmation. These components of care have been critiqued as individualistic and colorblind, as there is no recognition of the community, nor the perceptions of care for individuals of color (Patterson, Gordon & Price, 2008). Outside of the home and maternal responsibilities of the mother, scholars have noted the many sides of care for African American women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 2009; Thompson, 1998). Both Noddings and Gilligan write about care in a way that is not necessarily applicable to care

56

in the African American community since this work is missing some of the components of care offered by Black feminist and womanist scholars. However, this does not mean their work is not relevant to the conceptions of care for individuals of color. Continued exploration is necessary for building upon the foundational conceptions of care for African American women.

Other scholars examining care through various lenses have found that the communal (Cooper, 2007; Green, 2004; Knight, 2004), political (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Patterson, Gordon & Price, 2008; Roseboro & Ross, 2009) and cultural (Cooper, 2009; Noblit, 1993; Thompson, 1998) discussions surrounding care have been omitted from the most foundational pieces highlighting this topic. The well known works around care of both Noddings and Gilligan have been further extended and examined through various lenses, including Black feminism, in order to open up the conversation of care in the African American community: what this looks like, who is engaged in it and where and when it takes place.

What Does it Mean to Care?

Various scholars have previously explored the ethic of care from the perspective of individuals of color and found that this foundational notion of care, posited by Noddings (1984, 1992) and Gilligan (1982), is not the same in the African American community, particularly among African American women. In her reexamination of key themes emergent in the White feminist ethic of care literature, scholar Audrey Thompson (1998) asserts, "In feminine accounts of caring, the caring ideal may be treated either as generic or as pluralistic, but it is likely to be referenced implicitly to a White, middle-class ethic of domestic well-being" (p. 529). Thompson critiques the ethic of care

theories in education and psychology, examining the colorblindness and limited scope of

perspective. She finds that one of the most important conflicts in the White feminist ethic

of care and the Black feminist perspective is the communal aspect of care in the Black

community, where Black women are recognized as "both partners and leaders in the

movement for justice and racial uplift" (p. 536). Connected to this point is the

acknowledgement of race, racism and race relations in connection to care and how this is

exhibited among African Americans.

Upon examining care and justice through the voices of African Americans,

Walker and Snarey (2004) found that the two concepts are inextricably linked. These

scholars also recognize the significance of community and how it is not subordinate to

the individual. European conceptions of care tend to focus on one individual caring for

one child, but in the African American community, the historical norm was to work

"collectively for the good of all children" (p. 11). The focus was community and racial

uplift versus individual growth and success. With this, Walker and Snarey recognize that

race matters, and it is important to highlight the experiences of African Americans as it

provides an opportunity for closer examination of care within African Americans'

multifaceted culture.

Special Lessons: Classroom Care

Cooper (2009) asserts that "The main strand of educational research that

addresses African American women's caring behavior and dispositions" (p. 385) is found

in research on our role as teachers. African American teachers, from trailblazers such as

Mary McLeod Bethune and Anna Julia Cooper, to present day educators, display a

particular ethic of care more aligned with a Black feminist or womanist perspective

(Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). These terms are used interchangeably and "represent the cultural, historical, and political positionality of African-American women" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 72) and our marginalized experiences in the United States. With this nuanced perspective, African American female teachers approach caring for their students differently.

In her work on exemplary Black female educators, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) proposes three characteristics that are imperative for understanding care from the womanist perspective. The first characteristic is the embrace of the maternal, which connects to Collins' (2009) concept of othermothering. Embracing the maternal includes protecting, nurturing and treating their students as they would their own children. Second, political clarity focuses on first recognizing the institutional structures that often cause students of color to fail and to make the students aware of these structures. To withhold this information is disempowering to students. Last, when a teacher makes the decision to care, although success is not guaranteed for herself or the student, this is an "ethic of risk." This ethic of risk is rooted in interdependence and connects back to the communal relationship of care in the African American community. It is important to note that not all Black teachers employ these three characteristics into their teaching, but this does not mean they do not care for their students. The research on Black teachers and their experiences with care for their students provides opportunity for further discussion of this care and what it means for African American female mentors. When working with their mentees, does the care of African American female mentors align with Beauboeuf-Lafontant's characteristics of African American female teachers? Care is much more complex and complicated than I initially thought when reflecting upon my own

experiences with my mentors and mentees. Does the complication of care make it more difficult to examine and find in mentoring relationships or relationships in general?

Care for African American female educators and scholars includes interdependence and collective uplift, recognition of the political structures, engaging in the tough conversations addressing inequities, and recognizing the historical connections to present experiences. Roseboro and Ross (2009) recognize that the "care-sickness" of Black women educators may seem complicated, but is necessary:

> And this is how we care, this is how we teach our children to care. We teach them to carefully balance distrust and trust – distrust will keep them alive and trust will help them flourish. We teach them that meritocracy is a myth, that choices are possibilities but not endless, and we teach them that our people are still claiming the authority that has been denied to us for generations; that this is the authority to author our own lives, to speak our truth(s), and to collect our dignity…It is an ethic of care that must be political, that is rooted in an understanding of the home and the spiritual as politically creative spaces. (p. 36)

This form of care is not just limited to the classroom, but is intended to extend to communities and homes, forming "politically creative spaces." This care also gives voice to the power that teachers have in the classroom and in their relationships with students.

Noblit (1993) recognizes power is not always oppressive. He found that with Pam, an African American veteran teacher, power was actually moral authority. This is "an authority not only legitimated by the usual mechanisms of our society but also by reciprocal negotiation between people" (p. 37), which in this case was an adult and her students. Pam, possibly like many other African American teachers, constructed power in the context of her caring relationship with her students. There was reciprocity in this caring relationship, but Noblit emphasizes the point that power can exist within teacher-student relationships.

As a mentor, I wonder, what are the dynamics of power in my relationships with mentees? Is this power constructed within the context of the mentoring relationship or forcefully imposed? Does the ethic of care for African American females align with the work of Black feminist and womanist scholars, or does it differ? What does the care within mentoring relationships between African American female mentors and African American girls look like?

My Place in Your Life: The Role of a Mentor

WHO'S GONNA LEAD US?

Who's going to blaze the trail
For my children to succeed?
And on whose shoulders will my kids stand
If no one is willing to fall to their knees,

And surrender themselves in dedication
To the success of this next generation?
I pray that the hard work of the great legends
Doesn't fall to the dust.
So I turn to God
And I cry "Lord!
Who's Gonna Lead Us?"…

And the Lord replied
"A remnant shall arise
and carry on the vision.
A chosen few exist
That shall end all division
And produce unity
Within the black community."
God said He created you
For such a time as this
Don't doubt yourself
For he's given you the gift.
He's calling those that are ready and willing
To impact this world.
For you will make a difference
For that boy and that girl
That have not been born yet.
You will be to them

What the great legends were for us.
A beacon of light
Rising from the dust.
Revealing the impossible
Can become a possibility,
And proving that in the midst of negativity
One can produce a positive reality.

The Lord has heard my cry
So now I turn to you,
The chosen few.
From the womb cries a child
Who will need hope when he or she arrives.
Will you be the one to answer their cry?
Will you be the one whom they can trust?
Will you be the one
Who will lead us?
(Brown, Gray & Abrams, 2011, p. 35)

"Who's gonna lead us?" My heart aches knowing there are people, children in particular, who ask this question, even more concerning, those who do not know to ask this question when it is necessary. I do not want children I can help to be in a position where they have to ask this question. Ultimately, I do not want any children to have to ask this question because it is a question that I never had to pose. There were always loving, supportive, and honest women in my life who continue to lead me to this very day. Unfortunately, that is only my experience, and the "us" mentioned in the title includes my peers, some of whom did not have the same type of leadership in their lives and were faced with difficult changes that overwhelmed them and led to prison, failed opportunities and even death. In this poem, there is the voice of a mother concerned about the individuals who will sacrifice, work hard and carry on the legacies of great legends before in order for her children to prosper. This is a cry that can be heard from many homes and communities. The mother, after hearing the Lord's response, informs readers that within them is a gift to greatly impact the world, regardless of the negative

perspectives, challenging environments or sobering impossibilities. As a mentor, I am

one that leads. What exactly does it mean to lead? What is the connection of educating to

mentoring? As mentioned in Chapter One, to educate means to lead out. Where are

African American female mentors leading African American female girls? Can this

leading be done cooperatively? Can mentors lead from behind? The role of the mentor

varies, dependent upon the particular mentoring relationship, and this opens the

discussion in educational literature to diversify what a mentor is, does and how to sustain

those mentor-mentee relationships.

Is this Possible? Side-by-Side Leadership

When searching for the role of the mentor, it is difficult to find a straightforward

explanation in educational literature. This role varies across mentoring relationships and

looks different based upon the context. In many youth mentoring programs, the focus is

for mentor and mentees to meet regularly, over a period of six months or more, and work

to build the competence of the youth mentee while maintaining a close mentoring

relationship (Keller, 2010; Miller, 2010). The role of the mentor in these youth mentoring

relationships is strongly based upon the mentor and the program affiliate. The focus of

the program and the personality of the mentor shifts the mentor's role. In reference to

African American women, what I have found is that in higher education settings, the role

of the mentor is key and beneficial to student progression and success. According to

Patton and Harper (2003):

> Participating in a mentoring relationship with someone who looks like them, who
> has similar personal, professional, and scholarly interests and is devoted to their
> holistic experience and personal success as a graduate student in their chosen
> field, is keenly important for African American women and other students of
> color. (p. 68)

This relationship is not only beneficial to students, but also to mentors as well.

In their article "Retaining Each Other," Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) share their experiences as two African American women in the roles of advisor and advisee, building a relationship through writing in the unique position of "outsider-insider" at a predominantly White institution. Within the three themes that emerged from their work together, (1) connection as African American women, (2) living with vulnerability, and (3) maintaining motivation and momentum, it was apparent that both advisor and advisee benefited from their mentoring relationship. This was more of a co-mentoring approach allowing them to contribute equally to the relationship. Co-mentoring places both people involved in the mentoring relationship on the same level, so there is no discomfort in sharing goals, doubts and other feelings because each person serves as a support system for the other (McGuire & Reger, 2003). This piece further emphasizes the role of a mentor and the reciprocity of the mentoring relationship.

Considering the "Who's Gonna Lead Us?" poem, we see that mentors not only lead, but can see the leadership in others and help them to cultivate that skill with openness, vulnerability, trust and motivation. I wonder, might mentors also follow? Can they lead from behind? In Tao mentoring, it has been emphasized that "All good mentors (giving, teaching) are continually open to being mentored (receiving, learning). To be a good teacher, one must be a good student. To be a good student, one must learn well what he or she will teach" (Huang & Lynch, 1999, p. 9). With this, mentors should lead, as well as follow, in order to be effective in their mentoring relationships.

When conversing about her mentoring experiences, Ms. Karen shares that "providing guidance through your own experiences" is the key to truly being engaged in

a mentoring relationship. This guidance comes as a result of family life, schooling, relationships and general life experiences that help to shape one's life. With this in mind, Ms. Karen takes on the leadership role while recognizing the reciprocal nature of the relationship. Ms. Karen shares, "I grow as much as the person I'm mentoring does." In this she realizes the opportunity for growth as an adult mentor. Tasha's role in mentoring slightly differs as she views herself as one placed in the lives of youth to help them and to generally "make a difference in their lives." Tasha simply wants to be there for the young girls in her community as a part of their support system, serving as a friend and a listening ear. She does not automatically see herself in a leadership role as mentor, but more of a confidant who walks side-by-side with her mentees, showing them that she cares about them and their community.

Leading and Carrying

I have been led and carried by the mentors in my life. In my experience, this means having the pressure and weight of what feels like the world lifted off your shoulders, but not thrown away. Instead, mentors guide you in managing and balancing the many inevitable challenges and issues you face in life. When feeling academically overwhelmed and socially disconnected during my second semester of doctoral studies, one of my mentors pulled me through the slump. During this time I found myself trying to balance school, while also healing from the abrupt ending of a two-year relationship. Mrs. Diane, or Momma Diana as I like to call her, encouraged me over the phone, but also took the time to surprise me by driving over one hour to my home and spending the weekend with me. This sacrifice of her time inspired me to allow my mentees to "interrupt" my life in order to provide them with the support that they need. Knowing this

has been my experience as a mentor, I strive to provide this same type of guidance and

support for the youth that I mentor, as they recognize the strength that resides within

them. My desire is to

> …guide others to discovering this goodness within themselves and to help them to follow their integrity as they reawaken to the inner truth of who they are and what they can do. For the mentor, this is a process of instilling mentorhood, rather than embodying it. (Huang & Lynch, 1999, p. 14)

Being able to instill in my mentees that which has been instilled in me by the African

American women in my life is the goal that drives me. Hopefully, with this experience,

my mentees will go forward and do the same for someone else. I now go back to

mentoring and my existential questioning to unpack the layers of self doubt. The mentor

is vulnerable too.

The Vulnerability of Me: Value in Mentoring

Why Am I Here?

Hand on my forehead
As I close my eyes to hide from the text
Reading about theories that don't interest me
Leads to anxiety and stress

Backaches, headaches, sleep deprivation and silence
As thoughts are pondered near
Then the iterate question is raised
Why exactly am I here?

Why am I at UMD
In pursuit of a PhD?
Why am I allowing terms like
Dichotomy, epistemology and paradigm to get the best of me?

Why have the bags
Under my eyes grown?
And why do I feel
Like my energy is drained and gone?

Why have my healthy eating
Habits gone astray?
And why do I so badly
Want to return to yesterday?

Yesterday, when things were simpler
And my pockets were most certainly fatter
When my friends and family were near
And my life made sense, what I was doing seemed to matter

Now I'm sitting in classrooms internally defending
My people when referred to as the "underclass"
Reading discouraging statistics that have made it to the present
On a trip from the past

Why? Why? Why am I in this space
Where I myself feel like the "Other" and marginalized?
In a space where some people have drive and goals that I don't have
With hints of both doubt and passion in their eyes

Why am I at this predominantly white institution
Where most of the people don't even look like me
And I constantly have to cast out
My own feelings of inadequacy and inferiority?

Why? Why am I here? I'm here because as lame as it sounds
One person can really make a difference
And I'm that one for many children and adults
That did not grow up with silver spoons and white picket fences

I'm here because like Queen Esther
This is my period of preparation
Not quite sure about all aspects of the future
But I most assuredly know that I will impact this nation

I'm here as an African American female
Standing proud and tall
Raised by a single mother and not ashamed
Of who I am or where I come from at all

I'm here because my grandmother's
Education was complete in the 8th grade
And she always told me I could be whomever I wanted
And I have not allowed those words to fade

I'm here as a representative of Jesus Christ
And this is where He's destined for me to be
The doors have been opened, questions have been answered
And I will maximize this opportunity

Throughout all the positive experiences
There still arise thoughts of doubt and fear
But I just remember that I'm being prepared for greatness
And that is why I'm here!
(Gamble, 2010a)

In my mentoring relationships, I have found that the benefit of growing closer to my mentees comes when I am open and honest about my own struggles and life experiences. My mentees want to know that I am willing to open myself up and share things that I have faced personally, academically and spiritually. In the above poem, I share my continuous struggle of battling thoughts and feelings of inadequacy. As a student who has been on an academic roller coaster over the course of my life – starting in gifted education courses in the third grade, graduating high school with no desire to pursue higher education, starting community college in remedial math and English courses, graduating Cum Laude with my bachelors degree, Magna Cum Laude with my masters degree, and pursuing doctoral studies at a Research One university – I find myself constantly questioning whether or not I "measure up" to some self-imposed standard created solely in my mind. These thoughts are not just based upon my surroundings, but there is something within me that causes me to think I am unable to succeed. By sharing these feelings with my mentee Yasmine, not only does she better understand who I am, but she encourages and reminds me that I am capable of succeeding and have a purpose to fulfill. Mentoring her is a part of my purpose and provides me with the motivation to move forward through the challenges in life. In the same way, one of my mentors, Mrs. Linda constantly encourages me with her kind words

and sporadic messages reminding me that she has not forgotten about me. She sees the value in my research interests, although others may not notice the significance in it, which causes me to question my own decisions for research. After sharing my thoughts about my research interests, Mrs. Linda responds through email:

> I'm so excited for you. Always excited for you. I love the research focus. I so much believe in sister love in that we learn how to walk along aside a sister as she does HER journey. I hope one day you get to meet my niece. I hope so many people get to meet you. Girl, you are going to be something when you finished all this. Go on with your bad self. I just love it. I can't wait to officially say Dr. Wyletta Gamble, PhD (EdD… I don't remember which but there will be "DR" in front of your name).

Through her words, she not only reaffirms the significance of my research, but she also motivates me through her excitement for my progress and ultimate completion of the program. She also feels that I can be an inspiration to others and hopes that one day I will meet her niece and many other people. This is just another moment of closeness shared through my willingness to be open with an idea that I myself was still thinking through.

The word vulnerable, from the Latin *vulnerare*, means to wound. In the context of relationships, this means that there is an openness that provides space for the other person to hurt you. It is interesting because in focusing on the possibility of hurt, you can miss the opportunity to strengthen a mentoring relationship. I have found that vulnerability, in my mentoring relationships, has been an open door for receiving the benefit of growing closer and strengthening the relationship with my mentors and mentees.

Mentor Voice: A Gap in the Literature

While there are countless books available on what it means to mentor, how to mentor and when strategies for effective mentoring are to be implemented, there are very few reflections provided, from the perspectives of mentors. Previous studies have shown

that mentoring is beneficial to students in various ways and have examined the mentor-mentee relationship (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Linnehan, 2003; Pedersen, Woolum, Gagne & Coleman, 2009; Thomson & Zand, 2010), transitioning beyond mentor to "developer" (Baker & Griffin, 2010), school engagement (Holt, Bry & Johnson, 2008), leadership cultivation potential for elementary-aged mentees (Bonner & Jennings, 2007), matriculation through undergraduate (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007) and graduate school for African American students (Davis, 2007; Dixon-Reeves, 2003; Lee, 1999; View & Frederick, 2011) along with strength development in youth based upon their interactions with adults (Higginbotham, MacArthur & Dart, 2010). In reference to African American females, the limited research pertaining to mentoring surrounds the experience of mentoring in academia, particularly in predominantly White settings (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Grant, 2012; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Green & King, 2001; Holmes, Land & Hinton-Hudson, 2007; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001).

Unfortunately, I have found very few studies that focus primarily on the experiences of the mentors, particularly in community and school-based youth mentoring programs. Even President Obama spoke out about the benefits of serving as a mentor, and this is important since mentoring usually focuses on mentees (Reddick, Griffin & Cherwitz, 2011). The research provided on African American female mentoring experiences is largely focused on academia and the business sector. Moreover, there is a large disparity between the number of quantitative and qualitative studies on mentoring. The majority of mentoring studies are quantitative with an outcome based mentee focus.

Reviewing mentoring studies on the benefits of mentoring relationships, Liang and Grossman (2010) found that expanding research beyond treatment and control

evaluations, as well as pre and post-test comparisons is necessary in order to understand

mentoring experiences and relationships better. Huang and Lynch (1999) assert that

mentoring is a reciprocal process, so there must be something gained for the mentor.

According to Rhodes (2002):

> …the emotional rewards that mentors receive are rarely considered in writings on mentoring. Instead, the process tends to be conveyed in terms of the adult selflessly giving to the protégé in a one-sided relationship. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the mentor gets relatively little from the relationship. (p. 50)

Knowing that mentors benefit from their relationships, why is this not a primary focus in

the literature? What does it mean to privilege the relationship as one-way? Who do we

say we are as the one-giving?

The mentoring experiences of Ms. Karen and Tasha uncover benefits that help

them to grow as mentors, while strengthening the lives of their mentees. One of the

emergent themes in the preliminary study was *giving*. Both Ms. Karen and Tasha have a

desire to give of themselves to the mentees and their community. Tasha knew that as long

as she was able to give back to the community and help the children through her

mentoring, she would continue. For her, it was about making a difference in the life of

the children, or even one:

> Even if I make a difference in one child's life in this program, even though I aim for all of them, if I know that I make a difference in their life, I can help them along that road to success or whatever it is they want to achieve in life. I want to be there. I want to be the cheerleader and I don't want to do it because I'm obligated, but I really care. Deep down, I'm sincere and genuine about it.

Similarly, Ms. Karen wants her mentoring to leave mentees with the feeling that

they can reach any level of success and achieve any goal placed before them. Ultimately,

she wants to give them hope that sustains and motivates them. It brings her pleasure to be

this person in their lives. She asserts, "I'm shaping, molding them into what they want to be, but really all you're doing is putting them in a place where whatever they want to be, they have the motivation now instilled in them by you." This sense of support and empowerment has been one of the key elements of my personal mentor relationships. With this knowledge of accomplishment instilled in me, as a mentee I have grown with my mentors. The same has been the case in my role as a mentor. As my mentees grow, I grow as well.

I Grow, You Grow

In a phenomenological reading of the literature, Roberts (2000) concludes that personal growth of the mentor is one of the positive consequences of mentoring. Unfortunately, this is not expounded upon in his review of the literature, but aligns with Ms. Karen's statement that "I grow as much as the person I'm mentoring does." Arguably, this growth comes as a result of her giving back and being provided with positivity from her mentees, as is expected in the mentoring relationship. Moreover, mentoring provides Ms. Karen with an opportunity to "show the love of Christ," which for her is extremely important since God is the motivating factor in her mentoring role. She shares, "I can be with my mentee and never mention Jesus Christ, but the love of Christ as I'm mentoring comes through. That makes all the difference." For Ms. Karen it is not about sharing her faith, but instead sharing the love that is the foundation of her beliefs.

Through their conversations, both Ms. Karen and Tasha recognize that there are intrinsic benefits to serving as mentors, particularly to youth in their own community. From the Latin *intrinsecus*, intrinsic means inwardly, on the inside. These inward benefits

seem to be enough reward for these mentors. Is the intrinsic reward of mentoring connected to the concept of love? What is this lived relation like based upon love? Where does the silencing of the word love come from in such relationships?

Love vs. Care

In education, the word "love" is deemed problematic and raises questions about the comfort level between students and teachers (hooks, 2003; Stillwaggon, 2005). As a mentor, I do not hesitate in using the word love in my interactions with my mentees, but does this differ in formal mentoring relationships? Does the discomfort with *love* exist in formal mentoring relationships between African American females as it does in education?

As an educator, hooks (2003) knows, "When we teach with love we are better able to respond to the unique concerns of individual students while simultaneously integrating those of the classroom community" (p. 133). In comparison with mentoring, there is a unique ability to work with mentees based upon their own circumstances and challenges when approached with love. Hooks continues in sharing that connections based on emotions should not be frowned upon in education because they are significant and powerful for both teacher and student. The idea that loving students promotes favoritism is false, according to hooks, and love ultimately shifts "us away from domination in all its forms" (p. 137). This domination comes in a number of forms, one of which is standardized tests that, according to Hoyle and Slater (2001), have taken the place of love in schools. With this conflicting perception of love in education, is this the same in mentoring? Is the concept of love frowned upon or embraced within these mentoring relationships? If so, does it reflect that which hooks describes as relationships

73

that "empower each person engaged in the mutual practice of partnership" (hooks, p. 136)?

The word *care* is used far more often than love in the context of mentoring and education, but what exactly is care? What is love? Is love an extension of care? Are they one in the same? Noddings (1992) reminds us that people need to be cared for in all phases of our lives and this means that we are "understood, received, respected, recognized" (p. xi). Merging psychological, philosophical and religious ideas about love, Loreman (2011) asserts that love involves 1) kindness and empathy, 2) intimacy and bonding, 3) sacrifice and forgiveness, 4) acceptance and community, as well as 5) passion. Based upon these two definitions of care and love, they are actions shown within relationships. With Noddings' and Loreman's perspectives, as well as my own, care and love seem to overlap and although adults may find it uncomfortable or even inappropriate to say that they "love" the youth they work with, it is possible that love through kindness, sacrifice and acceptance is very much a part of the mentoring relationship.

Instead of problematizing love, we can begin to recognize it as a part of human relationships and necessary, particularly when working with today's youth. Exploring love within the context of mentoring relationships can lead to a better understanding of the significance of love in relationships with African American female mentors and mentees. This is not simply about an emotional connection, but various elements that lead to happiness and success within education and beyond. Hoyle and Slater (2001) assert that "A sense of disconnectedness and a desire to overcome it, a wish to be in contact with others, the feeling that others are necessary if things are to be whole or complete, and a longing for the community of others are essential parts of love's architecture" (p.

791). Exploring love in the context of mentoring can potentially open up hidden aspects of "love's architecture" that contributes to African American female relationships.

Overlooked Frustrations: Negative Aspects of Mentoring

Mentoring can be perceived as a relationship solely filled with positive interactions and outcomes for mentors and mentees. The truth is that mentoring, at times, is filled with tension, frustration and negativity for various reasons. In formal youth mentoring programs, mentors share that they experience both satisfaction and tension in their mentoring relationships. With the elderly and mid-life mentors, the negative experiences in mentoring far exceed the positive when working with at-risk youth (Blinn-Pike, 2010). In other mentoring relationships, mentors and mentees are not properly matched, which yields negative outcomes for both involved (Liang & Grossman, 2010). Whatever the reason, negativity does exist in mentoring relationships and has an impact on both the mentor and the mentee. Most mentoring literature tends to highlight the mentee's negative experiences, while disregarding the mentors. What do we experience and learn from mentoring opportunities being missed?

Although the question of difficulties or challenges in mentoring was never asked during my conversations with Ms. Karen and Tasha, both women share the challenges they tend to face as mentors. Tasha shares that it can be burdensome to be a mentor to the African American girls in her community because there are not enough people to carry the load. From the Old English *byrden*, burden means a load, weight. Mentoring can become a load or a weight, especially when there is a lack of mentors to build relationships with the youth in the community.

Mentoring is something that should not solely be the responsibility of a few dedicated individuals, but more people should be involved. While shaking her head in disbelief, Tasha shares, "I try to be the best person that I can be, not only because of them, but because I want to be the best person I can be. It's a struggle. It's difficult. We need more African American role models…" Tasha agrees with the old adage that it "takes a village to raise a child," but unfortunately according to Tasha, "the village is crumbling. There is no village." The crumbling of the village directly connects to the women-centered networks within the history of Black communities (Collins, 2009) that have unfortunately, been disassembled in Tasha's community. The crumbling of the villages and break down of community othermothers leads to a pressure on those who are still willing and able to support the youth through mentoring. Regardless of the circumstances in her community, Tasha has proclaimed that she will not turn her back on the children. What happens when such villages break down? Who does the dismantling? What is necessary to reconstruct?

Ms. Karen describes mentoring as an opportunity for her to pour into her mentees until the feeling of emptiness is gone. The notion of emptiness emerges from Ms. Karen's own sense of emptiness that presents itself when there is a lack of mentoring in her life. What gets poured? Is that which is poured into the mentee essential for the mentor as well? Knowing that she grows as much as the youth she mentors, Ms. Karen recognizes that while constantly providing the youth with what they need, if she does not have someone to pour into her, she will eventually experience the very emptiness she tries so hard to protect her mentees from:

> So, as an adult, there are times and certain areas of my life, I wish I had somebody as the mentor, even at my age, where there's a void and after I've drawn off of all

I can draw off, other than looking to God Himself, I can't. I have no mentor in
that area and it's an empty feeling. It's not a good feeling.

Ms. Karen recognizes the need for a mentor in her own life. In Tao mentoring, they

affirm, "The best mentors are students of other mentors" (Huang & Lynch, 1999, p. 17).

While taking the time to mentor others, Ms. Karen has found it challenging to sit in the

position of mentee and let someone guide and refill her, in order to do the same for her

mentees.

The benefits far exceed the challenges for Ms. Karen and Tasha as they work with

African American female youth. They both have made a commitment to instill in their

mentees the same qualities of care, patience and leadership that have been passed on to

them by their own mentors of the past and present. Maintaining a healthy balance

between self-preservation and giving of oneself will help to sustain both Ms. Karen and

Tasha along their mentoring journeys.

Familiarity: Black on Black Mentoring

For African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility
created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman. This process
of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women know
what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, then
who will? (Collins, 2009, p. 114)

This phenomenon of being an African American female mentor to African

American girls adds another dimension and complexity to the role of mentoring. If

African American women will not listen to African American girls, who can they turn to

that will truly understand their experiences, dilemmas, challenges and perspectives? Ruth

Nicole Brown (2009), the leader of *Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths* (SOLHOT), a

program for Black girls, recognizes that the girls she works with have much insight to

offer about their own lives, and it is the responsibility of those around them to find new

77

ways to interact with them. Could reciprocal mentoring relationships provide a different way for African American women and African American girls to interact and build new relationships that allow for each person involved to be uniquely and fully themselves? Within these mentoring relationships, is there a sense of belonging that reflects the uniqueness of the relationship?

Sense of belonging. There is not a clear consensus among researchers on the significance of race in mentoring. Some mentoring programs only match mentors with mentees of the same race and this, unfortunately, results in an extended waiting period for many minority youth. Many proponents of cross-race mentoring are concerned with the absence of mentors and believe that meaningful mentoring relationships can be established with individuals of a different race. In addition to the varying opinions on race and mentoring, inconsistent findings in research on same-race versus cross-race mentoring conclude that outcomes do not affect the youth "in any consistent manner" (Rhodes, 2002, p. 89).

Ensher and Murphy (1997) examined the mentor relationship and found that mentors paired with mentees of the same race seemed to like their mentors more than those paired with mentees of a different race. This information is helpful, but limited because readers are unsure of why the mentors "like" their mentees of the same race. Gender is another variable to consider in mentoring, in addition to race. Research conducted on same-sex or same-race matches conclude that these factors, individually, do not seem to show distinct advantages. However, collectively, both same-sex and same-race matches show an increase in academic competence and self-esteem among boys, while showing increases in school value and self-esteem for girls (Johnson, Xu & Allen,

2010; Liang & Grossman, 2010). But what do such "effect" studies show? These studies provide general insight into outcomes of mentoring relationships, but, unfortunately, do not offer insight into why these outcomes exist. Phenomenology gets to the heart of what such a relationship is like, and that is the place of connection that needs to be seen.

I do believe and know that effective mentoring relationships can take place cross-gender and cross-race, but for me, the most meaningful and impactful mentoring experiences have been with African American women. I felt as though I could see myself in them; they were truly reflections of me. This starts within my own family and extends beyond, with African American female mentors who mentored me academically, spiritually and professionally. Each has added immensely to my life and the relationships are invaluable. Collins (2009) words, "Only Black women know what it means to be Black women" (p. 114) resonate with me. A woman or man of any race can effectively mentor an African American girl, but will they be able to relate and connect in the same way that an African American woman can?

Ms. Karen recognizes the benefit of mentoring overall, regardless of race, but also understands the cultural connections that can only take place with an individual of the same race:

> What I've experienced as a Black woman, an African American woman, my counterpart in the White female has not experienced that to some degree. Now she can mentor another female about female issues, but when it comes to my culture, you've got to dig and go beyond yourself, so how much can you really give me because it's not coming out of you. It's coming from beyond you. So I think it really needs to be that connection where you have the same cultural experiences.

Ms. Karen believes that a woman of a different race would be limited in what she could offer to her mentee based upon her own cultural experiences. She is an advocate of same-race mentoring. Tasha also recognizes the relevance of same-race mentoring, but does not

believe this is the only effective approach to mentoring. Since they are the same race, Tasha feels more "relatable" to her mentees and believes that they can see hope in becoming more than what may be expected of them through their mentoring relationship with an African American mentor.

I think that one of the most important things is the sense of belonging in a same-race mentoring relationship. There is a level of comfort and understanding I experience in my mentoring relationships with African American women that differs from cross-race mentoring relationships. The comfort within these relationships provides me the space to grow and be vulnerable, knowing that I am understood. O'Donohue (1999) recognizes that

> The most intimate community is the community of understanding. Where you are understood, you are at home…There is a deep need in each of us to belong to some cluster of friendship and affinity in which the games of impression and power are at a minimum, and we can allow ourselves to be seen as we really are, we can express what we really believe and can be challenged thoroughly. This is how we grow; it is where we learn to see who we are, what our needs are, and the unsuspecting effect our thinking and presence have on other lives. (p. 262)

Although I recognize there is something that my mentors instill in me, the power is minimized within our relationship, so I feel no need to compete and can dwell in the space of comfort and belonging that the relationships provide.

Many faces of belonging. Hooks (2009) writes about belonging in relation to people and places she has encountered over the course of her life. She shares, "All my life I have searched for a place of belonging, a place that would become home…Home was the place I longed for it was not where I lived" (p. 215). This sense of belonging is about a safe space where hurts are not ignored and joys are celebrated. This context of belonging cannot be confined to one group of people or one particular place. Edelman

(1999) appreciates the diversity among her mentors. In *Lanterns*, a book about the important mentors in her life, she shares that her mentors, a very diverse group, racially, educationally, and spiritually, have all influenced and shaped her life:

> All of my mentors, men and women of different faiths and colors, in their own way personified excellence and courage, shared and instilled a vision of hope of what could be, not what was, in our racially, gender, class, and caste constricted country; kept America's promise of becoming a country free of discrimination, poverty, and ignorance every before me; put the foundations of education, discipline, hard work, and perseverance needed to help build it beneath me; and instilled a sense of the here and now and forever faithful presence of God inside me. (p. xvii)

The above statement solidifies the benefit of mentoring in the life of an African American woman with mentors from different walks of life. Edelman's experience has been different from my own and confirms that mentoring relationships can be both meaningful and life-changing regardless of race. Her hope in America, equality, change, education, and humanity stems from relationships with her mentors. There is no guarantee that a race-gender pairing in mentoring is more effective than cross-race and cross-gender, but exploring this phenomenon will add to the literature on mentor experiences and their pedagogical implications.

The Complexities of African American Women

A Woman is Not a Potted Plant

A woman is not
a potted plant

her roots bound
to the confines
of her house

a woman is not
a potted plant
her leaves trimmed

81

to the contours
of her sex

a woman is not
a potted plant
her branches
espaliered
against the fences
of her race
her country
her mother
her man

her trained blossom
turning
this way
& that
to follow
the sun
of whoever feeds
and waters
her

a woman
is wilderness
unbounded
holding the future
between each breath
walking the earth
only because
she *is* free

and not creepervine
or tree.

Not even honeysuckle
or bee.
(Walker, 1997, pp. 104-106)

In an effort to fulfill her role as a mentor, Alice Walker (1997) shared a variety of

poems to address Spellman's graduating class of 1995. The above poem was one offered

as a gift to the students as she raised the question, "What can I give you, women, to

remind you of our Goddess-given autonomy, on that day when you realize you are

trapped in a situation with another that permits you no more room to grow than a potted geranium on a windowsill?" (p. 104). Walker's words capture the feelings of entrapment and bondage that can bombard African American women, dealing with oppressive controlling images and misunderstandings of who we truly are and what we offer (Collins, 2009). This poem speaks to the complexities of African American women giving voice to our diversity, strength and resilience. Unlike a potted plant, we are boundless, exciting and free. The freedom of African American women is to be celebrated and not ignored. They also need to be recognized for their struggle against being viewed as "potted plants" – constrained, confined and bound. This notion of the potted plant has been "uprooted" through the many voices of Black women. Literature, music and other artistic forms of expression are outlets for Black women to raise their own voices while shaping their own identities in a male dominated society (Collins, 2009).

Truly, "the ease of simplicity is deceptive" (van Manen, 2005, p. 2). As an African American female who has mentored and also acquired the role of mentee, some would think this should be an easy topic for me to explore. This is not an easy topic to explore, although my positionality is one of insider. Yes, I am an African American female, but my individual experiences do not encompass all the experiences of African American females. Collins (2009) shares that "It may be more accurate to say that a Black women's collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges" (p. 32). In other words, there exists a specific perspective and standpoint of African American female experiences in America to resist a multitude of challenges, barriers and mis-namings of who we are, but this

collective standpoint is addressed and dealt with differently by each individual African

American female. From the Latin *collectus*, collect means together. There is a

togetherness in the experiences of African American women. What, then, is this

collective for African American female mentors?

Though the controlling images of the matriarch, mammy, welfare queen and

jezebel, among others, still persist in society and institutionally, there are authentic

representations of African American women that prevail within African American

communities and homes:

> Through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and
> communities, individual African-American women fashioned their own ideas
> about the meaning of Black womanhood. When these ideas found collective
> expression, Black women's self-definitions enabled them to refashion African-
> influenced conceptions of self and community. These self-definitions of Black
> womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black
> womanhood advanced by Whites as well as the discriminatory social practices
> that these controlling images supported. In all, Black women's participation in
> crafting a constantly changing African-American culture fostered distinctively
> Black and women-centered worldviews. (Collins, 2009, p. 13)

There is a power in Black women defining for ourselves who we are and taking

ownership of our own identities. In her dissertation study on African American

adolescent female poets, Bacon (2009) found that naming oneself is not an immediate

event, but it is a continued, ongoing process that is embedded in that context of the

individuals. Bacon also discovered that the naming can change overtime and display

unrecognized power among African American women. Even among the persistent

stereotypes and negative images, there is resistance in the truth of the actions of Black

women. The African American female community "thus reveals aspects of its

presence…by withholding other aspects of itself for further exploration" (Abram, 1996,

p. 51). Exploring the complexities of African American female mentors allows me to

enter into a space filled with this phenomenon as I seek for meaningful experiences that illuminate experiences common to humankind, not simply Black women (van Manen, 2005).

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf (1929) writes about the boundaries and limitations surrounding women writers. She posits that a woman must literally and figuratively have a room of her own free space to accomplish the task of being creatively unrestricted in her written words. When reflecting upon her experience of being locked out of the university library simply because she was female, Woolf shares:

> …and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer… (p. 24)

Although emphasizing the inequities between males and females, as well as the struggles for female writers, Woolf's words speak to the limitations faced by many women, including African American women, who may or may not be writers, but mothers, teachers, parents and mentors. What does having one's own space do for shaping their identity? Where does the resistance to stereotypical images and ideals show itself in the African American female community? What role do African American female mentors have in this resistance?

Silenced, but not Silent

Having others speak for you can take away your own voice. Having others speak for you can give them the power to shape your identity. Although attempted by those "who have appointed themselves our representatives to the rest of the universe" (Walker, 1983, p. 341), this has not been the case with African American women. Although others have spoken for us, particularly in academic spaces, this act of being silenced does not

mean that we have been silent. In the Black community, women have come together to

form their own intellectual groups and understandings of who we are as individuals

(Collins, 2009). African American female mentors are a part of this community and

possibly help to break the silence in their mentoring relationships. Moreover, through

literature and music, Black women have reclaimed the room necessary to tell their own

stories, despite the stereotypes that linger.

Stereotypes have long served as a negative guide into the lives of African

American women in this society. Unfortunately, the stereotypical images permeate many

spaces of society, including the workplace mentoring experiences of Black women. With

stereotypes embedded in their minds about Black women, leadership undermines the

capabilities of Black women (Bova, 2000). According to Sheri Parks (2010), stereotypes

are dangerous and powerful, promoting the wrong image of Black women:

> Stereotypes are by definition greatly oversimplified, boiled down to one
> seemingly essential trait and so made false by extreme omission and exaggeration.
> More than myth, stereotype is a bald exercise of power: It is an attempt to
> apprehend and control…According to some stereotypes, black women were either
> castrating matriarchs, clueless Mammies, pathetic welfare mothers, jezebels, or
> victims, depending on who was telling the story and what they needed their black
> women characters to be. Black women have often rejected these types of blanket
> definitions, reluctant to recognize them as anything more than cheap imitations of
> a greater mythology. It is natural to try to avoid stereotypes altogether, but we
> cannot leave the memories of our foremothers mired in stereotypes created for the
> purposes of others. (p. 177)

With the weight that stereotypes carry, Parks asserts that this image of Black women

must be eliminated because their purpose was created for the entertainment and power of

others. Parks also confirms that Black women have not accepted these false definitions,

but have instead recognized them as cheap imitations.

Literary Liberation

Through the written work of African American female writers there has been a resistance to the dominant ideal and stereotypes of African American women. These African American female literary figures such as Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Terry McMillan, are just a few of the many writers who have shared fictional, poetic and autobiographical works shedding light on the diverse African American female experience. As bell hooks (1996) recognizes, "To understand the complexity of black girlhood we need more work that documents that reality in all its variations and diversity…There is no one story of black girlhood" (p. xiii).

From characters, such as Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's (1970) *The Bluest Eye* to Winter in Sister Souljah's (1999) *The Coldest Winter Ever*, African American female writers present characters who are far too diverse and complex to fit into any one-dimensional stereotypical image created by others. The authors themselves have diverse life experiences and their own unique perspectives on Black womanhood and their responsibility and freedom as writers. Nobel Peace Prize winner and literary pioneer Toni Morrison recognizes the expectations of African American writers and interestingly, views her freedom as a writer in a unique way:

> But out of the world of literature, you try to carve this mammy, whore. Those two categories are laid down for black women's representation. Almost all of African- American women writers that I know were very much uninterested in one area: white men. So they tend not to ever write about them. They're sort of in the background somewhere. That frees up a lot. It frees up the imagination because you don't have to gaze, you know. In when I say white men, I don't mean just the character, but the establishment. The reviewers. The publishers. The people who are in control. Once you erase that from your canvas, you can really play. (Greenfield-Sanders & Mitchell, 2008, p. 23)

Morrison recognizes that the representation of mammy and whore has been laid out for her as an African American female writer. She does not limit herself to that script, nor does she concern herself with the opinions of "white men." She recognizes that stifling her creativity to appease others is pointless and would leave her not only unfulfilled as a writer, but also inauthentic in the stories she has to share. Similarly, hip hop artist, activist and author Sister Souljah (1994) shares her need to be truthful in her writing because of her concern and love for the Black community. She shares, "No matter how backward and negative the mainstream view and image of black people, I feel compelled to reshape that image and to explore our many positive angles – because I love my own people" (p. x). This desire to reshape the image of Blacks is exhibited through the raw language and honesty exhibited in both her autobiographical work and fictional novels. With the resistance to dominant representations of African American women shared through literature, there is an act of making oneself known. Van Manen (2005) states, "To write is to make oneself appear in the presence of the other. By telling about oneself, the person who writes directs his or her gaze at the other" (p. 97). The retelling and renaming of Black womanhood through literature places African American women in the space of the other and places eyes upon the readers. This gaze upon "others" leads to a new acknowledgment of the many layers of Black women and our wealth of experiences.

The (un)silencing found in the works of African American female authors reminds me that there is space to resist negative controlling images of African American women. Can mentoring relationships between African American women and female youth serve as one of these spaces? Does the role of African American female literature,

music, poetry and various forms of expression and resistance influence mentoring relationships?

Within my own experiences as both mentor and mentee, the space to resist negative controlling images of African American women has been revealed, but was not necessarily the focus. My mentors have not focused directly on the stereotypical images of African American women in society, but have been examples to the resistance through their life choices. In my very own family, observing how my mother handled issues with my father during the demise of their marriage has taught me about making choices that resist what can be the expected reaction (angry Black woman) from an African American woman. Some of the resistance may seem subtle, but has a lasting impact in the life of the mentee. Is resistance openly discussed or observed with mentoring relationships among African American women and their mentees? Do these discussions or observations in mentoring relationships provide a space for (un)silencing the voices of African American female youth? The discovery of this (un)silencing continues through phenomenological inquiry and exploration.

(Un)Silencing Through Phenomenological Inquiry

Silence is more than merely not using language to express oneself (van Manen, 1997). A state of mind is isolating and deafening until united voices break that silence (Bacon, 2009). Silence can become a state of mind, but this state of mind has not been embraced among African American women. With phenomenological inquiry, this resistance to silence can be examined within the community of African American female mentors. Does the mentoring relationship provide a space for (un)silencing among Black female youth? Casey (2009) notes, "When we cannot find a habitable place, we must set

about *making* or *building* such a place to ensure stable inhabitation" (p. 109). In this, Casey is not solely referring to physical space, but to the mental, emotional and spiritual space needed to explore and shape one's own identity. What have been the examples of resistance to false images for African American female mentors? How can the examples of African American female mentors who have resisted the stereotypical images influence the lives and goals of their mentees? These questions all connect to the lived experiences of African American female mentors.

According to Ms. Karen and Tasha, the lived mentor experience for African American women is connected to family, community, giving to others and the cultural connection between mentor and mentees. With this in mind, the mentoring experience is not solely limited by the few hours spent with mentees each week, but spreads into many areas of life that one would not think to address. Using Gadamer's (1975/2004) approach to genuine conversation, which is further unpacked in Chapter Three, I uncover more of the connections to this phenomenon than expected.

Exploring the lived experiences of African American female mentors phenomenologically will provide me with the opportunity to go beyond mere descriptions, statistics and facts that take "place on the margin" (Bachelard, 1994, p. xxxv). The margins provide me with a perspective that few ever notice, desire to see or recognize. It is interesting to explore the lived experiences of African American females from the margins, as we have been viewed marginally, in a more oppressive sense for years. The margin on which a phenomenologist is placed presents a new perspective that no longer "marginalizes" individuals, but works toward the goal of highlighting human experience. This special vantage point is beneficial in contributing to educational

literature on mentoring experiences in a way that has not been previously explored. Phenomenology has the ability to share that which might be familiar in new and unfamiliar ways.

For mentoring, instead of the outcome-based differences that mentors have made in the lives of their mentees, phenomenology allows us to see the differences mentoring has made in the lives of the mentors, based upon their own words and lived experiences. Phenomenological exploration also examines the meaning of everyday experiences (van Manen, 1997), and navigating my way through the meaning of being an African American female mentor to African American girls will contribute to existing literature in an evocative, unique and pertinent way. Although everyone is not an African American female mentor, there are common experiences embedded within all of us that link us together, whether we recognize them or not (van Manen, 2005).

CHAPTER THREE:
THE CIRCLES OF PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Guiding creates an atmosphere that encourages others to think and accomplish for themselves. (Huang & Lynch, 1999, p. 103)

Guidance is imperative in mentoring relationships as this leads to independence in thought and accomplishments (Huang & Lynch, 1999). The philosophical groundings of phenomenological philosophers, both traditional and contemporary, guide me into a space to think freely and understand phenomenological inquiry for myself. This guiding has created an environment that causes me to think more deeply about the African American female mentor experience. Using the work of philosophers including Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and David Michael Levin, in this chapter I transition into understanding the mentoring experience beyond the "how to" instructions so often incorporated in the voluminous literature on mentoring. Additionally, incorporating the voices of African American female scholars and feminists including Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks and Audre Lorde helps to illuminate further the experiences of African American female mentors.

Max van Manen's approach to human science research aligned with the philosophical groundings of foundational phenomenological philosophers further highlights the phenomenon of being African American women mentoring African American girls. Van Manen (1997) asserts, "There is a difference between comprehending the project of phenomenology intellectually and understanding it 'from the inside'" (p. 8). Exploring and connecting the various philosophical ideas with Black feminist thought helps me to understand phenomenological inquiry "from the inside" and explore the lived experiences of African American female mentors.

92

Since there is no one approach to phenomenological inquiry, and it is now limited in its understanding to a small group of specialists in Europe and North America (Moran, 2000), it is imperative that I have a competent understanding and grasp on this methodology to share my rationale for using this methodology and how it serves as the ideal choice when discussing African American female mentors and their lived experiences. Kant's (1784/1990) words, "Have courage to use your own reason!" (p. 83) extends this thought of putting my own understanding of the philosophical groundings boldly to use in my research experience. Mentors consistently make use of their own understanding while conversing, listening, caring and walking along side those who they guide into new experiences and understandings in life. The task of phenomenological inquiry is for the phenomenon "to show itself" (Heidegger, 1993a, p. 73), and with my own philosophical understanding, the lived experiences of African American female mentors become visible.

Phenomenology as Methodology: Husserl to Heidegger

Van Manen (1997) states, "Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 9). In other words, phenomenology seeks to find answers to meaning questions such as, *What does it mean to be an African American female mentor?* These meaning seeking questions take us back to "the things themselves," which was Edmund Husserl's project in phenomenological work. Husserl is known as the founder of phenomenology and heavily influenced the work of Martin Heidegger (Moran, 2000). Heidegger worked as Husserl's assistant for five years and began to criticize Husserl's main concern "of the realm of the theoretical" as opposed to "the engaged, lived moment in experience with its connection

with the world" (Moran, 2000, p. 205). Although Husserl acknowledges the significance of exploring human existence, he believes that "the suspension of concern with human existence and the world as they are experienced" (Schacht, 1972, p. 307) is necessary in order to truly engage in his perspective of phenomenological research. However, Heidegger's work is largely focused on our being-in-the-world with others, highlighting the exploration of human existence. Husserl's phenomenology was vastly different from Heidegger's, and as a result of his work, Heidegger is known as the philosopher who transformed phenomenology. Heidegger's philosophy is concerned with how we find ourselves in the world with others. More specifics about Heidegger's philosophy are shared later in this chapter, but my focus in the next section is to share my concerns with Heidegger's personal choices. I understand the relevance of his work and how I cannot ignore the use of his philosophy that highlights my existence with others when writing about mentoring, which is an inter-relational experience. In an attempt to understand Heidegger more fully with regard to the man and philosopher, I grapple with his choices and my own choice to incorporate his philosophy into my work.

Heidegger: (Un)silencing Concerns

The grappling that has taken place within me after discovering Heidegger's affiliation with the Nazi party has been indescribable. How could I, in good conscience, use the work of someone who was affiliated with a group most prominently known for their "genocide against the Jews that 'succeeded' in destroying two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe" (Lang, 1996, p. 3) when engaging in a study involving a historically oppressed group: African American women? As a member of this group, it was all the more challenging, and although my fellow phenomenologists and I discussed

94

this particular issue for weeks, there remained a discomfort in moving forward using

Heidegger's work. While reading about his life, I began to label Heidegger as an

opportunist, womanizer and even a double-minded individual who was unsure of who he

was, but within the labeling, I could not deny the contributions that Heidegger made to

the movement known as phenomenology. As a result of his work, I think about how I

find myself in the world with others. How do African American female mentors find

themselves in the world with others? The questions emanating from my engagement with

Heidegger caused me to reflect more on his choices and how I could build upon his work.

Heidegger's Silence Speaks Louder than Words

The most astounding revelation in reference to Heidegger's life and connection to

the Nazi party is his silence. Heidegger was silent about this choice which baffles some,

while I was intrigued by it. Did this silence stem from pride, shame or even privilege? As

Lang (1996) notes:

> To be sure, we face here the problem of ambiguity that confronts any
> interpretation of silence – in deciding whether the silence (once *that* is
> demonstrated) had been calculated and deliberate (it might, after all, reflect only
> indifference or ignorance) and, if it was, what that calculation was. For silence is
> no less multivalent, no less open to dispute, than words explicitly stated: the
> silence of horror registering the unspeakable as it mimics the silence of consent;
> the silence of conspiracy or of pleasure that may be as wordless as the silence of
> suffering. In still another guise (this has special relevance to Heidegger and the
> "Jewish Question"), silence may represent a decision not to say what else one
> would be obliged to say if one spoke at all – contrasted then with the silence or
> indifference or silence that attests only that the speaker who might have been
> heard knows too little to say anything about a particular subject; that reflection
> has, quite simply, been absent. And there can, of course, be other "personal"
> reasons bearing less on the particular occasion of silence than on the condition of
> the respondent; psychological causality does not necessarily replicate connections
> in the external world. (p. 15)

In agreement with Lang, we cannot dismiss any of the above reasons for Heidegger's

silence. Shame, pride or even a lack of remorse all cross my mind with Heidegger's

silence. Did he feel as though there was nothing to gain in sharing his reasoning, or did he think that his work should be the focus and not his personal life choice? With what has served as an informative distraction, reading about Heidegger's life choices made me think that this silence was manipulated and calculated as previously mentioned, but that is irrelevant. This point is irrelevant because by speaking for Heidegger's silence, I come upon the risk of misspeaking in the same manner that others have historically misspoken and presently misspeak on the behalf of African American women. What is more important for me is to think about is how this connects to my phenomenon and why this act of silence resonates with me in such a profound way.

With the option of only exploring possible explanations for Heidegger's silence, it became clear to me that he had a choice to be silent, but the context in which this has taken place is not to be ignored. Heidegger was a part of a group of German professors who served as the representatives for the Nazi party within the university communities (Safranski, 1998). This group, referred to as the "Working Community," was headed by a philosopher and education studies professor named Edward Krieck. This information is important to reference because Heidegger was not the only professor affiliated with the Nazi party, nor was he the leader of the organization moving the national socialist movement into universities. This leads me to think that support of Hitler and his politics was not uncommon among German professors. Additionally, even Jewish scholars supported Hitler and the movement towards Germany becoming a united country (Safranski, 1998). Within this context of a community of Hitler supporters, particularly within the university setting, the choice to become an advocate and supporter does not seem as poor of a choice as I have previously thought before considering the context.

There is reason to believe that these supporters of Hitler were not fully aware of his intentions, but supported what they thought was a vision of uniting Germany. However, even after examining the context in which Heidegger lived at the time of his choice, his refusal to address his affiliation with the Nazi Party is still a choice to remain silent from my perspective. What would it have meant for Heidegger to share why he made the decision? Would it have helped for Heidegger to share the many factors that led to his choice and how this, if at all, influenced his work? I think a response from Heidegger would have helped novice phenomenologists such as myself have a better understanding of not only this negative choice that can tend to overshadow his contributions, but also better understand his philosophical contributions and thoughts. Heidegger's silence speaks loudly in the freedom of choice that he had to be silent. Heidegger had a choice of silence, while African American women, on the other hand, have historically been silenced, while others have misspoken on our behalf. This dichotomous relationship is one of great significance when exploring the various interpretations of silence and what they mean in different contexts and scenarios.

　　　　Privilege to be silent. Heidegger was raised in a lower middle class family that was unable to afford more expensive higher education, so the privilege that I reference pertains to his success as professor and rector after many years of working towards that goal (Safranski, 1998). Coming from meager beginnings, Heidegger later found himself in a position of both privilege and power when he exhibited signs of being affiliated with the Nazi party, while abstaining from incorporating it into his teaching (Safranski, 1998). After years of being overlooked and continuously working to receive the rector position, Heidegger finally became rector as well as a highly influential philosopher. In this, he

97

held a place of privilege and power both socially and academically. Does Heidegger's silence stem from a weakness in his power? Two philosophers influenced by his work, Jean-Paul Sartre and Hannah Arendt, questioned his "weakness of character" (Moran, 2000, p. 192) when he did not disassociate himself from the Nazi party. This weakness in character is potentially reflected in his position of power. O'Donohue (1997) writes:

> Frequently people in power are not as strong as they might wish to appear. Many people who desperately hunger for power are weak. They seek power positions to compensate for their own fragility and vulnerability. A weak person in power can never be generous with power because they see questions or alternative possibilities as threatening their own supremacy and dominance. (p. 138)

Was the power that Heidegger longed for too much for him to handle once he had it? If O'Donohue's assertion about many people in power being fearful and weak applies to Heidegger, this could most certainly speak to his silence regarding what Lang (1996) calls "the Jewish Question."

Does this privilege align with Heidegger's philosophical contributions to the methodology that has called me to explore the lived experiences of African American female mentors? This question lingered in my mind while beginning to construct ideas on how I would articulate the philosophical ideas of phenomenologists to bring forth the experiences of African American female mentors. If this privilege serves as an influence on Heidegger's philosophical thoughts and assertions, it is imperative, that the contrast is made between being privileged and unprivileged. A continuous part of my grappling with the use of Heidegger's work extends into this notion of his privilege versus the unprivileged and marginalized place of African American women. Initially, I was funneled into the mental space of African American women, comparatively speaking, being marginalized when put in the same place as Heidegger, Gadamer and other White

male phenomenologists because, although these men are German, in American society whiteness has been "adopted as the norm," whereas individuals of color are viewed as different (Rothenberg, 2008, p. 2). Realizing that ending within this space of privilege and marginalization is limiting for me personally and for the lived experiences I desire to uncover, I move forward in this phenomenological journey which is a process that must be walked through and explored beyond the parameters of Heidegger's privilege.

Being silent versus being silenced. While moving beyond the limited scope of Heidegger's privilege, I found myself in a space of questioning Heidegger's silence. While pondering what Heidegger's silence means to me as a phenomenological researcher, it became evident that the silence experienced by both Heidegger and African American women had to be addressed. What does silence mean for Heidegger? What does silence mean for African American women? How does this silence *speak* to my use of Heidegger's work?

Heidegger (1993c) himself states:

The unspoken is not merely what is deprived of sound; rather, it is the unsaid, what is not yet shown, what has not yet appeared on the scene. Whatever has to remain unspoken will be held in reserve in the unsaid. It will linger in what is concealed as something unshowable. It is mystery. (p. 409)

Heidegger's silence is most certainly a mystery, since it remains unknown as to why he decided to keep quiet. Those unspoken words have lingered in my mind as I move forward in this phenomenological journey. Both the unspoken and the unsaid have collectively spoken loudly to me for the lived experiences of African American women. In Chapter Two, I addressed African American women's activism and resistance to dominant discourse through literary works using our own voices to express life from our perspective. The recognition of silence is a significant part of our history and not the

defining characteristic of who we are as African American women. Collins (2009) shares

that African American women being silenced was extended beyond mere voice and

associated with subordination. "Exclusion from positions of power within mainstream

institutions…has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interests and the

corresponding suppression of Black women's ideas and interests in traditional

scholarship. Moreover, this historical exclusion means that stereotypical images of Black

women permeate popular culture and public policy" (p. 7). What silence means for

African American women is multifaceted and is not an act of submission, but a force of

omission from the dominant discourse. This silence shapes false images of African

American women that can only be challenged and dispelled when our voices are heard.

> African American feminist and scholar Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) notes:
>
> …Black girls are not typically included in the conversations that shape our lives and destiny. In spite of everyday conversations Black women and girls have about who we are, what we endure, and the change necessary to creating a more just world, we are readily dismissed. Black women and girls are called out of their name. We are not invited, included, and heard even when we speak. Sometimes the conversations are explicitly about Black girls and women, and still no one thinks we should be there…All too often, for example, spaces dedicated to Black girls are constructed in ways (e.g., not having Black women and girls in leadership positions) that make the presence of Black women's and girls' bodies and intellects impossible, therefore missing critical opportunities to talk about the what, when, and why of either a memorable or a missed Black girlhood. (pp. 19-20)

African American women have been silenced and excluded from the conversations and

forums that shape who we are in this world, while simultaneously being wrongly

renamed by others in society. Unfortunately, there have been "critical opportunities" that

were missed, and this is where the significance of Heidegger's work emerges for the

exploration of the lived experiences of African American female mentors. It is ironic that

my being intrigued with Heidegger's silence uncovers this connection.

According to Gadamer (1975/2004), we are historical beings and actually belong to history because "long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live" (p. 278). The history of African American women has been one of marginalization and silence which leads to misrepresentation and it opens up the question of how this silence relates to our *being* in the world with others. Heidegger (1993b) states:

> But if man is to find his way once again into the nearness of Being he must first learn to exist in the nameless. In the same way he must recognize the seductions of the public realm as well as the impotence of the private. Before he speaks man must first let himself be claimed again by Being, taking the risk that under this claim, he will seldom have much to say. (p. 223)

Heidegger rejects this notion of naming and calls for an uncovering that does not just accept the names that are presented. The controlling images of African American women are a part of "the seductions of the public realm as well as the impotence of the private" and cannot be accepted as true. African American women have been in the space of the "nameless" and wrongly renamed within the silence. This silence "is a great silence that meets language; all words come out of silence. Words that have a depth, resonance, healing, and challenge to them are words loaded with ascetic silence" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 110). This "resonance, healing and challenge" comes from broken silence that poet Audre Lorde (1984/2007) knows "must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (p. 40).

Writing about being silenced, not only connects to African American women, but ironically connects to Heidegger as well. Heidegger was, in a sense, silenced when he was stripped of his teaching license and removed from his position in January 1946

101

(Safranski, 1998). Although there were claims that Heidegger was a secret opponent of the National Socialist movement for some time, he seemed to show no sense of guilt or remorse for his affiliation. According to Safranski:

> The situation as he [Heidegger] saw it, was this: he had for a short while, committed himself to the National Socialist revolution because he had regarded it as a metaphysical revolution. When it failed to live up to its promises-and what its promises to him had been he never accurately disclosed-he had withdrawn and pursued his philosophical work, unaffected by the party's approval or rejection…He believed that the road of his own thinking, which he had professed in public, had rehabilitated him. Hence he felt no guilt, neither in a legal sense nor probably even in a moral one. (pp. 337-338)

Heidegger felt that his thinking and that which he shared publicly was his form of therapy and rehabilitation for his association with the Nazi party. This opens up his choice to be silent, which from his perspective was not a choice at all, because he felt as though he shared what was necessary, although not sharing specifics about his choice. Being barred from university teaching silenced Heidegger from that which was important to him: teaching. It also impacted his being-in-the-world with others in a significant way. The way in which he existed with others changed after no longer having the opportunity to teach in the university setting. His work, his silence and his loss of that which was so important to him, serves as a stepping stone for my work.

Is a flawed gift really a gift? As an African American female that has been through my parent's divorce, formally educated in predominately White settings my entire life and continuously casting aside thoughts of inferiority, I have discovered the secret of using life's challenges to move towards my goals long ago. Similarly, bell hooks (1994) found herself faced with a challenge when introduced to Paulo Freire's (1993) work. Although liberating, the language in Freire's writing was sexist and served as a problem for hooks. She then came to the realization that "To have work that promotes

one's liberation is such a powerful gift that it does not matter so much if the gift is flawed" (p. 50). Heidegger's writing, although challenging and daunting at times, was not the problem. One of his life choices, being a card carrying member of the Nazi party for one year, however, presents him as flawed and challenged me in moving forward in this process. While having a strong desire to illuminate the voices of a historically oppressed group, of which I am a part of, I struggled with the use of Heidegger's work. As I read about his life, the silence that initially confused me served as the realization of the use of Heidegger's philosophical contributions. As an innovator in hermeneutic phenomenology and how we experience the world with others, Heidegger's philosophy helps to "uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience" (van Manen, 1997, p. 10) of African American female mentors.

In further exploration and dialogue with fellow phenomenologists, it became clear that this *problem* with Heidegger's political affiliation connects to the question hovering over African American identity: "How does it feel to be a problem" (DuBois, 1903/2003, p. 7)? How does the reality of African American women being silenced and viewed as a *problem* and Heidegger's problematic political affiliation link together? Gadamer (1975/2004) notes that starting with the problem is the issue itself. This does not mean to ignore the issues that arise, but instead bring voice to those problems. Internalizing inferiority, marginalization and invisibility is not something that can be solved overnight, but by bringing voice to the problem, there is recognition that "the problem as problematization needs interpretation" (Gordon, 1997, p. 78), and with the use of phenomenology, this can be addressed. This problem with Heidegger's work must also be addressed, but deciding not to start with the problem is key. What contributions has

103

Heidegger's work afforded me to explore the phenomenon of being an African American female mentor? Can his work in any way contribute to bringing voice to this lived experience? If yes, why would I deny the illumination of those experiences because of a stumbling block that has now been changed into a stepping stone?

While sitting in a recent dissertation defense, I realized that the question for most when using Heidegger's work shifts from a moral question of right versus wrong to an ethical question of, "is this right?" It is right to have a problem with Heidegger's affiliation with the Nazi party. As a result of this, it is also right to question the use of his work when exploring a particular phenomenon. But, is it *right* to dismiss his contributions, even though his work can be found in the writings of Gadamer, Levinas and Sartre, among other philosophers? Dismissing someone's intellectual contributions as a result of their life choices is irresponsible and would call for me to dismiss the wisdom and advice instilled in me by African American women including my mother, grandmother and mentors, who inspire this very work. I, myself, have made poor choices and been silent about these choices, because of shame, anger or simply because I did not want others to be aware of my mistakes. As a result of the poor choices, does my role as mentor to other African American females diminish? I would say no. Arguably, these choices have helped to shape me into the individual I have become. We all have issues that cause us to stumble, but whether or not we use them to grow is our choice.

Building upon the tradition of Heidegger's phenomenological approach I recognize that

> …if we cling to the dominant tradition, we are lost; but if we break away, we are in danger of losing touch with ancient traditions whose wisdom, long suppressed, might nevertheless now – even now – help to save us. A tradition can certainly be oppressive; it can stand in the way of growth, of life. But a retrieval of the

'origins' of that tradition can be emancipatory, a source of strength. How, then, can we take over the deeper, more concealed truth of our tradition? How can its ancient resources still be handed down in a meaningful and fruitful way? (Levin, 1985, p. 3)

Will I allow the choices in this traditional phenomenologist's life to impede growth, or will I use his traditional work as a source of strength? This is a way for those traditional ideas and contributions to be used in a fruitful and insightful way. In no way am I excusing Heidegger's choice or his silence on the matter, but I am, however, accepting the flawed gift, and since "there are so many silences to be broken" (1984/2007, p. 44) in the lives of African American women, I will do my part.

Why Phenomenology?: Going in Circles with the Process of Opening up My Research

Being in my field of minority and urban education, I repeatedly read about marginalization, inequitable learning opportunities, disparities in achievement and a plethora of other discouraging topics. One of the most inviting aspects of phenomenology is realizing that all experiences are important. Outliers, underachievers, low-income, gifted and talented, wealthy – all experiences are significant. According to van Manen (1997), "Phenomenology always addresses any phenomenon as a *possible human experience*. It is in this sense that phenomenological descriptions have a universal (intersubjective) character" (p. 58). In other words, regardless of your place in life, your experience is possible for others and deserves exploration that brings forth meaningful renderings and themes that can be understood by all human beings.

With the mentoring experience, I know that this is a reciprocal relationship and one that operates as a continuous circle of giving and receiving, learning and teaching, speaking and listening. Without this circle of understanding and relating, the mentoring

relationship is impartial and strained. Although, according to the Greek *Mentor*, a mentor is a wise advisor, I know that I have learned from my mentees as well as they have learned from me. This is immeasurable, so I cannot say that our experiences are equal in measure, but they are both important and lasting shared experiences. In my experience as a mentor, I have found that the circle must remain unbroken. Inevitably, there are times when the circle will break and we find an unwelcomed space in the relationship that reveals itself as emptiness. *Tao Mentoring* reminds me that "Without the emptiness between mentor and mentee, there is no sharing. The emptiness enables us to learn enough – to get filled, as it were – only to empty out once again in the learn-teach-learn cycle of Tao" (Huang & Lynch, 1999, p. 7).

This unwelcomed space, in the past, has helped me to learn something about myself as an individual and a mentor. With Yasmine, one of my teenage mentees, we have a close relationship that continues to develop through the openness and reciprocity presented in our time spent together and engaging conversations. When Yasmine shared with me her concerns about going to college, I was there to give of my time and attentive listening. Although an honor roll student in high school, Yasmine worried about being able to balance the academic and social aspects of college while living away from the safe haven of her parents. In return for the time and listening she received, Yasmine gave of herself by being open and vulnerable enough to share with me her own feelings of being unsure and concerned about her ability to focus in school. After listening, I shared with Yasmine some of my own coping mechanisms for academic success. After informing Yasmine that I had been through remedial courses, community college and initially did not have a desire to attend a higher education institution, she had more

insight into my personal experiences, and this was just another trip around that

continuous circle. From this, I have learned that in order to be a mentor, there must be

openness. The openness shown in the mentoring relationship with Yasmine helps me to

be more open in other relationships which have a critical role in life's journey.

Circularity is imperative in the mentoring experience, but also in every individual

being. When writing about the Celtic wisdom, O'Donohue (1997) shares:

> The Celtic mind was never drawn to the single line; it avoided ways of seeing and
> being that seek satisfaction in certainty. The Celtic mind had a wonderful respect
> for the mystery of the circle and the spiral. The circle is one of the oldest and most
> powerful symbols. The world is a circle; the sun and the moon are too. Even time
> itself has a circular nature; the day and the year build to a circle. At its most
> intimate level so is the life of each individual. The circle never gives itself
> completely to the eye or the mind but offers a trusting hospitality to that which is
> complex and mysterious; it embraces depth and height together. (p. 79)

Why the effective mentoring experience works in this way, I am unsure. This is a part of

that complexity and mystery that O'Donohue refers to in his work. There is a *trusting

hospitality* that becomes a meaningful part of life, and in particular, the life of an African

American female mentor.

I have found, that in many cases, the mentor relationship is reciprocal (Eby,

Rhodes & Allen, 2010; Haggard, Dougherty, Turban & Wilbanks, 2011; Rhodes, 2002).

In this reciprocity, there is opportunity for both mentors and mentees to tell their stories,

as well as be fully themselves, displaying vulnerability and openness (Wicks, 2000).

Although some believe that mentoring is asymmetrical (Eby, Rhodes & Allen, 2010), the

mentoring relationship changes once viewed within the context of a circle. Bolen (1999)

shares, "The circle is a principle as well as a shape. It goes counter to the social order,

pecking order, superior/inferior, ranking order" (p. 39). This is why the circle metaphor is

so significant in reference to mentoring relationships. Yes, it is not to be ignored that

when an African American female adult is working with African American female youth, she most likely has more life experience to offer to the mentee, but this should not establish the relationship as hierarchical or one-sided in providing wisdom. Since "Being in a circle is a learning and growing experience that draws upon the wisdom and experience, commitment and courage of each one in it" (Bolen, p. 15), it is imperative that both mentor and mentee are recognized as teachers and students.

In *The Good Teacher Mentor* by Trubowitz and Robins (2003), Sid and Maureen were assigned to work together as mentor and mentee during Maureen's first year as a classroom teacher. Over the school year, their relationship grew because the vulnerability and openness from both Sid and Maureen provided a space for the circular, reciprocal nature of mentoring. Maureen shares:

> Our relationship grew over time. Sid's nonjudgmental and supportive attitude encouraged me to let go of my steel layers of first-year protection. Even though I had known Sid previously through my work as an intern, I had not worked with him so intimately. I found that as we continued to work together, trust between us developed. During those first observations I felt like a performer – and perhaps all the way through the lessons that failed. His response of encouragement and support reassured me that I did not have to prove my worth to him and that it was important to keep my head about things, to remember above all my own common sense. (p. 104)

Through Sid's support and approach, Maureen was willing to open up, shifting from performer to teacher, and this caused the pair to grow closer, resulting in Maureen becoming a much more confident and focused teacher. Sid, as a mentor, epitomized what Wicks (2000) shares as one of his lessons in mentoring, "Be fully yourself (a passionate presence), and be practical, listen carefully, help seek greater clarity, and share your own wisdom and experience" (p. 56). This is just one example of the many exchanges that build upon the continuous interactions in a reciprocal mentoring relationship.

108

Phenomenology speaks to the circularity of mentoring, from my perspective, in the following four areas: relationships, care, conversations and identity. With phenomenological philosophy meeting Black feminist insights, married to van Manen's description of human science research, phenomenology sheds a necessary light on the lived experiences of African American female mentors.

The Circle of Relationships

> In the relation of one person to another person, goodness is possible. (Levinas, 1999, p. 107)

Levinas (1999) writes about encountering other human beings and how not interacting with others is ultimately insufficient. Morevoer, while engaging in relationships with others, Levinas expresses his discomfort with reciprocity. He shares, "The concept of reciprocity bothered me, because the moment one is generous in hopes of reciprocity, that relation no longer involves generosity but the commercial relation, the exchange of good behavior" (p. 101). Throughout this particular study, I have presented the concept of reciprocity and argued that meaningful mentoring relationships are reciprocal. The question becomes, is reciprocity genuine in relationships? Levinas is uncomfortable with the notion of reciprocity because there is room for a disingenuous expectation. Levinas instead feels that "When you have encountered a human being, you cannot drop him" (p. 106). This sense of responsibility comes from the interaction, not out of guilt or expected gratitude. Based upon the shared experiences of African American female mentors, this is their approach (Patton, 2009). Within Black feminist literature, helping or supporting one another was done out of communal care and responsibility (Collins, 2009).

Effective mentoring relationships do not occur without a relationship being built between the mentor and mentee. The word, relation, from the Latin *relationem* means a bringing back, restoring. What is being brought back to mentors and mentees in their relationships? What is being restored through the mentoring experience with African American females? Where are the stories of these relationships among African American women found? By exploring Heidegger's notion of being-with others in the world, recognizing the role of community in African American relationships while using African American literary works and educational research on mentoring, the circle of relationships among African American female mentors will be better understood.

Being-with is within being. Heidegger's (1962) philosophical contributions include his take on being in the world with others. He writes about being-with others in the world and how "the world is always the one I share with others" (p. 118). Levinas' (1999) notion of an insufficient world without others is closely aligned with Heidegger's concept of being-with. Levinas states, "The human will pass through another decisive step, in which the subject, despite its satisfaction, fails to be sufficient unto itself" (p. 99). A part of being with others and building relationships in the African American community is about community itself. African American women have historically created their own communities or safe spaces to share ideas and engage in intellectual conversations since they were omitted from the dominant discourse taking place in educational institutions, media and popular culture (Collins, 2009).

In *Welcoming Spirit Home: Ancient African Teachings to Celebrate Children and Community*, Somé (1999) shares the significance of community. Somé states, "A community is an environment where you can find a home in each other's heart and soul"

110

(p. 27). This definition of community is vastly different from the sense of community as simply a neighborhood where people live. With Somé's definition, community is about personal engagement and space to build meaningful relationships.

Similarly, Brown (2009) writes about the significance of community when working with Black girls. She recognizes, "Community making is continually contested terrain" (p. 21), but necessary, nevertheless, in order to build meaningful and lasting relationships. Brown's organization, *Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths* (SOLHOT) is more than an after-school program, but a space where Black girls can embrace who they are as individuals. This comes with understanding that community making and building includes meaningful relationships and connections in spaces where, "Each person has a gift to give, a contribution to make to the whole. The kind of gift a person brings, the kind of being a person is, is very unique to him or her and is valued by the community" (Somé, 1999, p. 32).

In relationships among African American women, community has been formed in person and through the fictional texts of prolific writers, sharing the lived experiences of African American women. The literary influence of relationships among African American women has traveled through time continuously providing multiple experiences of African American female relationships.

(Non)fictional relationships. Collins (2009) emphasizes the significant role of African American woman's fiction in understanding both the shared recognition and complexity of those relationships. She writes that "This shared recognition often operates among African-American women who do not know one another but who see the need to value Black womanhood" (p. 113). In reference to the complexities, various fictional

111

works written by African American women explore the friendships, family dynamics and sexual relationships which can range from affirming to detrimental in the lives of the characters. In Toni Morrison's (1973/1982) *Sula*, Terry McMillan's (1992/2005) *Waiting to Exhale,* and Jacqueline Woodson's (1991) *The Dear One*, there is a sense of shared recognition among the African American female characters, as well as complexity within their relationships.

In *Sula*, both Sula and Nel found what they needed in one another as childhood friends, with challenging family lives.

> So when they met, first in the chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (Morrison, 1973/1982, p. 52)

Throughout the complexities of separation, tragedy, betrayal and death, Sula and Nel recognized the sameness within their differences as adults and had an admiration for one another disguised by a lack of understanding for the other's life choices.

Waiting to Exhale highlights the lives of four African American friends, Savannah, Bernadine, Robin and Gloria, who find solace in their friendships while they each deal with relational, familial, financial and physical struggles. As Bernadine's divorce is finalized and she is informed about her settlement of almost half a million dollars, she contacts her friends and thinks about their shared joy in the process:

> After she hung up, Bernadine knew her girlfriends were just as elated about her settlement as she was. She could hear it in their voices. Hell, they'd been waiting as long as she had. Now it seemed as if they'd *all* won the lottery. And as far as Bernadine was concerned, they had. (McMillan, 1992/2005, p. 513)

112

As friends who had been with her throughout the divorce proceedings, Bernie knew that each of them had shared her pains and would now share this joy with her.

Jacqueline Woodson (1991) writes about a pregnant fifteen year old named Rebecca and her new twelve year old roommate, Afeni, in *The Dear One*. Afeni did not welcome Rebecca into her home, and initially they were not friends, but soon they both began to view their differences as an opportunity to learn from one another. Afeni realizes the change that Rebecca has made in her life and others around her:

> My grandmother once told me that all it takes is for one tiny thing to happen and then, Boom! your life is changed forever. That's what I'm trying to remember now – the one tiny thing. The thing that might have happened to Rebecca before she came, the thing that happened to me after she was here. Because by the time she left, we were different people, all of us – her, me, Ma – even Marion. (p. 2)

Afeni and Rebecca had a shared recognition of what it meant to be an African American female youth and how their experiences can differ, while maintaining similarities.

These fictional works, though realistic, are fiction. How does this relate to relationships among African American female mentors and mentees? These fictional works are closely related because within the African American female mentoring experience, there is a sense of shared recognition and complexity as well. In mentoring experiences of African American females in graduate school and those who are now professors in the academy, there are four themes that highlight the relational aspect of mentoring, specific to African American women: (1) familial relationships, (2) cultural relevance, (3) enlightened aspirations and (4) a sense of responsibility.

As noted in Chapter Two, mentoring in the African American community is closely linked to familial relationships. While being mentored by African American female mentors, African American female graduate students "felt their mentoring

relationship resembled that of a mother and daughter" and shared "these maternal

mentoring relationships consisted of nurturing, care, concern, worry, and honesty"

(Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 71). There was emotional support within these relationships

that helped to prepare mentees for the professional world. Upon reflection of their

experience as mentees, mentors also have this desire or need for a familial connection,

which in turn, helps them to navigate their way through the tenure process. One mentor

shares:

> Had I experienced the type of sistering and networking from other African-American women professors, many things would have been different for me. I would have been less confused about the culture and I might have felt less isolated. Although I have received professional assistance, *personal* assistance from African-American women to negotiate race and gender bias, while surviving in the midst of the tenure process would have been most helpful to me. (Grant & Simmons, 2008, p. 509)

Both mentors and mentees desire the familial aspect of mentoring in their relationships

with other African American women. This can take form of one-on-one mothering, or in

a group setting more connected to sisterly bonding. The familial aspect of mentoring

among African American women connects to the significance of cultural relevance in

those relationships.

Participants in Patton and Harper's (2003) study shared that culture was

significant in a mentoring relationship. The mentees felt that an African American

woman would understand and relate to their experiences better and provide a space for

openness and vulnerability that would not be misconstrued as weakness. While

interviewing eight African American female graduate students, Patton (2009) discovered

that cultural relevance was partially found in identifying with someone of the same race

who "looked like" (p. 523) them. There was also this deeper understanding of the

challenges and stereotypes that African American students are faced with, particularly on a predominantly White campus. African American female mentees also felt that their mentors "kept it real" (p. 524) and confronted the tough topics and issues that otherwise might not have been explored or discussed. Within these relationships there was an example of what each mentee could possibly become right in front of them and this heightened their own personal aspirations.

In the eyes of African American female mentees, their African American female mentors were also role models. These relationships provided them with access to individuals who were already where they desired to be in the future, and this "opened up new possibilities of the reality of professional advancement…and is important to see" (Grant & Simmons, 2008, p. 507). Reading about those you admire and even attending their presentations is far different from having your own personal relationship with them to experience first-hand their expertise and example. As role models, African American female mentors inspired their mentees not only professionally, but personally as well. The desire to mentor others stemmed from their own engagement with effective mentors.

African American female mentees felt a sense of responsibility to give back and guide others since this had been done for them (Patton & Harper, 2003; Patton, 2009). This sense of responsibility is a part of the circle of mentoring and the circle of relationships among African American women. The mentees in these studies not only credited their professional mentors for this desire to mentor others, but also their own family members. The challenges they faced while making their way through graduate school inspired them to help others in their own communities. This is a continuous cycle

of care and responsibility that keeps mentees humble and grounded while helping others to accomplish their goals (Patton, 2009).

Both the fictional relationships among African American women shared by award-winning African American female writers, and the nonfictional mentoring experiences shared among African American female mentors and mentees, shed light on the shared recognition and complexities in those relationships. We know that there is no one particular relationship among African American females, and there is sameness within their differences that can be explored in the space of a mentoring relationship.

The Circle of Care

> Caring, as helping another grow and actualize himself, is a process, a way of relating to someone that involves development, in the same way that friendship can only emerge in time through mutual trust and a deepening and qualitative transformation of the relationship. (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 1)

Caring is a process that is much broader than sharing feelings, hoping the best for someone and speaking encouraging words. Heidegger recognizes care as concern for others and a movement in life that is continuous and a part of our existence here in this world (Heidegger, 1993b). Both Heidegger and Mayeroff's interpretation of care as a process, much like phenomenology, is a process of discovery and growth. As a mentor, one of my goals is that the girls I build relationships with grow academically and personally, while being empowered to achieve their own personal goals along the journey of self-discovery. Noddings (1984) asserts that care is a shift in motivations and provides service to others. This type of care comes with challenges, and the process is not always smooth and enjoyable, but there is a level of commitment in care that far exceeds my own desires that push me into a place of care.

According to Casey (2009), "To be is to be in place" (p. 14) and "place is not something I have, as if it were a possession. Rather I am in-place because of the way I relate to others. And place must be continually renewed and reaffirmed; it is not assured once and for all, for it is our response to the need of others to grow which gives us place" (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 40). Being in this place of care is a part of my existence as an African American female mentor and provides a space in which there is development on the part of both myself and my mentees. This is an ongoing and continual process, contingent upon how I exist in the world with others.

Care, from the Old English, *carian*, means to be anxious, grieve; to feel concern or interest. There is an anxiety when you care for someone and a genuine feeling of concern for their existence. According to Heidegger (1962), "Because Being-in-the-world is essentially care, Being-alongside the ready-to-hand could be taken in our previous analyses as *concern,* and Being with the Dasein-with of Others as we encounter it within-the-world could be taken as *solicitude*" (p. 193). Concern and solicitude differ in that, concern is more for "the cares of this world" (Dreyfus, 1995, p. 239), while solicitude is connected to our relationships with people. This is where the place of care and the mentoring role can become uncomfortable and challenging. The mutual trust among individuals in a circle of care is inevitable, particularly when caring for others and caring for oneself.

Care for self. "You cannot love anyone else if you do not love yourself," is a statement that my mother often makes. Usually this statement is preceded with a conversation about recognizing your own self worth and knowing that you deserve to love and be loved in return. Similarly, how can I sincerely care about someone else

117

without first caring for myself? Basically, I must first identify care and have an understanding of it with myself before I can provide that care to someone else. To care is an interesting notion since it is important to care for myself, but that self care really can only be fulfilled when caring for others. Mayeroff (1971) recognizes, "I can only fulfill myself by serving someone or something apart from myself, and if I am unable to care for anyone or anything separate from me, I am unable to care for myself" (p. 35). Aligned with this is Noddings' (1984) perspective on self care, since "caring for self, for the *ethical* self, can emerge only from a caring for others" (p. 14). There is an iterate echo of genuine care being connected to caring for others. The absence of caring for someone else ultimately means that you do not care for yourself. A shallow level of care is not the focus here; instead there is a level of commitment that extends beyond observable acts that represents genuine care (Noddings, 1984).

As noted in Chapter Two, care from the African American perspective is communal (Walker & Snarey, 2004) and connects to the mentoring experience. As a mentor, this makes complete sense because my care for my own successes, accomplishments and place in the world compels me to engage in the process of care with others. The care that exists between my mentees and I is not there for my own pleasure and betterment, but for them. In my interactions with my mentors, this has been the experience. There has never been a desire to seek recognition or glory for any of their accomplishments and milestones. The joy I experience comes from a place of care.

Care for others. While engaged in self care, it is inevitable that I care for others. What does this care for others mean? What does this care look like? How does one know that they are engaged in genuine care? According to Mayeroff (1971),

To care for another person, I must be able to understand him and his world as if I were inside it. I must be able to see, as it were, with his eyes what his world is like to him and how he sees himself. Instead of merely looking at him in a detached way from outside, as if he were a specimen, I must be able to be *with* him in his world, "going" into his world in order to sense from "inside" what life is like for him, what he is striving to be, and what he requires to grow. But only because I understand and respond to my own needs to grow can I understand his striving to grow; I can understand in another only what I can understand in myself. (pp. 30-31)

The circularity of care is present since one can only provide to others that which they themselves understand. Being with others in the world and understanding who they are from the inside is intertwined with phenomenological inquiry and the desire to explore lived experience from the inside (van Manen, 1997). Going into the world of another person is engrossment, rather than empathy. According to Noddings (1984), instead of attempting to put myself in another person's shoes, I instead "receive the other to myself, and I see and feel with the other. I become a duality" (p. 30). This receptivity is a result of being emotionally "invaded" by someone else and now care is inevitable. This invasion connects to meaningful relationships, and in mentoring relationships, there occurs an interconnectedness that supports growth. Not to be confused with co-dependency, this interconnectedness benefits both individuals involved in a mentoring relationship.

The Circle of Language

One of the most troubling aspects of conducting educational research has been this notion of me being the researcher: outsider, superior in some sense to the participants. Pursuing a doctoral degree has often times placed me in an awkward position. While others view their congratulatory and pride-filled comments as encouraging, I can sometimes view them as placing me in this position of outsider. The

119

privilege of working towards receiving an advanced degree can give some the impression that I am "above" others, which I never want to adhere to and of which I completely disagree. Not allowing my positionality as a researcher to impede my interactions with participants has always been significant.

The notion of superiority in research stems from my prior limited scope of educational research and how it is conducted. Having learned that people come to understanding in a number of ways releases the pressure of being in the position of researcher. Different epistemic commitments highlight the discovery of meaning (objectivism), construction of meaning (constructionism) and even meaning that is within the individual, and in turn, imposed on the world (subjectivism) (Crotty, 1998). Fortunately, phenomenology positions me to co-construct knowledge with the participants and engage in meaningful conversations, instead of mere questioning.

Throughout courses and discussions referring to various qualitative approaches to research, I continued to feel uneasy about conducting interviews and questioning in a way that felt inauthentic. While interviewing individuals, there were a list of questions in front of me, and these questions were limiting and distracting. Without really listening to the responses, I was already onto the next question. How does this approach to research limit the information shared? What does a phenomenological approach offer to the research process when seeking information from participants? With Gadamer's (1975/2004) approach to conversation, I was not in a position to guide or lead the conversation, but to allow it to take me where I need to be. Since conversation "creates a sense or 'sphere' of living together in a shared world" (Li, as cited in van Manen, 2005, p. 88), I do not want

to interview African American female mentors; I want to engage in conversations with them.

Genuine conversation. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1975/2004) explicitly and eloquently emphasizes the significance of language in the hermeneutic experience. He understands that individuals have their own perspective, and within their experiences, they have their own interpretation of language. Gadamer begins the section on language and hermeneutics explaining the true form of a conversation. How similar this is to the phenomenological journey I find myself a part of; conversation is itself a journey and process that cannot be predetermined.

> We say that we "conduct" a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will "come out" of a conversation…All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it – i.e., that it allows something to "emerge" which henceforth exists. (p. 385)

As mentioned earlier, African American females have been excluded from conversations about their own lives and identities. Entering into a Gadamerian form of conversation is imperative for African American female mentors, as this provides a space that is not predetermined, but instead allows for anything to emerge. The twists in the conversation can be the very thing we need to uncover and understand a particular experience better, but without the liberty of allowing the conversation to take its course, we would miss fundamental pieces of lived experience that would never evolve in guided or "constructed" conversations. Furthermore, in the process of genuine conversation,

121

there is an opening up among those involved and this directly connects to the circle that is a part of each individual being. This openness allows for understanding and engagement beyond the mere surface of a topic or objective.

Prior to moving beyond the surface and into the deep, we must recognize that "the art of conversation is ensuring that the other person is with us" (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 360). What does it mean for one to be "with us"? Interestingly enough, *with* from the Old English *wio* means "against, opposite, toward." This is very interesting since Gadamer mentions the argumentative stance that we can take in inauthentic conversations. With our focus on the "art of arguing," we miss the "art of thinking" (p. 361). In Middle English the meaning for *with* shifted to "association, combination and union" which is the definition we are more familiar with in today's society. For someone to be *with us* in conversation, it means that there is a union of understanding, although our opinions may differ. We are now more concerned with the art of thinking about the varying perspectives, experiences and opinions rather than seeking to find points of dissension.

In addressing the circularity of language and genuine conversation, it is imperative that the hermeneutic circle is included. Genuine conversation and the circle of language is about understanding others and remaining open to their ideas and opinions. This stems from the hermeneutic circle itself, which according to Gadamer (1975/2004) is "fundamental to all understanding" (p. 294). According to Heidegger (1962), "In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing" (p. 195). In other words, within the hermeneutic circle is where a particular type of knowledge begins to reveal itself. The hermeneutic circle is about recognizing our own perspectives, opinions and limitations within text and conversation, as well as, remaining open to the

interpretations of others. You approach both text and conversations projecting your own interpretation, but within the hermeneutic circle, you remain open to the other projections which are present as well. Human understanding occurs in a circular nature (Bontekoe, 1996; Debessay, Nåden & Slettebø, 2008; Gadmaer, 1975/2004; Heidegger, 1962), since we are constantly developing new knowledge through our interactions with others and our experiences in the world. We operate in understanding through whole and parts: parts signify details in reference to the whole text or conversation, whereas without those details we could not fully grasp the whole. In other words, in the circular nature of understanding others, we engage in conversation and consider the many components that create the whole person or situation, while also considering the whole.

In the case of African American female mentors, solely exploring this phenomenon through the lens of Black feminist theory would only be a part and would not allow me to examine the whole phenomenon. Bontekoe (1996) shares that the journey in hermeneutic inquiry is an integrative process that continues to reveal new knowledge and information:

> Given that the hermeneutic circle involves the constant bringing to bear of new information upon the object of inquiry, and the integration of that information into increasingly adequate interpretations of the object, hermeneutical inquiry has no natural resting place, no point at which it can suspend its operations with a sense of the job well and thoroughly done, short of an understanding of the entire world, and of the entire world, moreover, as an *integrated* world. (p. 10)

Let the journey continue in genuine conversation, which reveals new information and knowledge around the lived experiences of African American female mentors.

Beyond the surface. According to Huang and Lynch (1999), in meaningful mentoring relationships, Tao mentors must move beyond mere weekly meetings and obligatory commitments into a deeper and more fulfilling mentoring relationship that "is

open, compassionate, and caring, and it exudes passion and inspiration for personal growth" (p. 17). How can you reach this point without moving beyond the surface in genuine conversation? One of the unique elements of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry is getting *behind* that which is spoken. I often say that I take what people say at "face value," and as straightforward as that sounds, it is simply not true. My interpretation of the words spoken by anyone hinders this notion of purely taking their words as they may interpret them. I have my own interpretation of that which is spoken. As a result of our own interpretations and horizons of language, it is imperative that "a person who wants to understand must question what lies behind what is said. He must understand it as an answer to a question. If we go back *behind* what is said, then we inevitably ask questions *beyond* what is said" (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 363). In other words, we continue to dig deeper and gain more insight into lived experience when we look behind the answers to a question. In human science research, "Every questioning is a seeking" (Heidegger, 1993a, p. 45). Behind the questioning, we seek to find unknown answers as the conversation guides us. Allowing one to speak in genuine conversation leads to more opportunities to get behind statements that are made, and they have the opportunity to elaborate beyond what the question ever intended.

You heard me, but are you listening? Engagement in genuine conversation includes both hearing and listening. Being mentored, it is always important that my mentors both hear me, with their ears, but listen to me, with their hearts and emotions. As a mentor, I know that doing both provides for a balance that will allow me to give meaningful advice without being overwhelmed with opinions and flooded with emotions that can lead to irrational discourse. Without an opportunity to hear and listen, genuine

conversation is absent. There is uniqueness in hearing that Gadamer (1975/2004)

promotes in his writing:

> When you look at something, you can also look away from it by looking in another direction, but you cannot "hear away." This difference between seeing and hearing is important for us because the primacy of hearing is the basis of hermeneutical phenomenon…Whereas all the other senses have no immediate share in the universality of the verbal experience of the world, but only offer the key to their own specific fields, hearing is an avenue to the whole because it is able to listen to the logos. (p. 458)

The unique position of hearing is imperative in genuine conversation for the

openness and development of understanding among all people included. Gadamer writes

that hearing has the ability to *listen* to the logos. Listening, although used interchangeably

with hearing, is different. Hearing is one of the senses that most of us have as human

beings, but listening is a special way to approach not only conversation, but life and

relationships. Heidegger (1962) recognizes that "Being-with develops in listening to one

another" (p. 163). Similarly, when listening in the context of students, Schultz (2003)

asserts, "Listening is fundamentally about being in relationship to another and through

this relationship supporting change or transformation" (p. 9).

The poet, Rumi (1999), writes about a particular type of listening that should be

incorporated into our lives more often. This listening is deep and goes beyond what we

hear with our ears, but penetrates the heart and spirit.

Listening

> What is deep listening? *Sama* is
> a greeting from the secret ones inside
>
> the heart, a letter. The branches of
> your intelligence grow new leaves in
>
> the wind of this listening. The body
> reaches a peace. Rooster sound comes,

125

reminding you of your love for dawn.
The red flute and the singer's lips:

the knack of how spirit breathes into
us becomes as simple and ordinary as

eating and drinking. The dead rise with
the pleasure of listening. If someone

can't hear a trumpet melody, sprinkle
dirt on his head and declare him dead.
Listen, and feel the beauty of your
separation, the unsayable absence.

There's a moon inside every human being.
Learn to be companions with it. Give

more of your life to this listening. As
brightness is to time, so you are to

the one who talks to the deep ear in
your chest. I should sell my tongue

and buy a thousand ears when that
one steps near and begins to speak. (p. 90)

Rumi's words remind us that deep listening can result in peace, pleasure and a new

recognition of what each human being has to offer in what is shared. "The unsayable

absence" can be clearly heard with deep listening which does not ignore or overlook our

differences, but instead allows us to see the beauty in them.

    Similarly, in education, Lisa Delpit (1995) writes about the silenced dialogue

plaguing educators of different backgrounds, and she calls for a solution that can only

come with a special kind of listening:

> To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only
> open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our
> eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold
> is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment-and that is not easy. It is painful as
> well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up on your own sense of

who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (pp. 46-47)

This is a universal approach to listening that has the ability to work beyond the classroom and academic setting. Similar to Delpit's special listening, Levin (1989) notes that reaching the highest level of listening is achieved only "by cultivating our capacity for feeling and restoring the connection between feeling and listening" (p. 219). In other words, listening cannot be disconnected from our own body and emotions. Listening in this fashion would help to allow African American female mentors to converse about their lived experiences in an open and uninhibited way, and also allow a space for African American women to name correctly who they are based upon their own voices being heard.

Moreover, in mentoring, listening is imperative and there should not be a fear that our lack of listening will damage that relationship. Levin (1989) states that "No matter how painful it may be, no matter how threatening to our ego, no matter how demanding on our capacity to care and be compassionate" (p. 85), listening is necessary in our relationships and interactions with others. Disagreements continue to arise in conversation when "unflattering light" is shone upon particular people, but this is necessary to move beyond the shallow waters of dialogue. This type of listening extends beyond a sound or murmur in our ears to a place where we recognize our own beliefs, positions and biases when engaged in conversation. Having the ability to listen to someone's beliefs is strongly related to getting behind the words that are spoken. This is another level within the power of language and how it plays a significant role in opening up human experience.

The Circle of Identity

> Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even with the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America [sic], we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson – that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, Black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 42)

The word "identity" comes from the Middle French *identité*, which means sameness, oneness. Although our identities are unique and individual, there is a sameness about how we identify with one another. Lorde writes about the visibility and invisibility of African American women. This unfortunate experience of being visible, yet invisible at the same time, is not only an experience of African American women. Individuals of different races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations and socioeconomic classes might often be able to connect to this space of visibility/invisibility. The point is, Lorde writes this as an African American women, and I read this as an African American women. My race and gender will not change, but I know that there is sameness within the differences I share with others.

Speaking to male educators in a predominantly female career field, listening to the testimonials of Latina female professors in the White male-dominated professoriate, and reading the stories of students and teachers in *Other People's Children*, remind me of the sameness within our differences. This is not to say that everyone has the same experience or can fully relate to the experience of others, but this is to recognize the importance of identity and the relevance in noting that all human beings have deep, lived experiences (van Manen, 1997). Heidegger (1969) notes:

The formula A=A speaks of equality. It doesn't define A as the same. The common formulation of the principle of identity thus conceals precisely what the principle is trying to say: A is A, that is, every A is itself the same…Sameness implies the relation of "with," that is, a mediation, a connection, a synthesis: the unification into a unity. (pp. 24-25)

Sameness means a connection among human beings, but we are not identical beings. Basically, there is sameness in difference. The sameness within our differences is a part of our circle of identity. This circle of identity is unending, and within this circle we can find some form of sameness and oneness among all beings. As human beings, there is an instant oneness. Other identifiers such as gender, race, sexual orientation and class also help to shape our identities and connect us to others, while differentiating us from the rest. In Eddy's (2008) research on the complexities of being a gay male, he asserts, "Dis-covering identity is really about discovering difference on the way to self" (p. 185). As we journey throughout our lives, we discover differences about ourselves which make us unique and help to shape who we are as individuals.

The identity of the African American female mentor uncovers significant aspects of their lived experiences that are necessary in order to gain rich and deep insight into how this phenomenon contributes to the education of youth and growth of communities. Moreover, the unique identity of African American women has often been overlooked in our society. Hooks (1981) shares:

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group of "women" in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white* women. (p. 7)

Having your identity "socialized out of existence" leads to a displacement and misunderstanding of who you are and with the opportunity to share how your identity is uniquely similar, yet, vastly different from others who exist in the same society with you. This is an opportunity that cannot be dismissed. Your identity, how you identify sameness or oneness with others, is inextricably linked with mentoring and building meaningful relationships. In their mentoring relationship, Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) noticed, "Our identities as African American women enhanced our ability to relate to each other, and it added to the soulfulness and nature of our collaboration" (p. 237). Yes, the differences I notice in my mentors have been points of growth in our relationship, but to get to the recognition of differences, I first bonded with them through the sameness we share as African American women with similar interests, beliefs and goals. The sameness of our identities first solidified the mentoring relationship and often sustained that relationship through various transitions. As I have often heard many people say, "I am who I am," but in order to understand what that means, it is necessary to get behind the words, as Gadamer (1975/2004) promotes, as I seek out the identity of African American female mentors. Only they can genuinely share themselves, not others on their behalf.

Seeing oneself in the mirror. Mentoring is about guiding, supporting and encouraging another individual. When mentors have this role confused, they might think that it is their responsibility to make carbon copies of themselves in their mentees. This is ineffective, since as Gadamer (1975/2004) states, "A copy tries to be nothing but the reproduction of something and has its only function in identifying it" (p. 133). A copy always identifies the original and does not serve any purpose outside of this. Genuine mentoring is about preparing someone to embrace who they are and have them look into

130

the mirror, mentioned in Chapter One, provided by mentors in order to understand that the image staring back at them is that with which they have to work.

Mentees begin to embrace their own individual identities as a result of an authentic mentoring relationship. The African American female mentors in my life have helped me to accept who I am, and my journey has been far from theirs, although there have been similar experiences along the way. To merely emulate what they continue to do and have done would be inauthentic and a missed opportunity within the mentoring relationship. Gadamer writes:

> The essence of a copy is to have no other task but to resemble the original. The measure of its success is that one recognizes the original in the copy. This means that its nature is to lose its own independent existence and serve entirely to mediate what is copied. Thus the ideal copy would be a mirror image, for its being really does disappear; it exists only for someone looking into the mirror, and is nothing beyond its mere appearance. But in fact it is not a picture or a copy at all, for it has no separate existence. The mirror reflects the image – i.e., a mirror makes what it reflects visible to someone only for as long as he looks in it and sees his own image or whatever else is reflected in it. (p. 133)

Using the metaphor of looking in a mirror, there comes a time when one can no longer stand in front of the mirror and see the image that is reflected back. In the same sense, in life there are times when a mentor will not be available to remind you of who you are, so one of the goals is to instill in mentees self-awareness and the confidence to embrace the image presented. Knowing who I am as an African American female has come from the mentors in my life who have reminded me of the strength I have, regardless of the circumstances and situations that will inevitably come with life.

As noted in Chapter One, there are many mirrors for African American women to look into, and some offer distorted images as to who we are and how society sees us (Harris-Perry, 2011). Collins (2009) calls for "new mirrors" to be used for the

empowerment and growth of African American women: "When Black women learn to hold up new 'mirrors' to one another that enable us to see and love one another for who we really are, new possibilities for empowerment via deep love can emerge" (p. 180). These new mirrors closely align with the positive mirrors that are upheld by others in our lives to resist society's carnival mirror (Harris-Perry, 2011). Although Collins' use for the new mirrors seems exclusive to African American women, these mirrors can also serve as a way for African American women to state, for ourselves, who we are without the distorted perceptions of others playing a role in the process. As a mentor to African American girls, it is imperative that African American female youth know with the many misconstrued perceptions, and at times blatantly ignorant namings of who they are, that those things do not control or shape their lives. They have the power and ability to push through that and use the tools that they have been given through meaningful relationships, education, faith, etc. to build new images by simply being themselves.

Being an African American woman. The concept of Being, although universal, is also undefinable and leads to the continual seeking to discover the meaning of Being (Heidegger, 1993a). Something that is near, yet far away from all beings, Being is a concept that cannot be fully grasped, but each person individually has one's own concept of Being. Eternity, the space in which we exist – can represent individual concepts of Being. Similarly, understanding the being of an African American woman cannot simply be explained by one person (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1981). Black feminist scholars share the historical experiences of African American women from slavery to present day and emphasize the places of silence, marginalization and oppression that African American woman occupied, and unfortunately in which we can still find ourselves in today.

Casey (2009) understands, "To be somewhere is to be in place and therefore to be subject to its power, to be part of its action, acting on its scene" (p. 23). Existing in America, African American women have become "subject to its power," those individuals who dominate social rhetoric and beliefs, but African American women have also become a "part of its action" as well. By joining with White allies during the woman's movement (Davis, 1981), engaging ourselves in community work to enhance social growth (Gilkes, 1994), and conversing among ourselves in spaces deemed "safe" to examine and explore various issues (Collins, 2009) among many other acts, African American women have taken part in the action of the place in which we dwell.

Lorde (1984/2007) asserts that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 112). In other words, oppression cannot be overcome using the same methods of the oppressor. Collins (2009) writes about Black women's use of music, literature and other forms of artistic expression to resist oppression:

> As a historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from the standard academic theory – it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like – but the *purpose* of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different. Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic justice. (p. 11)

Since African American women were not able to define themselves in the dominant discourse and spaces, such as college classrooms and politics, they used the tools that worked best to resist the dominant discourse. Also, finding ways to "survive in" these particular spaces is a form of resistance. How do these experiences influence, if at all, the mentoring relationships of African American female mentors? What are the mentors'

own personal experiences with resistance, oppression, racism? Do they instill these forms of resistance into their African American female mentees?

What is my horizon? Initially, when reading Gadamer's (1975/2004) explanation of horizons, I thought that every human being had a horizon or point of view, from which they viewed the world. Revisiting the text, it is clear that not everyone has a horizon (or one which they are aware of), since some individuals narrowly view the world from their own perspective with no understanding or desire to see that which extends beyond their own lives and experiences. "'To have a horizon' means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it" (p. 301). In an effective mentoring relationship, it would be dangerous to operate from one perspective or point of view. Having a horizon does not mean that you agree with or accept all perspectives, but that you recognize them and notice their relevance.

Casey (2009) asserts that a horizon is a boundary, different from a limit, and is present in our everyday life experiences. The participants in this study mentor elementary school-aged females living in inner-city communities with various familial arrangements and their own valuable thoughts, opinions and experiences to share. Without embracing that which is beyond their own narrow experiences of life, the mentors would miss so much to open up their own lives and to help their mentees. As previously shared, African American females have often been perceived and portrayed through a very narrow lens, from individuals who, according to Gadamer, do not have horizons from which to extend their understanding of others. It would be irresponsible and unfortunate for anyone, particularly members of an oppressed group, to ignore the various perspectives and opinions of others. Seeing the value in what others contribute is important for growth and

progression. This is particularly interesting in mentoring relationships as mentors strive to reach new horizons and instill this thinking in their mentees. In the words of John O'Donohue (1997), "If you are striving to be equal to your destiny and worthy of the possibilities that sleep in the clay of your heart, then you should be regularly reaching new horizons" (p. 215).

As historical beings, African American women do have both a historical horizon and a present-day horizon from which we shape our own identities and rename who we are. Since "understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves"' (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 305), African American females must not completely let go of the past, but build upon it while embracing the present. This study is one way in which to build upon the tradition of African American women to rename our own identities through the mentoring process.

Journeying: Embracing Hermeneutic Phenomenology

> We were in a space of both loneliness and possibility – the familiar had become strange, the strange had not yet become familiar. It was a place of possibilities, particularly those of growth and change. (Rivkin, 1991, p. 171)

Arriving at this point of my hermeneutic phenomenological journey has been both challenging and compelling. There have been points of clarity and others of mere confusion. I share the sentiments of Rivkin (1991) by finding myself in a space of both strangeness and familiarity. That strangeness and familiarity connect to both my phenomenon, and the literature and philosophical interpretations guiding this work. The obvious source of excitement comes from the possibilities presented – the possibilities for *growth and change*, in both myself and my work as a hermeneutic phenomenologist. By starting this journey with an interest in an experience that has profoundly changed my

135

life, I knew that I was on the right path. With an introduction to van Manen and his helpful guidance throughout the winding paths and dim roads of hermeneutic phenomenological methods, I felt confident in my decision. Upon entering the dark and at times, foggy area of philosophical groundings of Heidegger, Gadamer and Casey, among others, I thought about turning back and finding my way to uncovering the voices of African American female mentors by use of a different methodological approach. But I found that by uniting phenomenological philosophers with African American philosophers and feminists such as Gordon, Davis, Collins and Lorde, this journey became much more compelling and easier to navigate.

In *Researching Lived Experience*, van Manen (1997) shares a framework for human science research. Each approach in this framework helps me as a researcher to enter this journey and complete it in my own way, with my own understanding. This is presented as an intermittent approach and need not be completed sequentially, as that would be artificial and stifling. The framework includes six necessary guidelines:

1.) turning to a phenomena that seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2.) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3.) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4.) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5.) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6.) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

Turning to the Phenomenon

In Chapter One, I shared how the phenomenon of being an African American female mentor has personally impacted my life. As both the mentor and the mentee, my life has been changed. Turning to this phenomenon is not difficult because African American female mentors have been a huge part of the successes in my own life. Being a graduate student in the field of education is largely a part of the serious commitment that

my mentors have made to me and my growth. This is a part of me that I have a strong desire to explore. By committing myself to this particular phenomenon, there is an opportunity to engage deeply with African American women and extend this beyond my own personal experiences to open up this phenomenon in a broader way. Physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally – I explore the lived experiences of African American female mentors as a seeking pertaining to the whole individual. Unsure of what I will discover in this wholeness, there is a knowing that this will make for a deeper description of their lived experiences. As a phenomenological researcher, it is my task to engage readers in a way that as a result of my commitment to this phenomenon, they also understand this particular lived experience in such a way that they have not known it previously. This can only come when there is "fullness of thinking" (van Manen, 1997, p. 31).

As van Manen shares, "Phenomenological research is being-given-over to some quest, a true task, a deep questioning of something that restores an original sense of what it means to be a thinker, a researcher, a theorist" (p. 31). The *original sense* van Manen shares is what brings me back to a place of research that is deeply meaningful to me, although not deeply valued or appreciated by others. Phenomenological research takes me outside of my own comfort zone by sharing personal experiences, but also keeps me close to that which holds great value and importance in my life as an African American female and graduate student. In this deep questioning and commitment by "being-given-over" to this phenomenon, uncovering will take place in a way that is not possible without serious commitment. The phenomenological question that drives the deep

exploration of this study is, **what are the lived experiences of African American female mentors mentoring African American female youth?**

Investigating Experience as It is Lived

Understanding that "phenomenological research aims at establishing a renewed contact with original experience" (van Manen, 1997, p. 31), I am happy to rekindle memories of special moments when being engaged with my mentors shifted my thinking and perspective. Although, "Memory is one of the most beautiful realities of the soul" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 171), remaining in relationship with both my mentors and mentees has served as an even more purposeful event, on both a personal and academic level. Maintaining those relationships keeps me inside of the lived experience of both being an African American female mentor and engaging with them on a regular basis. To further investigate this particular phenomenon, I engage in conversations with six African American female mentors currently serving as mentors to African American female youth. These women are in the midst of currently living out this phenomenon and share their experiences with me in three one-on-one conversations. Approaching this investigation with the inclusion and merging of philosophers, feminist authors, poets and the voices of the six African American mentor participants, along with my own personal testimony and poetry connected to this phenomenon, has helped to bring forth a richer understanding of what it means to be an African American female mentor (van Manen, 1997).

Reflecting on the Essential Themes

In order "to grasp the essential meaning of something" (van Manen, 1997, p. 77) in phenomenological inquiry, essential themes must be formed for the particular

phenomenon. Van Manen provides three approaches, each with its own question to be answered, when uncovering thematic statements in a variety of sources, including phenomenological conversations, stories, observations and poetry. First, the wholistic or sententious approach seeks to express meaning through a phrase with the question, "What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?" (p. 93). Second, the selective reading or highlighting approach seeks to find statements that are telling or revealing about a particular phenomenon with the questions, "What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?" (p. 93). Last, the detailed or line-by-line approach asks, "What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?" (p. 93), and seeks to uncover meaning by a thorough reading of every single sentence in the text. The questions are important in helping me reflect on what I am seeking in the text and how to gather that information. As a phenomenological researcher I used the approach that works best for me with each source of text. With the desire to uncover all possible understandings of the phenomenon of being an African American female mentor of African American girls, using the wholisitc and selective approaches were the most helpful in establishing essential themes. With each transcript, I found that the approach changed. There were times when reflecting upon the entire conversation, I created a phrase or sentence to capture the significance of that text. At other times, particular phrases were highlighted to pull meaning from the lived experiences of the mentors. I did not limit myself to one particular approach since that could possibly inhibit what was revealed in the text and minimize the opportunities for rich description.

Describing the Phenomenon through the Art of Writing and Rewriting

Reading aloud the phenomenological work that is still being developed puts me in an uncomfortable place. Even among fellow phenomenologists who understand this work and are familiar with my phenomenon, this discomfort does not wane. As an artistic writer who has written poetry for years, and even performed spoken word in front of both large and more intimate crowds of people, reading my writing remains an uneasy task. I feel as though there is a piercing gaze upon me when I write for others. Van Manen's (1997) sentiments that "The writer produces text, and he or she produces more than text. The writer produces himself or herself" (p. 126) are exactly my feelings when it comes to writing. Being a poet has been therapeutic for me, and there are certain poems that I only share with a small circle of people with whom I feel comfortable revealing so much of myself. With phenomenological writing, I find myself in that same space of recognizing this vulnerability that is uncovered through the text. The rewriting process has come to be the space where I identify that I am on this phenomenological journey.

Although challenging, it is in the rewriting and revisiting the text that I "write myself, not in a narcissistic sense but in a deep collective sense" (van Manen, p. 132). This rewriting process, although an opportunity to deepen my understanding of both the methodology and my phenomenon of interest, can be burdensome. The constant opening up of oneself without assurance that others will understand, agree or approve of the thoughts presented in the work is uncomfortable. Yet, I find comfort in knowing that others recognize this burden and beauty that comes with writing. Gordon (2000) states that writing "is beautiful; and to *be* a writer is to suffer beautifully" (p. 174). In the phenomenological process, this beautiful suffering continues.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Pedagogical Relation

As an educator currently enrolled in a doctoral program that focuses on preparing students to become educational researchers, I have struggled with and even questioned the educational value of the phenomenon I wish to explore. Since mentoring is typically a relationship formed and built upon outside of the classroom, it was a struggle for me to understand how this connects to education and the pedagogical practices that take place within school settings. With phenomenology, I have now realized that pedagogy is not solely limited to the classroom setting, and the lived experiences of African American female mentors speaks to experiences in schools, communities and many other spaces where students learn and are both formally and informally educated.

The writing and rewriting in hermeneutic phenomenological research helps to keep me oriented to the phenomenon of being a mentor to African American girls as an African American woman. My experiences as a mentor opens up a number of questions about what these experiences mean for the present and future selves of both myself and my mentees. My experiences also reveal how one relationship can have a lasting influence in the lives of both people involved and others around them.

Van Manen (1997) emphasizes the relevance of text when employing hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodological research approach. The four necessary conditions for phenomenological human science text require it to be oriented, strong, rich and deep. While engaged in phenomenological writing, placing oneself in the research process as an insider alongside participants leads to stronger and richer experiences to uncover. This shows itself in the text and leads to pedagogical insights to complement and strengthen educational research.

Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole

Van Manen (1997) calls for a research approach that considers both parts and whole in the research process. Being too engaged in writing, for example, can lead to an unbalanced presentation of work because the researcher has not considered a plan of how to move forward. Considering both parts and whole aligns with both the mentoring process itself and the work of Black feminists. Recognizing the whole person and not simply a part of who they are or who you think they are is what Black feminists have brought forth in their work and is also an important piece of the mentoring relationship.

Having this opportunity as a phenomenological researcher to broaden the scope of the mentoring relationship using the ideas, poetry and research of different scholars from various fields and backgrounds contributes to the balance necessary for this work. As a mentor, only focusing on the educational growth, social development or spiritual awareness of my mentees in isolation is stifling. Getting to know them as complete individuals and what they want to share in genuine conversation, helps me to mentor them effectively, as well as receive the same as a result of the reciprocity of mentoring. Since I know my mentees as whole individuals, I am also aware of the particular areas where they need special attention and guidance, such as Yasmine and her need for encouragement while transitioning into college life, as well as other areas beyond this point in her life. In addition to the phenomenological writing as a guide for balancing research, staying connected with other phenomenological researchers and philosophers ultimately helps to keep me balanced and on track with writing, researching and continuing to open up during this process with an understanding that pedagogical insights will contribute to the field of educational research.

My Process of Engagement

Through the unknown, the unfamiliar, the strange, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the works of van Manen, Heidegger, Gadamer, Collins, and Lorde, among others, have guided me. They have guided me to this point in my phenomenological journey. I have reached a space where I can gain a deeper understanding of the philosophical underpinnings, while also blending my own writing with the works of other African American feminist scholars and poets. The guiding process now becomes a dual effort among myself and the participants in this study. Working alongside one another, we make our way through the next level of this journey. Engaging in genuine conversations, we uncover and discover the lived experiences of African American female mentors working with African American female youth.

The Participants

With the support of my dissertation committee, I chose to converse with African American female mentors from varying places of mentoring and not solely limited to formal mentoring programs. I was very interested in how the African American female mentors who mentor African American female youth define themselves within different mentoring contexts. How do the mentors experience these relationships? Why did they become involved in mentoring? When did mentoring become an important part of their individual lives? Ultimately, **What are the lived experiences of African American female mentors mentoring African American female youth?** With this question as my continual guide, I moved toward the process of finding participants and conducting conversations with them, both individually and collectively as a group.

Solicitation of participants. I recruited mentors through my own social network of family, friends and colleagues. After sharing my research topic, members of my social community were happy to assist me with contact information for African American female mentors they felt I should engage in conversations with for my dissertation. After receiving the contact information for potential mentors, we began to correspond through email. I provided each mentor with a letter of invitation and my contact information in case they were interested in participating (see Appendix A for Letter of Invitation). Also, I shared specific information about the time commitment and my reason for exploring this specific phenomenon. It was crucial that the six participants could share their experiences in mentoring in an open manner while engaged in genuine conversation in order to uncover meaningful themes that help to answer the question that guides my phenomenon.

To encourage diversity among participants that adds to the richness of the study, the following areas varied in range when soliciting participants:

- Amount of time mentoring (minimum of one year)
- Age (varied as to get the experiences from women of different generations)
- Educational background (high school diploma through advanced degrees)
- Marital status (married, single, divorced)

After the six interested participants were selected, we scheduled times to meet and engage in our conversations.

Establishing conversations. I had three one-on-one conversations, lasting sixty to ninety minutes with each participant. Before starting the first conversation, we discussed an overview of the research while reading, explaining and signing the Institutional Review Board (IRB) forms (See Appendix B for Consent Form). In the first conversation, I opened with the statement, "Tell me about your mentoring experiences."

This first conversation was solely focused on the mentoring experience with mentors, family members, people in their communities, etc. The second conversation focused on being an African American female and how this influences their mentoring experience. After starting with questions along the lines of, "Does being an African American woman shape your mentoring experiences? If so, how? What are your experiences emanating from being a Black woman?" we delved into a conversation surrounding race and the role it plays in mentoring. At the conclusion of each conversation, participants received a writing prompt and were asked to work on the prompt for at least one hour before the next meeting. Each prompt included a question or statement pertaining to the previously discussed topic. The first writing prompt (see Appendix C for Reflective Writing Exercise) included the following:

> After sharing your own definition of mentoring and that which motivates you, take some time to reflect on your position as a mentor. How have you been changed and/or influenced through the experiences with your mentee(s)?

The second writing prompt (see Appendix D for Metaphor Life Map Activity) is an activity that mentors discussed with me during the third meeting:

> Share a metaphor that helps you further express and describe your role as a mentor. With the use of your metaphor, create a life map that depicts three significant mentoring moments in your life.

With van Manen (1997) I believe that "Writing teaches us what we know, and in what way we know what we know. As we commit ourselves to paper we see ourselves mirrored in this text. Now the text confronts us" (p. 127). I found, however, that finding the time to write responses was difficult for the mentors. Instead of written responses, I decided that we could just discuss their responses. This was not a problem for me as a phenomenological researcher because the conversations still provided me with insight

145

into the mentors' lived experiences and having the prompt for weeks also provided the

mentors with time to think about their responses.

The third and final meeting was an opportunity for the mentors and I to discuss

their metaphors and at least three of their most memorable mentoring moments. Since

"By way of metaphor, language can take us beyond the content of the metaphor toward

the original region where language speaks through silence" (van Manen, 1997, p. 49).

This discussion around a metaphor and mentoring helped the participants to think about

mentoring in new and deeper ways, penetrating the silent moments in the conversation or

unspoken words, focusing on three particular moments that were meaningful to their

overall mentoring experiences.

No-thing Becomes Some-thing

> The things we are trying to describe or interpret are not really things at all – our
> actual experiences are literally "nothing." And yet, we seem to create some-thing
> when we use language in human science inquiry. (van Manen, 1997, p. xviii)

There are times when the mentoring experience may feel like 'nothing' since

others are unaware of the meaning in the relationships, as well as when fear and failure

can overshadow the positive aspects of the relationship. To create something out of a

seemingly nothing-less experience is one of the exciting aspects of phenomenological

research. Bringing forward the experiences of African American female mentors in a

new, different and unique way through human science research is a necessary

contribution to educational research and hopefully a resource for others in schools,

communities and families with a continual desire to both help and be helped.

CHAPTER FOUR:
LIFE LESSONS: THE FABRIC OF THE JOURNEY

Mentoring is a process. Process from the Old French *proces* is a journey, a continuation. The six African American female mentors who shared their lived experiences with me highlight that mentoring is a continuous journey. This journey is filled with various perceptions, memories, necessary conversations and moments of reflection that help to enhance the mentoring experience. Along this journey of mentoring comes an individual, yet collective, understanding of what it means to be a mentor. The "fabric" of this journey is made up of the life lessons developed along the way, inspired by both mentors and mentees. Likened to pieces of a quilt, each individual lesson like "soft cottons that in another culture might have become rags" (hooks, 2009, p. 164) and deemed insignificant, instead became a beautiful creation, holding historical significance that speaks of a journey. While describing his grandmother's process of stitching a quilt, Harper (2008) also recognizes this process as a journey.

> The stitching together of those disparate pieces was the journey and using them to create something completely new, beautiful, and useful was the journey. And if any of those individual pieces hadn't been created, used, and worn for their original purpose, they would not look like they do now in this new quilt. (p. 272)

The life lessons which present themselves through our conversations as African American female mentors are the individual pieces, that are still important on their own, but far more evocative when combined with other life lessons. These lessons are found in the form of meaning-seeking questions around the dominant emergent themes: What does it *mean* to be in a place of mentoring? What does it *mean* to be African American, female and a mentor? What does it *mean* to engage in (un)silenced dialogue with mentees? By searching for the meaning of being an African American female mentor to African

American female youth, I have found that like creating a quilt, this is a time-consuming process which can look like nothing more than random scraps and pieces to the unfamiliar eye, but later becomes a creation that can last, comfort and inspire. These six African American female mentors define what it means to be a mentor and provide insight into the mentoring process through their own individual experiences, while allowing me to be an active participant in defining for myself what it means to be an African American female mentor to African American female youth. Hopefully, this journey will last in the minds of the readers, comfort them along their own journeys and motivate them to continue inspiring others.

Mentor or Muse: From Helping to Relating

> Muses were women in mythology who acted as sources of inspiration; their role was to recognize and to help spark or draw out the genius or artistry of their charges. The metaphor of *muse* shifts the focus to the inner resources and potentials of girls – strengths that might well be missed in relationships that seek primarily to teach girls what they do not know. (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 226-227)

When the decision was made to explore the lived experiences of African American female mentors mentoring African American female youth, I knew that the word mentor would need to be unpacked. The word mentor is often associated with expertise, control and leadership. With the mentors in this study, they take on the role of muse because they are focused more on building and sustaining relationships with their mentees. The women in this study also recognize that their mentees have so much to give and offer within the mentoring relationship. These women are sources of inspiration and seek to bring out the best in all of their mentees. Since they fit the definition of muse, I refer to them as such and use pseudonyms, chosen by the muses, throughout the study. Who are the muses? How do they define mentoring? What can their lived experiences

show us about education and pedagogy? What can their lived experiences teach us about ways to interact with young people?

The Teacher Muse

"I think a mentor has a lot of different roles…Somebody who's their cheerleader, and a coach and a supporter." Thirty-nine year old Priscilla is a woman of many different roles: reading specialist, PhD student, daughter and friend. With over ten years of experience working with children of different ages in the classroom as a reading specialist, Priscilla knows the significance of mentoring and being a positive role model for her students. Although Priscilla calls herself a mentor to two young African American girls, Katrice and Shanelle, she works with her students in a way that can be considered mentoring, particularly when connected to her own definition of what it means to be a mentor: coach and supporter. When Priscilla's students progress out of "Reading Recovery," they still want to spend time with her, so she reminds them that they are welcome to stop by anytime. She also reassures their self confidence by telling them, "You know you can be out there flying on your own now." She has supported and coached them to the point of independent reading with the hope that this translates into other areas of their lives.

With her laid back and often quiet demeanor, Priscilla does not normally elaborate on various aspects of her mentoring, but when it comes to how her faith is connected to mentoring, Priscilla does not hesitate to share that her faith plays not only a pivotal role in her mentoring relationships, but in all aspects of her life. Along with her faith, Priscilla recognizes that time is one of the most important, yet difficult, aspects of mentoring. Finding the time and making the time for her mentees is important to Priscilla

because she wants to make sure that her mentees "have a chance to talk" with her about whatever they need to discuss: school, family, faith. Priscilla is determined to remain a part of her mentees' lives and support them, because as she says, "I just want to be a part of [their lives] to support and to make sure 'Are you doing what you're supposed to?'" With this care and concern for her mentees, Priscilla will continue to build strong relationships with the youth in her life.

The Hometown Muse

Twenty-four year old Lauryn understands the importance of giving back to African American girls, particularly those in the community where she was raised. Having come from a low-income background, Lauryn recognizes the significance of having positive role models who can show you that the goals you have can become reality. Balancing doctoral studies and working with her mentees can become a bit overwhelming for Lauryn at times, but she remains committed to being an example and reminding her girls that their lives and experiences are unique and important.

I can just imagine Lauryn with a classroom full of sixth, seventh or eighth grade girls. With her bubbly personality it is probably easy for her to connect and relate to teenagers who might be apprehensive about sharing their life experiences with a stranger. Lauryn meets with middle school aged students, three separate groups (6th through 8th grade) once a week, on average, during the school year. With her interest in Black girlhood and the elements of their lives that make them into the resilient individuals they are, Lauryn meets with her groups of mentees to gain their perspectives on issues ranging from pop culture to relationships. Being a doctoral student from the same community as her mentees, Lauryn feels that it is important for her to be a role model and example. To

150

explain why she wanted to meet with the girls and engage in discussions around various topics, Lauryn shared that they would be a part of a mentoring program that was also research for her own project, which would hopefully one day become a book about their lives.

> One day I brought in a few books. I said, "These books have all been written about Black girls." I said, "Mainly they're written by White women but they all tell a story." I told them what some of the books were about. "The goal here is for this to be a mentoring program, but it's also research… I'm doing this to one day hopefully write a book, not using your names, but telling stories that you all have and what it means to be a Black girl."

Lauryn's mentees were receptive to her work and have been willing participants since 2010. Since there are many unwritten stories of Black girlhood, along with many written misrepresentations of their experiences, Lauryn hopes to change this with her program and eventually start variations of her program in schools all over the country.

The Gentle Muse

As I sit with Alice, she smiles and shares that as a forty-five year old mother of a five year old, she has become "more gentle" as a result of her mentoring the kids at church. As a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the military, Alice understands that it has been a transition from tough to gentle. As a firm believer in equitable opportunities for women, Alice admits she is known for being "harder on women… I'm looking at her and saying you can do what they're doing. I'm not looking at her to say you're weaker than what he is." Alice focuses a lot on her time in the military and having the opportunity to mentor African American females who are traveling down the same path she has traveled. When making the connection between education and mentoring, Alice believes that mentoring is about life experiences and taking the time to share them with others so they can avoid some of the pitfalls and be prepared for the inevitable challenges ahead.

Alice currently tutors elementary aged boys and girls in mathematics at her church and acknowledges this as a form of mentoring. Her mentees are generally receptive to tutoring and she enjoys helping them learn. Alice is also very much a mentee and recently entered into a mentoring relationship with an older White woman who she believes can guide her in a new business venture. Because they have common goals and interests, Alice knows that this will be a healthy relationship. She continues to see the value in having a mentor and role model. Alice admits, "I can't be successful in business without having a role model. I need to find somebody who's done what I want to do and lean on her coattail and say, 'Help me understand what I need to do here.'" Continuing to inspire youth in her own community will hopefully instill this same desire for lifelong mentorship in her mentees.

The "Keep it Real" Muse

After having just one conversation with Trina about her mentoring experiences, I understand why her mentees tell her that she "keeps it real." Trina, thirty-one, is very open and forthright about her memories as a mentee and muse. With the conviction that a mentor is "Someone that encourages, uplifts another individual," I know why she takes this opportunity very seriously. After completing the requirements for her bachelor's degree in biology in just three and a half years, Trina began to work in the field of biotechnology. She takes pride in being one of the few African American female scientists that her mentees know, and she enjoys being an example of a positive role model to them. Currently in school for stenography and ultrasound, Trina is motivated to complete her program, in part because of her mentees. Trina cannot tell them to work hard, but yet she does not push through to reach her own goals.

Trina mentors primarily through her church. Since she works with the youth through youth group and the dance ministry, Trina connects with them and forms informal mentoring relationships. Trina currently mentors six teenage girls and finds that she can connect to them by reflecting on her own experiences as a teenager. Since she has been serving as a mentor for ten years, Trina recognizes the value of having her own mentors, because "Even as an adult, you should always keep a positive role model." With the confidence that all of her mentees can be successful adults, Trina feels good about being a positive role model in the lives of her mentees and the fact that they listen to her advice and experiences. By maintaining trust within her mentoring relationships, Trina plans to provide guidance to her mentees so they can become professional, independent African American women.

The Mirror Muse

As an excited newlywed, Deanna is still learning to balance teaching, mentoring and spending time with her new husband. Deanna speaks passionately about teaching her students in an inner-city middle school where she has been for the past eight years. At just thirty years of age, Deanna has already started her own nonprofit organization, Helping, Educating, Restoring, Empowering (H.E.R.E.), which targets girls between the ages of eleven and sixteen who have an incarcerated parent, have come from a single parent home or are children who feel lost and need support from an adult. Deanna admits that she sees herself in her mentees and wants to help them so they will not have to endure the struggles alone the way she had to when growing up.

To Deanna, a teacher is a mentor, whether she recognizes it or not. "So people say 'I'm just a teacher. I'm not a mentor.' You are. To me it's the same thing. If you are a

mentor, you are a teacher too because you are teaching them basic things about life."

These basic things extend beyond academics into behavior in public, appropriate attire and topics surrounding race and the perceptions of others. Deanna admits that at times it is a struggle to prepare her students for the real world, but she is determined to do it in spite of the challenges. For the past four years, H.E.R.E. has been a place for Deanna, the girls and other mentors to come together for three hours on Saturdays and engage in discussions around topics that are relevant to teenage life. Working with mentors and working alongside parents, Deanna is fulfilling her own definition of what it means to be a mentor. According to Deanna, a mentor is "Someone who gives their time and service to the youth; someone that is a positive role model, a shoulder to lean on." Her work both inside and outside of the classroom will hopefully inspire her students and mentees to do the same for others.

The Village Muse

As the eldest muse in the study (in her fifties), Angela has a lot to say about growing up with individuals who just had a "village mentality" and felt that it was everyone's responsibility, not just parents, to make sure that children were taken care of and supported. As a mother of one daughter, Angela has always opened her home to other young people to be an example and support system in their lives because she comes from a big family and is used to others being there for her, and she wants to continue this by doing the same. Professionally, Angela is currently a military case worker for a twenty-two week quasi-military program for "at risk" youth ages sixteen through eighteen. But even prior to this position, Angela worked with youth. Although her specialty is girls, Angela works with both males and females, guiding them through the

program before they go back into their own communities. Angela says the program is "basically for kids that are at risk, they're dropping out of school or they have dropped out. This is their second chance in life to, you know, before they're really held as an adult."

Working with the young people in her program is an around the clock endeavor, since the students live in barracks and are with Angela for approximately six months. This exposure to her mentees allows Angela to build close relationships with them that extend beyond their time in the program. Her straight-forward approach and sarcastic tone seems to work well with mentees whom she has built a close relationship. With her mentoring, Angela brings the philosophy that she has "a responsibility to give back." This giving back includes her time, resources and anything she can provide to help her mentees recognize their own potential and work towards their goals. With a recent promotion, Angela has the opportunity to serve as liaison between the youth in the program and the adult staff. With her lifelong experience of working with youth, Angela plans to work with the other mentors so "they know they have a voice," and "at the same time, we can learn from these kids. We don't have all the answers."

Journey with Me through Emergent Themes

Van Manen (1997) suggests, "Grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning" (p. 79). Writing my way through this journey thus far has been challenging as writing "distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world" (p. 125). While finding meaning in the lived experiences of African American female muses, and also struggling to be engaged with events around me while writing, three major themes have emerged

155

out of our conversations that serve to anchor this phenomenon of mentoring. Each muse is in a place of mentoring. Each has made the decision to work with African American female youth in a way that is important for their growth and development, academically and socially. What is it like to be in this place of mentoring? What is the significance of muses' past experiences? While in this place of mentoring, what helps muses to cope with the inevitable challenges in mentoring relationships? After exploring why they are in this place of mentoring in this chapter, we journey into what it means to be an African American woman in Chapter Five: conflict and support, similarities and differences, along with struggle and racism. What is the role of race in mentoring? What role does the presence of struggle have in mentoring relationships? When the muses establish these relationships with their mentees through their own vulnerability and openness, there is a space for (un)silenced dialogue to occur. What does engaging in (un)silenced dialogue mean for the mentoring relationship? This dialogue includes everything from jokes and sarcasm to serious, challenging discussions around sexual activity, self-esteem and the perceptions of others. In Chapter Six, I explore the way these conversations not only help to strengthen the mentoring relationship, but also remind muses of the significance of their roles in the lives of young African American females. Writer and teacher Parker Palmer (2000) knows that although every journey varies, "every journey, honestly undertaken, stands a chance of taking us toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need" (p. 36). With this journey, I wonder what deep need will not only be met, but continually supported and nurtured.

The Significance of Place: Mentoring Out of/With/Through

Again and again as I travel around I am stunned by how many citizens in our nation feel lost, feel bereft of a sense of direction, feel as though they cannot see

156

where our journeys lead, that they cannot know where they are going. Many folks feel no sense of place. (hooks, 2009, p. 1)

Belonging is the significance of place. Just because one feels as though they belong in a particular place, that does not exclude moments of doubt, questioning and challenges. Belonging also does not mean one is perfect in this particular place. Both hooks and O'Donohue (1997) write about belonging in reference to home, because even in the midst of discomfort, there is safety and peace that come with belonging. Each and every muse in this study *belongs* in this place of mentoring, but there are still moments of discomfort. This discomfort comes in the form of how they became mentors, what they bring into the mentoring relationship and how they work through the challenges. The place of mentoring, unlike many rigid physical places, changes and evolves over time.

The mentoring journey begins for different reasons and at various points in life for the six African American female muses in this study. Through the conversations, it became apparent that how muses end up in this *place* of mentoring is significant. What is the source of seeking out this *place* of a mentoring relationship? Casey (2009) writes that in order to reside somewhere we must build places for ourselves that are stable and comfortable. Both muses and mentees take part in the building of a place, which is their mentoring relationship. In this section, what we bring with us to this place and what we have to work through in this place of mentoring are all explored. The six muses all end up in this place due to different life circumstances. Once we as muses find ourselves in this place, it is necessary to be aware of what we have brought along with us into this place of stability. Are there preconceived notions about our mentees in this place that hinder our interactions? Do we have beliefs that find their way into the advice that we offer our mentees? Recognizing what we as African American female muses carry with us along

157

this journey is not to be ignored. As muses, we must also be cognizant of the challenges and issues that we work through in this place of mentoring. What particular issues do we as African American female muses face and persist through when mentoring African American female youth? Understanding that as we continue to mentor, aspects of this place of mentoring may change. Since the relationship is one that both muses and mentees are in the process of "making and building" (p. 109), for their own comfort and growth, exploring this place is necessary as a starting point for understanding the lived experiences of African American female muses.

Confronting the Past: Mentoring Out of Pain

Three younger female cousins came to live with Lauryn and her parents, when she was just a teenager because their parents were struggling with drug abuse and alcoholism. This new living arrangement, although challenging, was not a problem for Lauryn because she has always been one to help others, especially family. The absence of their parents, particularly their mom, sent the cousins on an emotional whirlwind and they began to act out in ways that angered Lauryn, since their disrespect towards her mother just became too much. Because of what she witnessed her younger cousins go through emotionally and developmentally, Lauryn shares, "When I look back, maybe there's a bit of guilt that I couldn't help them that I am trying to help these girls. I think it was too close. It was too personal." Since she could not help her family members, Lauryn now works with middle school aged African American females in her hometown with the hope that she can help them find their passion, pursue it and achieve their goals.

Lauryn's mentoring experience stems from a painful situation in her past that has propelled her to helping others now. Although specific to her situation, Lauryn's story

connected to becoming a mentor is not the only story that stems from painful memories and experiences. From absence of parents to tragic loss, pain finds its way in the lived experiences of African American female muses.

In response to Lauryn's admission of guilt, author Jacquelyn Small (1995) would tell her "Try not to blame yourself if you've made emotional mistakes. For our transformation to occur, the fires of crisis must burn hot – that is why crises are life altering experiences and pain is our greatest teacher" (p. 42). This transformation includes moving forward and learning from our past experiences, while avoiding the urge to dwell in the past. Since pain is our greatest teacher, what happens when we do not learn anything from painful situations? Pain from the Old French *pener* means "to exert or strain oneself." This strain can be physical, but also emotional. If muses exert themselves to deal with painful situations in an unhealthy way, what becomes of the pain? The strain of the past can unfortunately find its way into our present relationships if it is not explored. Pain does not simply go away. The strain of pain turns to bitterness.

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Bitter

Stays invisible
Invisible pain
It creeps and hides

…But you have to find a way
To let the bad feelings go
If you don't
It'll eat at you very slow

…At least start
By knowing there's a problem
And realize what it is

A start is better than nothing
And it'll get you closer to the end
(Watkins, 1999, p. 7)

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In her book *Thoughts*, Tionne Watkins writes about bitterness, reminding readers that we

"have to find a way to let the bad feelings go." Again, pain does not just go away. We

have to find a release. "By knowing there's a problem" muses can deal with it. It is

unknown if engaging in mentoring relationships is the start for dealing with their painful

pasts, but presently Lauryn, Deanna and Angela find that mentoring has been a positive

release for them and helps them to deal with past events and relationships.

Deanna shares that the idea to start her nonprofit mentoring organization

"clicked" when Kimberly, one of her middle school aged students, approached her and

this conversation ensued:

> "Ms. Deanna, I missed my period." I think from there, it was my second year of teaching, something clicked. I was like, "What you mean you missed your period? Have you talked to your mother?" "Oh my mom don't care." "Why she don't care?" "She's in jail." "Have you talked to your father?" "I don't know my father." "Who do you live with?" "My grandmother, but she just whatever. She just giving me somewhere to stay." I'm like, "Okay so tell me again why your period's not here." She was like, "Well I had sex with him. Oh yeah and then his friend. Oh yeah and then the guy around the neighborhood." I was like "Why?" She was like "Because I need love." I wish I could make this up. It was all in the same setting. We went from mom, dad, grandma to now I need love and now she had sex with three different guys: an eighth grader, thirteen years old. She doesn't know the father. She literally was like "I need love." There was no emotion behind that. Most people would probably break down and cry. She looked me square in the eye like "I need love." It was giving me something. I was like, "Do you feel pregnant?" She was like, "I don't know. I'm a month late." I was like, "So what happens if you're pregnant?" She was like, "Well at least the baby will love me."

This heart wrenching encounter with Kimberly caused Deanna to think about other young

females of color who were dealing with similar situations. Who would help them? Who

would show them the love that some so desperately seek?

Deanna could personally relate to Kimberly because she also went through

difficult situations growing up. Like Kimberly, Deanna also was raised by her

grandparents, and instead of searching for love, she was searching to find herself because of painful experiences that she kept hidden from others. Dealing with the pain of her mother being incarcerated and her father struggling with alcoholism, Deanna longed to be better and make better choices. Her love for her parents was overshadowed by anger and frustration that was finally unleashed and dealt with through a conversation with her mom during her freshman year of college.

> "I'm so glad I did not turn out like you, so in a sense you were my motivation because at one point I felt like maybe I act like this, I was like in a sense I thought if I act like you, I would become closer to you." My mom broke down and cried. She was like, "I never want you to become like me. I always want you to be better." So those words, I guess I needed to hear for me to kind of like get myself together.

Deanna realizes that the change came for her when she "had to learn to use all of the pain that was embedded" within to "unlock the words – and through the words, the power – and the will – to tell" (Boylorn, 2013, p. xxi) her mother how she felt. She just wants to be a caring adult in the lives of her mentees so she can be that listening ear when they need to share the anger, anxiety and confusion they might be dealing with on a daily basis. Fortunately for Deanna, she had the opportunity to share with her loved one how she was dealing with past experiences.

Angela, unfortunately, did not have the opportunity to share as many experiences with her sister as she would have liked to, since she was tragically murdered at a young age. Although she does not elaborate on the specific details, Angela does share that she had two sisters who were murdered, and one was only in her early twenties. She began "to mentor because of that," recognizing that "Life is short. Although we say that, it's shorter than we believe." Knowing that life is short, Angela not only wants to get the

most out of her life, but she also wants to help her mentees maximize every opportunity possible and become mentors for the next generation.

The pain in the lives of Lauryn, Deanna and Angela has evolved into service. Serve from the Old French *server* means to "offer, provide with." The muses offer experience that partly stems from pain to their mentees. In turn, as they offer their shared life experiences and how they worked through those with their mentees, the muses are provided with the outlet and release they need. It seems as though serving others benefits the muses as well as the mentees. Harper (2008) admits, "Whenever I serve, I've always wound up getting even more out of the experience than the person or people who I help do. Because by giving, you wind up being the receiver of the other person's happiness" (p. 260). Harper's feelings on service lend themselves to the muses' experience with serving out of pain. To be on the receiving end of another person's happiness helps to take the focus off of self and place it on others. This is just one of the benefits of sustaining a mentoring relationship and realizing that confronting the past can lead down a new and exciting path.

When you are journeying through and you come to a place along the journey that is reminiscent of a troubling experience from your past, what do you do? Maya Angelou (1994) writes, "How often must we…confront ourselves in our past?" (p. 116). We can constantly confront ourselves in our past, but what comes out of that confrontation? The answer relies upon whether we deal with the past or avoid it. When we avoid it, we will find ourselves confronting our pasts once again in the future. The past never goes away; how we work through past experiences makes the difference. When we deal with the past, a "wounded healer" (Palmer, 2000, p. 57) emerges. Lauryn, Deanna and Angela are

wounded healers. Who better to provide healing than someone who has been wounded themselves? "When you have felt deep emotional pain and hurt, you are able to imagine what the pain of the other is like; their suffering touches you" (O'Donohue, 2004, p. 181). A wounded healer is one who has been hurt and can use even the deep wounds to heal and support others.

The muses also display vulnerability in their mentoring relationships because, as mentioned earlier, "vulnerable" from the Latin *vulnerare*, means to wound. The muses, as wounded healers are vulnerable individuals who challenge the notion of what it means to be a "positive" role model. Who exactly is a positive role model? Is there a need for positive role models because mentees are engaged in or exposed to negative individuals and behaviors? What I define as positive, someone else might reject as negative. The muses bring their pasts into their present mentoring relationships and this allows the opportunity to be authentic with their mentees. This authenticity challenges the notion of positivity and how others see mentors: what matters is how their mentees see them. These relationships also shift from the idea of a *need* for mentors in order to address societal ills to simply building relationships that *can* help mentees pursue their goals while facing inevitable challenges. For these muses who confront painful memories and experiences as the source of their engagement in mentoring relationships, thankfully, change is the result of that confrontation.

Absence is Presence: Mentoring Out of the Absence of Mentors

Daddy

Raised me on lies
Like ones you tell little girls
Grow up and they don't
His stories refrains

163

I read in diaries, novels, pictures
Frames, girl after
Curl
Up late at night, bedside
Prayers for visits, a birthday
Card, to see his car parked
In front of our apartment
When I wake up any morning

Daddy, word I didn't learn
To spell until I was thirty-seven
A mental block doctor said,
Her pen, dipped in kin.
(Weems, as cited in Boylorn, 2013, p. 51)

Contrary to popular belief, you can miss what you have never had. Absence is very much presence. Weems' words emphasize the physical absence, but emotional and mental presence of daddy. Although he was not physically with his daughter, he was in her prayers, her visits to the mailbox for an unseen birthday card and her gaze outside the window. We can even say that the mental block identified by the doctor was very much the presence of daddy. The absence of mentors, particularly African American female mentors, is part of the reason Alice, Angela and Deanna are currently mentoring African American female youth. Both Alice and Angela have served in the military and reflect on that time without African American female mentors and the difference it would have made if they had the opportunity to be mentored by an African American female.

Angela shares:

There is nothing like having that connection to somebody who looks like you, talks like you and shares some insight like you. That shouldn't be your whole focus because the world's too broad for you just to be in that little box but at the same time if you can make that connection, it makes a big difference. It says "I can do this."

Alice shares that during her time in the military she was mentored primarily by White males. Learning from their advice and experiences was helpful and appreciated, but Alice

164

did desire to connect with female officers, since she felt they might better understand her experience in a male dominated space. This is an interesting aspect of absence in mentoring related to gender. What does it mean for females to be mentored by males? Most mentoring organizations match mentors based on a number of criteria and one is gender. Mentors are usually matched with a mentee of the same gender. This is most certainly prevalent in school-aged mentoring programs, but what about with adults? There is no guarantee that if Alice was mentored by females that those would have been more effective mentoring experiences. Based on the lived experiences of the muses, at the core of meaningful mentoring relationships is collaboration. Muses and mentees collaboratively define successes, prepare for opportunities and work through difficulties. It seems unfortunate that Alice did not have female mentees, but she may have had a richer military experience with the male mentors. Since Alice did not connect with the White female officers, she believes that race played a role in the lack of mentoring she received in the military, but she is not quite sure why that was the case.

> I would say compared to my White counterpart females, they got more mentoring than I did. It was obvious. I don't know if that was because of race. I think it was. No other reason why. What else could it have been? I don't know.

Both Angela and Alice share if they had African American female mentors while in the military, it would have been a more empowering experience for them knowing that it was possible to achieve certain levels of success. Philosopher Drew Leder (1990) writes, "An absence is the being-away of something" (p. 22). He also notes that this being-away of something can also show itself in different ways. For Angela and Alice, there was a physical absence of African American female mentors. Recognizing that absence is presence, the physical absence means there is a presence of something else:

lack of aspiration. Without an example of leadership, muses may lack that aspiration of who they can aspire to become. The physical absences can also bring in the presence of doubt, confusion and even myths.

Years after retiring from the military, Alice still hesitates to confirm that her lack of mentoring was connected to race. Even now there is still doubt present around the lack of mentoring she received. Race, explored further in a later chapter, is an extremely important piece of the mentoring puzzle, particularly in settings with few African American mentors available. When Alice had the opportunity to meet an African American high ranking female in her field, she was extremely excited: "I think the fact that she was a Black female and well respected in Air Defense Artillery was like wow! Someone really is, there is one of us at this level as a Lieutenant Colonel and I was just in awe to meet her." Alice's excitement can most certainly transition into her current mentoring of African American female youth because she can now be that role model they need to see in order to believe that which they have never seen or thought possible. With the absence of older mentors, it is possible to engage in peer mentoring. Angela believes that "If you've got an ability that you know you want to transfer over to somebody else…you can do that." Even with the absence of adults, there might be a peer present to support and encourage growth.

Beyond military and career experiences, Angela recognizes that having African American female mentors is powerful enough to dispel myths about success which she heard growing up and throughout her life.

> We're of an era, me and the folks of my generation, we were always taught you have to be twice as good to be considered even this [two fingers close together]. If you had these folks in those positions at that time, you wouldn't have to buy into that cause you would already see, "No I don't. This person that looks like me is

166

doing the same thing that the blonde haired blue eyed person is doing and they're successful at it."

For Deanna, having the opportunity to work with her mentees now is great because she can be that source of support for them that she lacked while growing up as a teenager who struggled with depression, abandonment and feeling completely uncomfortable in her own skin. Deanna shares, "With these girls I always tell them, I'm always honest with them. I tell them everything I've been through. You have a support system. I didn't have that. Take advantage of it. Hopefully it works."

Curriculum theorist Ted T. Aoki (2003) requests that educators are careful not to privilege presence over absence. This applies to the muses as well. Deanna reminds her mentees that they have a support system and she did not. Had she not gone through her trials alone as an adolescent, would she have started H.E.R.E? With the presence of African American female mentors during their years in the military, would Alice and Angela work with youth today? I am unsure, but I do know that some lessons are learned only in the absence of others. My parents divorced when I was a preteen, so while residing with my mother, I longed for my father's attention. When I did not receive as much of it as I needed, his physical absence became very present in things I did solely for his approval and acceptance.

<div align="center">

For You

Wooden bats and dusty cleats
Sandpaper and saws
Sketches of 15 Atkins Avenue
All of this
Not for me, but for you
Where exactly are you?
(Gamble, 2013a)

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Softball, woodshop and art class were activities I enrolled in simply to receive the gaze of my father. He watches sports, so I thought playing a sport would interest him. My father was a construction worker, so building was a primary part of his life. By building napkin holders and other forgettable objects, I thought we would be able to connect. As a very young child, I remember seeing a painting in one of the closets. After discovering that my father was the artist, I thought sketching and painting could spark a great conversation between the two of us. Obviously, he was very present in my life, although physically absent. Beyond the presence of activities to gain my father's attention, there was also the presence of self-blame because of our lack of time spent together. In her poem "Ghost," Lorde (1997) writes:

> Since I don't want to trip over your silence
> Over the gap that is you
> In my dark
> I will deal how it feels
> With you
> Climbing another impossible mountain
> With you gone
> Away a long time ago. (p. 300)

Again, absence is very much presence. I was beginning to trip over silences with questions of my role in our lack of time spent together. What did I do? Is this my fault? These questions inspired the interest in softball, woodshop and art. The lesson learned out of my father's absence was to appreciate those who were present in my life. Of course, I learned this lesson much later in life, but out of the experience of absence, I was more aware of those who were present and the difference they made in my life. It seems as though mentoring out of absence includes a greater appreciation and understanding of the presence that absence brings. Instead of "tripping over silence," you learn how to climb what you thought were impossible mountains. With these African American female

168

muses, their hope is that their mentoring works and provides examples and a support network they did not have, sharing the lessons learned along the way.

Tattered Boxes: Mentoring with Perceptions of Youth

> In general though, I think other than just the sad stories, right, Black girlhood often gets, Black girlhood is either, I don't know. It's so many boxes but the most boxes I see even in the literature or talking to the girls are the happy days, sexualized days or in the literature, trying to synthesize everything or the abusive family, poor family. (Lauryn)

A box is a wooden container. When something contains, from the Latin *continere*, it holds together and encloses. Exploring this etymologically, to box anyone into our own perception of who we think they should be is confining and limiting. Just think of moving boxes. When we pack, we put as many items into a box as we can, eliminating room for items to shift while being transported to our desired location. We also label boxes for our own organization when they are unpacked later. Before placing the box in the car or truck for transport, we make sure it is sealed tightly so that nothing will break or fall out. Eliminate, label, seal and transport: "Boxing" mentees into our own perceptions does all of the above. Have you ever placed something too large into a box and found that the box was tattered when you reached your final destination? Mentees are not to be boxed in and often, if not always, find themselves outside of the narrow perceptions of the mentors in their lives. Ma'ayan (2012) asserts that "Girls are bombarded all the time by messages, some subtle and some obvious, about who they are and who they are meant to be" (p. 111). Boxes for things are fine, but not for people, yet we can sometimes, unintentionally in both subtle and obvious ways, expect mentees to conform to our ideas of who we think they should be.

What happens when they do not fit into the boxes we have for them? What happens when our perceptions of mentees influence the mentoring relationship? Eleven year-old Tiffany says, "What I'd like to say to black girls in America is that it's okay to be who they are and to express what they want to express" (Carroll, 1997, p. 134). Tiffany understands that all Black girls are not the same and they cannot be placed into one category. Expressing oneself varies from person to person and this is why any boxes surrounding our opinions, thoughts and perceptions of mentees must be tattered so we can see who they are and allow them to be themselves.

Muses, during our conversations, honestly shared their opinions about some of today's youth and it speaks to the frustration that can arise in mentoring relationships. "True & False" highlights the muses' words regarding their mentees' behavior and attitudes, as organized and brought together by me in my interpretive rendering:

<div align="center">

True & False

Self seeking
It's all about me
What can I get?
How can I get it?
Selfish mentality

Give me
Give me
Give me
Detached
Needing a
Glimpse of reality

Disrespectful and sheltered
Often not listening
Concerned with the next sneaker coming out
Not going to make it

In this middle space
Wow, you guys are listening

</div>

They do have the tools
Voicing their opinions

Higher self-esteem
All intelligent
So smart and equipped
Let's embrace and uplift
(Alice, Angela, Deanna, Lauryn, Pricilla and Trina)

"To be a perspectival being also means that things can only present themselves from a particular angle and through a limited set of profiles. There will necessarily be aspects of any perceptual object, hidden sides, concealed depths, that elude one's gaze" (Leder, 1990, pp.12-13). The statements in the poem are both true and false. From the perspective of the muses, these statements are true based upon their observations and interactions with their mentees and youth they work with on a regular basis. We do not have the perspective of the mentees, but it is safe to assume that they would disagree with some of the statements made about them by the muses. Leder notes that our perspectives are limited and can only present themselves from our stance of experience. What happens when we are provided with another perspective? This is when we become a part of the hermeneutic circle that allows us the opportunity to bring our own perspectives to the relationship, as well as remaining open to the perspective of others, in this case the mentees. We as muses cannot just make assumptions and generalizations about today's youth. We need to take the time to explore possible underlying issues or circumstances that cause youth to engage in certain behaviors or even respond in what we consider a disrespectful manner.

> When people either say something negative to you usually something is going on in their life and not a reason to push the kids away. Give them a chance and see you can do some coaching to them; check on them and see how that issue is going. (Priscilla)

Lauryn brings a different and interesting perspective to the conversation involving the perception of youth. When talking about her eighth grade group of African American girls and the activities they are engaged in – smoking marijuana, drinking, partying and nonchalantly bragging about their sexual acts – Lauryn admits, "I wouldn't be friends with them if I was in school…I try not to let it get in the way of how I view them 'cause I do love them and respect them." What a struggle it must be to not place her mentees in "boxes" or categories to later transport to her own place of success, while at the same time recognizing her own inability to see them as individuals she would have befriended as a teenager. Although she tries, I think these things do get in the way of how Lauryn sees her mentees. This incident along with her thoughts watching her eighth graders graduate both connect to Lauryn's view. While sitting at the eighth grade graduation ceremony, Lauryn thought to herself:

> I sat there and thought oh God, some of them are not. I hate feeling like that, it sounds horrible. What I was gonna say is some of them aren't gonna make it and as I keep thinking it's a continuous process, "What does making it mean?" I recognize that and believe that there's not one path but some of them are gonna have a hard time… Possibly, some of their family do the same thing or have. They see them getting by. Maybe it's a difference between getting by and making it, right? Maybe those two can be like the same thing, well they cross each other. Somebody's getting by won't be somebody's making it.

According to O'Donohue (2004), it is not *what* we see, but *how* we see that influences our outlook. Even though Lauryn was attending a graduation ceremony for her girls that represents promotion and transition, she was thinking about those who will ultimately fail to reach their goals. O'Donohue writes, "Both the gaze that sees and the object that is seen construct themselves simultaneously in the one act of vision. So much depends on how we see things" (p. 18). Lauryn, from where she stands, as a young adult in the lives of her girls seeing their choices and decisions socially and academically,

172

while also aware of some of their challenging home lives, comes to the conclusion that they will not make it. For Lauryn, "Somebody's getting by won't be somebody's making it." In other words, Lauryn sees that the getting by of other people, possibly their family members, will not work for her mentees. How Lauryn sees getting by and making it as two completely different destinations, might not be seen by her mentees the same way. Lauryn wants them to "make it," meaning live out their dreams and accomplish their goals. What if for her mentees their goals are "making it," while for Lauryn they are simply "getting by?" This is where the conflict in perceptions comes in and we as muses must recognize our own limitations in our view. No, neither Lauryn nor any other muse wants their mentees to live in mediocrity, but how does this come across without judgment and "boxing" mentees in?

As muses, we need to reevaluate our own perceptions of youth. I believe the issue is not with the perceptions themselves, but with what we do with them. Can we push through the negative perceptions and uplift our mentees because we all ultimately want them to reach *their* goals?

> We want them to be able to consider themselves middle or upper class or at least have the economic access, right? That's what we do in education and mentoring but how can we do that in a way when we're not making them seem deviant already, putting them down instead of uplifting them where they are and not say "You need to be this, you need to be that," but to find out where they are and embrace that because you can't just change people. (Lauryn)

Lauryn raises an important question about how we help our mentees not only get economic access, but also have the skills they need to succeed without tearing them down. Why is this important? For many African American female youth, especially those growing up in inner-city neighborhoods similar to Lauryn's hometown, poverty is their reality and we know for them to have a fighting chance we need to make sure they have

173

economic access. Approximately 13 million school-aged students live in poverty, and almost 25% of those students are African American (Howard, 2010). Jean Anyon (2005) asserts that the economic is political, and highlights, "The poverty of U.S. families is considerably more widespread than commonly believed – and is catastrophic in low-income urban neighborhoods of color" (p. 17). With the disproportion of poverty among African Americans, it is imperative that the muses recognize this and promote economic access through education, community involvement and available resources. Meeting mentees where they are is the key, and knowing that young African American female mentees think that "The kind of girl I am has everything to do with the kind of woman I think I'll be" (Carroll, 1997, p. 43), we need to be aware of the negative perceptions of young females that persist in our culture. We also need to recognize that most of today's youth do not fit into the stereotypes perpetuated in society (Leadbeater & Way, 1996). Being honest with the way we perceive our mentees can help us as muses to reflect upon our own experiences and how this can help us to become more aware, open and reflective.

"I See Myself in You": Mentoring With the Mirror

> So some experiences that I had growing up, certain experiences that I dealt with or situations that I dealt with, I [might not have understood] then, but I now know, "Okay, I can help somebody else through this situation. I can help these young girls." (Trina)

Along the journey of mentoring, you can sometimes catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror and realize that the mentees you work with now look like you as an adolescent. Gadamer (1975/2004) informs us that what is visible in a mirror is present "only for as long as" we are looking in it and see our "own image or whatever else is reflected in it" (p. 133). When muses are reflective they can see their behaviors, attitudes and decisions

in their mentees. Interestingly, Trina and Deanna both recognize that some of the

perceptions they have about their mentees and the youth today in general stem from their

own teenage years and the difficulties they dealt with emotionally and developmentally.

Trina notices that some of her African American female mentees have "attitudes" that are

rude and disrespectful towards others. After having the opportunity to reflect on her own

experiences as an adolescent with an "attitude" while in college, Trina developed the

desire to help teenagers who were expressing themselves with this "attitude" and assure

them that there were other ways to deal with their problems and understand their

interactions with their parents.

> So, when I saw a lot of the teenagers acting like that, "Hey, you know what, I've
> been there, I've done that. I understand certain things may frustrate you, but guess
> what? You don't have to be like that. It gets better. It gets better. A lot of times
> we don't understand why parents do certain things or have certain rules, but it's
> only basically to benefit you." Another thing is, I can be transparent and as a
> mentor, I think that's important because I think that people need to know, "I've
> been there."

While thinking about mentees' "attitudes" we have to "go back *behind* what is

said" (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 363) and continue to listen. Levin (1989) reminds us that

"In a group or community where all people are committed to the reciprocity of good

listening, each participant develops a clearer, more individual *sense* of the matter in

question by helping each of the others to do the same" (p. 135). It is necessary to form a

space of reciprocal listening in the mentoring relationship so that both muses and mentees

can discuss and address where certain behaviors and attitudes come from, and more

importantly, what they mean. Levin continues, "Where there really is such reciprocated

listening, what is facilitated is not only the *sharing* of an *existing* understanding, but also

the *emergence and formation* of *new* understanding" (p. 135). At times, it is easy to just

assume we know why others respond or behave in certain ways, but through listening we can come into a mutual, new understanding that disproves or extends our previous assumptions. This new understanding emerges not only from listening, but also from care. As previously highlighted in Chapter Two, African American women typically show their care for African American youth by challenging societal myths and speaking truths in order to prepare them for the realities they will face as African American adults (Morris, 2007; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). Listening and care together will lead to new and deeper understandings of behaviors, as well as more opportunities for reflection with the muses.

Through her transparency with her mentors, Trina also has had the opportunity to heal from decisions and experiences in her past that she still chooses not to share with most of the people in her life. Initially, when sharing personal and private experiences with mentees, Trina asked herself, "Do I really want to tell that?" but she later realized that "it was like a healing process to say, 'I did these things but look at where I'm at now.' I didn't get caught up in those things." Since "what is in the mirror is the image of what is represented" (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 134), we realize that the image muses see in the mirror depends upon what is going on in their lives at that present time. For Trina, previously, her negative "attitudes" were presented, but now the healing is presented. This representation also helps Trina to relate to and understand her mentees better. Her closeness and openness with her mentees allows Trina to be open with them, and at the same time, begin to heal from her own past experiences. This is also a reminder to Trina's mentees that we all make mistakes or decisions that if we could change, we

would, but that is not an excuse for us to remain in that place of shame or express ourselves through poor words and disrespectful attitudes and behaviors.

Deanna shares that, like Trina, she also noticed the similarities between herself and her mentees, and surprisingly, she learned a lot about herself and how she could heal from past hurts and painful experiences similar to those her mentees currently encounter. Deanna admits that through working with her mentees, "I learn so much about myself and it helped me to open up more about my struggles, my pain and everything I'd been through." Deanna speaks very openly about her upbringing and not being ashamed of it because her experiences can hopefully help to empower her girls [mentees] to be unashamed and possibly help others who are going through similar experiences.

I wonder, what happens when you don't like what you see in the mirror? It has been a process for Deanna to reach this point of openness and accepting events from her past, but what is it like to reflect and not like what you see? Lorde (1997) writes about this in her poem "Good Mirrors are Not Cheap."

> It is a waste of time hating a mirror
> or its reflection
> instead of stopping the hand
> that makes glass with distortions
> …if you can see
> the mirror is lying
> you shatter the glass
> choosing another blindness
> and slashed helpless hands.
> (p. 67)

Beyond the physical, muses can use what they see in the past as motivation to not only change, but also help the mentees "shatter the glass" of pain, hurt, negativity and choose "another blindness." Blindly making another choice can lead to hope and healing with an acceptance of the past and working through broken relationships and unexpected pain.

177

Mentees have the power to stop the distorted images they view in their own mirrors. Through the listening and display of care, muses can empower them to do this.

The father of one of Deanna's mentees passed away just two months before Deanna's own father died. Deanna told her mentee to write her father a letter and place it in the casket so that she could express whatever was unsaid between the two of them. Upon hearing about her own father's death, Deanna knew that she needed to take her own advice and write a letter to her father. In the letter, Deanna expressed her anger about her father not physically taking care of himself and dying, although she felt that it could have been prevented, among other things.

> He passed away March 22nd, I was gonna go down there the 25th. He had an aneurism because of stress. Black men, he didn't even tell me had high blood pressure or was a diabetic and stopped taking his medication for a year. I didn't know. No one [knew]. So I was mad at him for dying because he could've prevented that even though it's God's will but I felt like my dad was so stubborn even until his last day. I expressed that in the letter. I expressed to him not taking my brother and I and raising us. So all this and I felt so much better. Now I'm like, I feel like my father's presence all around because I opened up and I wrote a letter, and I feel like me saying that to the little girl helped me in the same breath.

By starting and leading a nonprofit organization that targets "girls who have a parent that's incarcerated, or a parent that just got out of incarceration, or absent parent, or maybe girls that have dealt with molestation and rape," Deanna feels that her past experiences and struggles can ultimately help them to deal with what they are currently facing.

While engaged in a peer mentoring activity, some of Deanna's mentees began to cry talking about their own experiences. Seeing them express themselves, Deanna also began to cry and realizes that she has never fully dealt with the issues that occurred in her past. In that moment, Deanna began to be honest with herself.

When the girls start talking about it, I start being real with myself and I finally talked to the girls about, "You know what, this happened like "Wow! Ms. Deanna is going through the same thing. Ms. Deanna is still trying to me. I want you guys now to listen." The girls just like looked at me different, to deal with her issues." They kind of opened me up and made me more open, if I talk about it, it is probably easier for me to overcome instead of thinking, "I'm going to keep it in. I don't want no one to know. I want everyone to think I'm perfect." I had this wall up and the girls are steady, like breaking it down. I tell them, "Your insecurities make you beautiful," and it took me a while to get to that point.

Although "You cannot wander back through the gallery of your past" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 170), you can reflect on past experiences. Reflection has helped Deanna to heal. Since healing comes through recollection (Levin, 1985), having the opportunity to reflect and open up has helped Deanna to allow the walls of fear and shame to crumble. When Deanna started "being real," she began to be truthful with herself.

> What makes you use me
> Just tell all, the truth
> Guess it was something
> You missed as a youth
>
> Hi! My name is "lie"
> Please leave me alone
> But people will always use me
> Let the truth be known
> (Watkins, 1999, p. 139)

In an excerpt of her poem, "What's my Name," Watkins exposes the truth about lies and requests that we simply tell the full, honest story. Honesty is imperative in mentoring relationships. Without it, there are walls containing lies about self, our futures and those around us that can stifle our ability and willingness to support others. Deanna's walls began to come down when she finally made a decision to "let the truth be known."

Openness and vulnerability allow Deanna to connect with her mentees in a way that she had not previously connected with them. This moment also allows her to deal with her issues in a new way: being honest. In her honesty, the girls of H.E.R.E. had the

opportunity to see a hurt, yet reliable, adult in front of them. The girls had the opportunity to see that Deanna has also had painful experiences, and she can now use them to help her girls. Moreover, Deanna now understands the importance of being open and allowing others to break down the emotional wall that she had built many years earlier. Having to navigate those struggles alone, Deanna knows the value of having a support system of individuals who have been through similar experiences, and she wants to continue in that role for her mentees.

Bringing the mirror into the mentoring relationship can help mentors to reflect on, and possibly heal, from their own past hurts while using them to empower and encourage their mentees by ultimately sharing "what it takes to be self-defined Black women" (Collins, 2009, p. 278).

Too Much, Yet Not Enough: Mentoring Through Challenges

On any journey, there are inevitable challenges and issues that will arise. How you deal with these challenges is the real test of your ability to handle what you will find at your final destination. Although mentoring can be presented as some cookie cutter, "it's all good" experience, that is simply not true. Often challenges arise that cause mentors to reevaluate their own commitment to the relationship. Balancing family, career, and academics, along with mentoring can become tiresome and overwhelming at times. Time itself is part of the challenge in mentoring. There is an investment of time in mentoring relationships. Muses willingly invest *clock* time in their mentees but this becomes a struggle when this time interrupts their *lived* time with family, friends and other responsibilities. Lived time is time in the moment and it can seem to disappear quickly or move slowly depending on the muses' engagement (van Manen, 1990). Muses

also experience lived time with their muses, but it can be difficult to for muses to create

boundaries with mentees and not experience interruptions in their own private time.

Angela and Lauryn express their mixed emotions around constant availability to

their mentees. Even though it is the right thing to do, Angela admits that being there for

her mentees is not always what she wants to do in that moment.

> Sometimes you're the 1-800 PARENT. "You can call me, here's my number you
> can call me." And when they call you at that time when you're on the beach with
> your grandchild and they're like, "Hey I need to talk to you." I'm like, okay, I
> have to kick into that gear. Well, you did give them your number and you did tell
> them you can call me at anytime. You sat there and think, "Okay, do I take this
> call? Do I blow them off?" You say, "Well what if somebody had blown you off?
> What if this was the one time that you really needed?" So, conscience gets the
> best of you, you do the right thing. Maybe not for the right reason, but you do the
> right thing and feel good about it when you see the outcome. Whether the
> outcome was a positive or not, you can honestly say you took the time with that
> person to see them through that crisis.

Reflecting upon when her mentors were there for her in a time of need, Angela makes

herself available to her mentees, even in the midst of family time with her grandson. This

decision is one that is based on Angela knowing the importance of being a woman of

your word, especially when dealing with youth in a mentoring relationship. Angela is an

"othermother." Her role as a muse is not limited only to academic and work related tasks,

but she does assist parents in raising her mentees into mature, well-informed adults.

Collins (2009) states, "Othermothers can be key not only in supporting children

but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire

for motherhood" (p. 194). When Angela says she is like a "1-800-PARENT," she is not

diminishing the role of parents or trying to take their place, but instead noting that some

of the conversations and time she gives to mentees should occur with their parents, but if

that does not happen, she makes herself available. With this availability, it is important

that she does not become a hostage to the role of muse. Van Manen (2000) reminds us that we can be held hostage "by a vulnerable child who exercises power over" (p. 320) us. Does this happen when muses give too much of themselves? Absolutely! If we do not learn to release responsibility, we will find ourselves forced into this place of mentoring, which is not what we want. Remember, as muses, we belong in this place and it is necessary to "find a balance in your belonging" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 144). Without that balance, we give ourselves completely over to mentoring and that will not benefit anyone involved. All muses, giving of themselves, should take heed of Palmer's (2000) words: "Self-care is never a selfish act – it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others" (p. 30).

Upholding your promises also connects to this sense of pressure that some of the mentors feel in their mentoring relationships. I refer to it as *positive pressure* because it seems to be helpful for both mentors and mentees, but it is still pressure nonetheless. Priscilla shares, "I think the pressure's on me too. How am I gonna tell them to make a good choice and I'm making a bad choice?" As a result of this pressure, Priscilla finds herself being even more aware of her own behaviors and actions so she can continue to encourage her mentees. For Trina, this positive pressure motivates her to work toward achieving her own goals. As a thirty-two year old student, at times Trina feels discouraged and overwhelmed, but admits, "My mentees keep me encouraged because I know that they're looking up to me… If I quit, how can I tell somebody else not to?"

With challenges in mentoring, there can also come this feeling of inadequacy. Feeling inadequate leads muses to believe that we are not giving enough of ourselves to our mentees. It is a difficult balance between the feeling of giving too much and not

182

doing enough in the mentoring relationships. Where does this feeling of inadequacy come from? Lauryn believes that her mentees "are strong Black girls who will become strong Black women." As their mentor, she wants to be one representation of strong Black womanhood in their lives. It is possible that when determined to be strong Black women, we miss the fact that while we are strong, we are still human and cannot do it all. Harris-Perry (2011) concludes:

> The strong black woman is a complicated cultural myth. On one hand, she is a deeply empowering symbol of endurance and hope. Her unassailable spirit is uplifting. Her courage in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity emboldens black men and women when facing their own life challenges. But in her perfection, the strong black woman is also harmful. Her titanic strength does violence to the spirits of black women when it becomes an imperative for their daily lives. When seeking help means showing unacceptable weakness, actual black women, unlike their mythical counterpart, face depression, anxiety, and loneliness. (p. 215)

Lauryn admits there are times when she does not feel like meeting with her mentees and she feels "horrible" for feeling this way, but it is the truth. On the other hand, although she does not have the energy or desire to meet with her mentees, Lauryn still fears "letting them down" and not giving them the attention and structure they need.

Lauryn becomes anxious about disappointing her mentees, but as Harris-Perry states, it is important to realize our own limitations. There is also strength in honesty. Being honest enough with ourselves to admit that we are tired, drained, and simply need a break shows the concern that we have for ourselves and others. Can I really provide the support and listening ear mentees need and deserve when I am out of balance? A part of helping our mentees is using additional resources and connecting them with others who can be of assistance. After sharing that she had a mentee, Phylicia, who would call in the evenings and late into the night to talk about issues with her family, including possible

sexual abuse, Lauryn openly admits both her lack of setting boundaries as well as her

inability to provide what she feels Phylicia truly needs.

> She started calling me maybe a year into the program when things were getting worse. She started calling me a lot. It would be after 8 o clock, sometimes eleven. I was busy with school, clearly. It be like on the weekends. I feel so horrible for saying that. I'm like "I'm trying to have fun right now. I'm not gonna pick up this phone." I didn't know how to feel. I didn't want to be selfish, but I'm like, I'm not her mother. She was sad and I'm like I'm putting myself as this mentor, I can't hold up the deal all the time. I never made boundaries because I didn't know I needed to. It was a learning process.

After realizing the severity of Phylicia's issues and taking her to speak with the school

counselor, Lauryn asked herself:

> What do I do? I'm not a social worker, I'm not trained. I wish I was. I know I don't need it, but in these situations, what do I do? Do I do anything? And I have to remember that these girls keep going back, with the good and the bad times at home, not just with me.

Questioning her own capacity truly to help Phylicia and mentees in similar

situations, Lauryn is reminded that her work and her influence are limited because the

mentees have real-life situations occurring in their families and at home that might not be

easily fixed or dealt with. I agree that "We can learn as much about our nature by running

into our limits as by experiencing our potentials" (Palmer, 2000, pp. 41-42) and,

therefore, need to recognize our inability to be everything to everybody. In their work

around race, ethnicity and culture in mentoring, Sánchez and Colón (2005) recommend

that mentors connect with other adults in the mentees' social network for additional

support. This not only releases the mentors, but provides a better mentoring experience

for the mentee who now has more than one adult to rely on for guidance and support.

Through all of the challenges, mentors notice the changes in themselves as a result of

their mentoring. With these changes also comes reflection as to why they remain committed to their mentees and what this commitment means.

Through it All: Remaining Committed

> It is funny how as a mentor you are expected to help your mentees with their life struggles and hurts but through you helping them they can actually be helping you and not even know it. I am thankful and grateful for all of my mentees. I am truly inspired by their accomplishments and obstacles that they overcome to reach their goals and that is one of the greatest joys about being a mentor. (Trina)

As mentors, I think we often enter into the mentoring relationship with the expectation of helping our mentees, but not thinking about the possibility that the relationship will help and possibly change us as individuals. These benefits should be expected with the reciprocal nature of mentoring. As Levinas (1999) mentions, the reciprocity I promote is genuine and naturally occurs within the mentoring relationships. The muses entered these relationships focused on the mentees and not anticipating the benefits they would receive. Like Trina, all of the muses in this study notice changes in their own lives and how their mentors have helped them to grow. While working through the challenges in mentoring, we begin to change and ultimately remain committed to our mentees. Alice and Deanna have noticed that they are both better listeners since they have become mentors. Alice tries more "to understand what a person is in need of" instead of just trying to solve their problems, whereas Deanna's listening is helping her in her mentoring, teaching and relationships with family members. Her communication has improved to a point where she can express how she feels without becoming angry or hostile. Since Deanna advises her mentees to communicate respectfully, she engages in that behavior even more now, modeling this for her mentees and doing the same when they are not present. Deanna's improved communication stems from a particular type of

listening. She has transitioned from listening-for into listening-to. Instead of simply listening-for what she wants to hear, Deanna listens-to others. "*Listening-to* is a concentrated attention, silent, patient, willing to *take the time* to listen carefully" (Levin, 1989, p. 84) type of listening. This careful listening allows the opportunity for the speaker to share her thoughts, feelings or opinions, and allows the listener the opportunity to understand the other's perspective or experience better. If listening-to is reciprocated in conversations among muses and mentees, this can only enhance their understanding of one another, even in the midst of disagreements.

Angela admits that she was close-minded and stubborn when it came to her opinions and perceptions about others, particularly White people. Through her first mentoring relationships, Angela realized how her attitude was limiting her opportunities to be herself and give to others without suspicion of being taken advantage of.

> It was just that whole, I was so adamant about certain people that it was hard for me to be who I really am, that giving person because I always felt that what I was giving somebody was trying to take and oddly enough the first kids that I got to mentor were not African American. So I'm saying if I'm giving all of this to someone else with the love and care because a kid is a kid, why can't I be home in my own environment and do the same thing?

This is an extreme change that allows Angela the opportunity to build relationships with individuals of different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, whereas prior to mentoring she had no interest in establishing such relationships. When asked about her commitment to mentoring, Angela honestly shares that every time she thinks about stopping, one of her mentees will change her mind. "Then you'll be out and you'll see that kid that you mentored and they'll be doing something positive," and in that moment, Angela has the opportunity to see that all of her time and effort has paid off. She concludes, "I'm definitely going to continue to do it."

186

With commitment comes reflection. Deanna feels, "Like if I stop now, I'm pretty much quitting on my inner child. Remember the first meeting I told you I wish I had a mentor growing up? So I'm quitting on my inner child." Deanna refuses to give up on her mentees because she recalls what it feels like to go through trials and struggles alone as an adolescent. There is a very redemptive nature in the commitment of the muses. Deanna will not give up on her mentees, nor will she give up on herself. The redemption present promotes the communal aspect of uplift in African American communities. Instead of waiting on others to liberate us, we liberate ourselves. Deanna and the other muses strive to promote this ability to redeem others and ourselves through their commitment to mentoring. This commitment extends far beyond Saturday meetings to personal interactions and helping mentees to create positive memories. Having a mother incarcerated, Deanna knows what it feels like not to see her mother on a regular basis. After a discussion with Tanya's grandmother, Deanna decided to drive Tanya, one of her mentees, four hours away to visit her mother in prison since Tanya's grandmother was physically unable to make the trip. This is a moment that Tanya can share with her mother, but also with Deanna. How she extends herself, in the midst of feeling inadequate, she pushes through; Deanna strives to make a difference in the lives of her mentees.

Commit, from the Latin *committere,* means to unite, connect, combine. When you commit to mentoring you unite with someone. You also unite with the place of mentoring. When you truly commit, you cannot simply walk away because of difficulties, since unite from *unus* means one. To commit means to become one with what or to whom you have committed. This speaks to the muses' persistence in mentoring,

187

regardless of the challenges. Since "a transformational journey is not for the fainthearted" (Small, 1995, p. 9); not everyone can be a committed mentor. Commitment is about always remaining dedicated, especially in the times of challenge and frustration. The muses in this study do just that to make sure that their mentees are provided with the necessary resources and support. As African American females, there is a sense of connectedness because of race and gender, but also much more.

Secrets in the Village

> We cannot be silent on things that matter because we are each a part of the village and the village has historically been our safeguard and our refuge and the secret to our resilience. The integrity, the vigor, and the zealous action of the village is critical now more than ever in order to diffuse damaging and toxic messages that continue to subliminally undermine our children's understanding of self worth. Messages that denigrate the integrity of womanhood and show very few examples of healthy sisterhood and offer fighting and arguing as viable ways for women and girls to resolve conflict. Messages that enable our youth to embrace despondency, death, destruction and a distorted value system so easily. Our ancestors instilled the value of group accountability with the phrase "Each one teach one" and tonight our honorees remind us that it is our collective duty to commit ourselves to the work of rebuilding our village. (Bond & Orlando, 2013)

Beverly Bond (Bond & Orlando, 2013), the founder of Black Girls Rock, a non-profit mentoring organization focused on enriching and empowering girls of color, urged viewers during the 2013 Black Girls Rock ceremony to recognize their place in the village. It is not simply that we are a part of the village – we *belong* in the village. Muses and mentees dwell together and belong in a place where they are valued, appreciated and challenged. The pain of loss and hurt, along with the absence of African American female mentors are all within the village. Our own perceptions of youth and the mirror we have the opportunity to look into reflectively also belong in the village right beside our challenges, obstacles and difficulties encountered while mentoring. Bond proclaims the village is the Black woman's "secret to our resilience" and undoubtedly needs to be intact

and visible in today's society for our youth. Taking it a step further, I think Black women

need the village just as much as the youth. The Black women in the village have their

own unique insights, experiences and struggles that help us to embrace one another in a

new way. As we work with mentees, African American female muses rock: we rock

perceptions, attitudes, lives and hearts. Through it all, we rock.

CHAPTER FIVE:
I AM WHO I AM: BLACK FEMININITY

> She is a college graduate. A drop-out. A student. A wife. A divorcee. A mother. A lover. A child of the ghetto. A product of the bourgeoisie. A professional writer. A person who never dreamed of publication. A solitary individual. A member of the Movement. A gentle humanist. A violent revolutionary. She is angry and tender, loving and hating. She is all these things – and more. (Bambara, 1970, pp. xvii-xviii)

Jezebel, Mammy and Sapphire are just a few of the stereotypical images of African American women dominating the conversations around our bodies, relationships and personalities. Even though it is clear that our backgrounds, upbringings, experiences, achievements and goals are varied and far too diverse to be generalized, this continues to occur within today's society. Even Michelle Obama, the First Lady of the United States, must endure constant critiques, vicious attacks and blatant insults, for the most part, connected to stereotypical representations of African American women. Harris-Perry (2011) writes about the crooked room we as African American women are forced to exist in because of society's unending gaze and recognizes that Michelle Obama "is the most visible contemporary example of an African American woman working to stand straight in a crooked room" (p. 271). This theme, "I Am Who I Am: Black Femininity," emerges from this group of African American female muses who also are working to stand straight in a crooked room. In other words, the muses recognize how they are perceived and what this means for their current roles in working with today's youth.

Our conversations as African American female muses lead us to question our interactions with other African American females, including both our mentees and other African American women, as well as how we are perceived by others and how we see ourselves. We all come to the conclusion that in mentoring race definitely matters, but we

know that it is not the only significant factor in the relationship. If mentors and mentees cannot relate to one another, the relationship will become ineffective and ultimately end. Reflecting on who we are and our experiences around race, we discuss the challenges associated with being an African American female along with the support found within our "sister" circles. The difficult experiences help us to empower our mentees and persist in our efforts.

Not All Bad, Not All Good: African American Female Interactions

The relationships among African American women start within the family and historically have been filled with support that has become a "sisterhood" (McDonald, 2007, p. 4). With the diversity among us, some African American women believe that this sisterhood is fading. While conversing with the muses, some of their experiences support this notion yet they also have experiences that point to the closeness of sisterhood among African American women. McDonald notes that as Black women's experiences have become more diverse, the discord among us "is generally accepted as a natural outgrowth of that diversity" (p. 4). I wonder about the influence of this discord in mentoring since the muses speak about the variations of African American female interactions with both their mentees and other African American women.

Dasein is the word Heidegger (1962) uses to define our existence as human beings. What makes us unique from everything else that *is* and *exists* is our ability to define for ourselves what is essential about our very existence (Dreyfus, 1995). Heidegger extends *Dasein* when he writes about our being- in-the-world with others. He states, "The world is always the one I share with Others" (p. 118). As African American women, we define for ourselves our interactions with one another. If the sisterhood is

191

fading, this is unfortunate because as Walker (1991) asks rhetorically, "Is solace anywhere more comforting than in the arms of sisters?" (p. 418). When I hear statements such as, "Let's be honest. Black females, sometimes we are the most difficult creature and we are jealous of each other and we always break each other down instead of encouraging one another" (Deanna), I too, begin to question the sustainability of sisterhood. But then when I hear, "Yes we can argue and disagree, but at the end of the day I still have your back" (Priscilla) in reference to relationships and support among African American women, I am reminded that the sisterhood is present, although some believe it continues to fade. Knowing that the sisterhood is present, it is necessary to explore the tensions among African American women, particularly in the lives of the muses, since they not only interact with African American female youth, but they also share their experiences and model those interactions for them.

Torn Down from the Inside Out

While discussing instances within her own family around skin complexion and beauty, Angela mentions Gabrielle "Gabby" Douglas, the first African American gymnast to win a gold medal in the individual all around at the 2012 summer Olympics. Angela shares, "You know it wasn't people on the outside saying that…They wouldn't know one strand from another" when referring to critiques about Gabrielle's hair made largely by African American women in blogs and on social media outlets. When these situations occur, it makes me and the other muses wonder, "Why?" During a conversation with Oprah and other African American actresses in Hollywood, Gabrielle Union offered a comment that might shed light on this issue. She said, "Nowadays there

is this celebration of how kids say 'the ratched-ness.' You're supported in tearing people down" (Eberhart & Augustine, 2013).

Why would African American women want to tear each other down instead of lift one another up? It takes effort and energy to edify others, whereas insulting and tearing them down is quick and easy, requiring what seems like nothing more than angry words. Lorde (1984/2007) writes that the journey that leads to healthier relationships among Black women is "uncharted and insecure" (p. 161). Collins (2009) notes that one of the difficulties in Black women's relationships is the lack of "affirming one another in a society that derogates Black women as a group" (p. 115). Both to affirm others and journey with them require effort, energy and time. The muses use their time and put forth effort as well as energy in their mentoring relationships, so why do they sense jealousy and competition when mentoring African American female youth? Do these feelings, perhaps, stem from the muses' own experiences and interactions with African American women? Is there pain embedded in these interactions that stem from societal notions of Black womanhood?

"If I look at my most vulnerable places and acknowledge the pain I have felt, I can remove the source of that pain from my enemies' arsenals" (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 146). Lorde highlights the ugliness and pervasiveness of racism as the cause of Black women's lack of self-love and inability to love and encourage other Black women. Within the systemic structure of racism in America, there is a need for African American women and girls to find their own space to resist the prevailing notions of who they are and become a part of the conversations that shape their lives (Brown, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011; Winn, 2011). While reflecting on her own experiences with racism, Alice shares,

"It's sad that people are that way but it's reality and sometimes you have to take a dose of reality and just understand that is reality." Inevitably, situations connected to race do occur. In the mentoring relationship, sharing our experiences with mentees can possibly prepare them for these situations. Alice recognizes, "It may have hurt, affected you but you know what, in the end I'll be okay."

Lorde notes, "It is easier to deal with the external manifestations of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another" (p. 147). In other words, it is easier to project pain and hurt on others instead of dealing with my own. If, as a Black woman, I see the distorted image of less than, not good enough and worthless that is present in racist mindsets and rhetoric when I look in the mirror, I see the same thing when I see another Black woman. This also connects to the muses' admittance of jealousy and competition. If I see that another Black woman appears to be standing straight in society's crooked room (Harris-Perry, 2011), instead of a source of inspiration, it is possible that she could become a target of my own insecurities. This, unfortunately, is the presentation displayed most prominently about Black women through media.

The REAL in REALity Television

The positive side of African American female interactions far outweighs the negative, although the negative is often highlighted. Arguably, this occurs, in part to reality television programs that continue to perpetuate stereotypes around female interactions, particularly women of color. Conversations around the characters and behaviors in these shows occur between the muses and their teenage African American female mentees.

In *Essence* magazine, Jeannine Amber (2013) writes about the falsehood of reality television shows and the representations of African American women as a result of their popularity.

> From the all-out brawls on *Basketball Wives* to the grimy love triangles on *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta*, reality TV has become a significant force in disseminating images of Black women to the viewing public. But to the chagrin of many, these shows seem to feature one type of woman most prominently: She's irrational, unreasonable, oversexed and violent, and more often than not she's so lacking in self-regard she's willing to be humiliated publicly by the man she claims to love. In short, the women on these shows often represent the worst stereotypes ever hurled at us. *Tacky. Violent. Ho.* (p. 85)

Tacky. Violent. Ho. Once again, these are the stereotypical generalizations made about African American women, and now there are millions watching each week to affirm that this is the way African American women (on reality television, anyway) behave. It is unfortunate, but "The public can't seem to get enough of the glamorized and ghettoization of Black womanhood" (Boylorn, 2008, p. 424). This public includes adolescent females that can begin to mimic the behaviors they observe from the popular and now famous reality television stars. Do these distorted images of African American women show themselves in mentoring relationships? If so, what do these distorted representations mean within the mentoring relationship? What occurs when these stereotypical images are addressed and even challenged between muses and mentees?

Angela, Deanna and Trina mention that they recognize the role of reality television and media in how their mentees behave, dress and interact with their peers. No, mentors do not underestimate their mentees and realize that there are some who engage in the negative behaviors modeled on reality television, but not all. In agreement with Hall and Brown-Thirston (2011), the muses recognize that "adolescents possess the power to either accept or reject societal scripts and, in the process, develop their own unique

identity and perspective" (p. 23). When the negative behaviors and responses prevail, these become teachable moments to remind mentees that these shows are not "reality" at all since many of the shows are scripted and manipulated by producers for high ratings.

After observing negative behaviors in some of her eleven and twelve year old students and mentees Deanna asks them, "Why do you have drama?" and they respond, "I don't know. I don't like the way she looked at me." These responses display immaturity and a willingness to engage in conflict without any reason, at least not one they will share with their teacher. Is it possible this connects to "the confusion of feelings which exist between sisters," and if not addressed, are shown "in hundreds of hurtful and unproductive ways" (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 170)? Instead of ignoring their behaviors, Deanna decides to confront this issue with an activity. Since she hears some of her mentees referring to themselves as "the baddest chick," Deanna uses reality TV's, "The Bad Girl Club" as a starting point and asks her mentees "Are you the baddest or are you a bad girl?" Deanna challenges her mentees to think about what it actually means to be the "baddest" by raising thoughtful questions: "Are you applying to college? Are you trying to build relationships with your teachers? Are you doing community service?" In the end, Deanna wants her mentees to understand that you can be "the baddest" by excelling academically, giving back to your community and respecting yourself and others. By the end of having the opportunity to think about their actions and thoughts about what it means to be "bad," the mentees ask, "Wow, I was acting like that? I was sounding like that?" When given the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their own perceptions and interactions with other females, the mentees actually begin to see and admit how inappropriate their behavior is towards others.

Angela shares a discussion she had with some of her mentees about a popular reality television show, emphasizing that not only is the show fake, but also that mature, responsible adults do not deal with their issues in unnecessarily violent and aggressive manners.

> You don't really think this is real life, do you? You don't really think that it's okay as adults to just slap somebody? That's not maturity. That's not being an adult. That's not being a responsible adult.

As a self-proclaimed responsible adult, I must admit that when watching women of color, particularly African American women, on these shows I have been entertained and at the same time embarrassed and ashamed: entertained by the glitz and the glamour of mansions, luxury cars and exotic getaways; embarrassed and ashamed by the blatant disrespect displayed towards one another. As an African American woman, what can I do to deal with these mixed emotions while promoting positive and loving interactions between African American women? Boylorn (2008) shares her own mixed feelings in "S.W.A. (A Poem),"

> beautiful teeth and skin and
> angry defensive words
> demanding respect or love or
> to be heard
> listened to, remembered
> I want to tell her to
> keep in mind
> her actions reflect
> somewhat, sometimes
> on me
> another
> black woman…
> wrapping herself in stereotypes
> bearing the shame for fame
> I watch her
> like watching myself in slow motion
> killing me softly
> innocently

an inarticulate part of me…
everyday
reality
being judged without witnesses
or the ability to defend myself
against lies you tell
assumptions you make
the way you look down on me
with the things you say
its real, world
not a different world
no other mother
no sisterfriend
with beautiful teeth and brown skin
bringing me back to life again
putting our issues on the table…
my scars are not visible on tv
that girl, her words, that doesn't represent me
but beautiful teeth and skin and
reality sets in again
cause it's a personal thing sister,
this is just me
milking this temporary celebrity
and my beautiful teeth and skin and
there you go again
judging me because that girl on tv
put you in the mind of me
and she took off her clothes
and her hair and
left me exposed
acting like she didn't have home training
or home school, or no school
she dropped out of school
or put herself through school
how much does it cost
to sell yourself
short…
(pp. 426-428)

Boylorn (2008) emphasizes through repetition that these women are physically

beautiful and this is part of the appeal. Regardless, their beauty does not eliminate the

judgment and assumptions that are hurled at other Black women because of what viewers

believe are accurate depictions. The poet expresses that as a sister with attitude, she can

relate to African American female characters on reality television programs and their desire to be heard and listened to, but she is troubled that there is no support and encouragement shown among an "other mother" or "sisterfriend." She, the African American woman at home, not affiliated with these shows, is left feeling exposed. To be exposed is embarrassing, humiliating, particularly when the exposure is unwelcomed and invasive.

As an African American female mentor, I share Boylorn's feelings. Is it possible that African American female mentees share these feelings, as well? What does this mean within the mentoring relationship? Muses are flawed, real-life individuals who are present in the lives of their mentees to counter the behaviors presented on television. They are not hidden behind cameras, scripts, or persona. Of course, the expectation is that by witnessing healthy interactions and engaging in them with the muses, mentees will begin to engage in more positive, healthy interactions with their female peers, but there is something else that must occur before this can happen.

Mothering and Sistering

Since, unfortunately "There have been few external examples of how to treat another Black woman with kindness, deference, tenderness or an appreciative smile in passing, just because she IS" both muses and mentees "have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other" (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 175). Lorde asserts that we can start with an appreciation of Black beauty, but our attempt to love on one another must extend beyond the superficial. She believes that we must "learn to mother ourselves" (p. 173). Not all African American female interactions are negative

and many of us have learned how to mother one another. Thinking about the special,

unique relationship between African American mothers and daughters, to mother one

another is to care for, support and nurture one another in a way that only we can do for

each other. Lorde writes,

> …as I learn my worth and genuine possibility, I refuse to settle for anything less
> than a rigorous pursuit of the possible in myself, at the same time making a
> distinction between what is possible and what the outside world drives me to do in
> order to prove I am human. It means being able to recognize my successes, and to
> be tender with myself, even when I fail. (p. 173)

What does this mean for interactions among Black women? It means that as I begin to see

myself this way, I will also see other Black women in this way as well. I will begin to see

them as empowered, successful, persistent and worth far more than what is repeated

within public discourse. There must be an intentional, habit-formed love and appreciation

for other African American women.

Whether it is a sense of comfort, or the notion of "sisterhood," the muses in this

study support and receive support from other African American women. It is a different

kind of support and although, Priscilla cannot articulate why this is, she understands that

the "sisters" need one another. Trina finds that she gravitates towards other African

Americans because in that space she is comfortable. Lauryn remembers that support

among African American students in her predominantly White private high school. She

found herself relying on the presence of other African American students, recognizing "it

was this unknown but known fact that we needed each other." Why do African American

women need each other? What connects us in such a special way?

According to McDonald (2007), the struggle we encounter as African American

women is what connects us. McDonald writes, "As was true for their foremothers, what

unifies black women today is their strong self-esteem and sense of pride manifested by,

among other things, their strong feelings of identification and their virtual personification

with the notion of 'struggle'" (p. 6). McDonald continues in writing that Black women

are connected through struggle and oppression, so when we collectively advance and

progress, there is support and encouragement from within the Black female community.

This support and encouragement for Trina lead her to embrace who she is as an African

American woman and hopefully instill the same in her mentees. She shares:

> I'm very proud of being Black and an African American woman, despite the
> struggles that our ancestors might have went through. I'm proud for who I am and
> I won't let anybody take that from me or try to dictate because I am of African
> American skin complexion, I can't do what they can do.

There are countless reasons for discord and tension among African American

women. Whatever the reason, in mentoring relationships, it is an opportunity to discuss

these tensions and confront the issues that mentors and mentees might have with their

peers, co-workers and one another, while also learning and teaching what it means to

"mother ourselves." Through engaging in open dialogue about these tensions, mentors

and mentees can begin to embrace their similarities and differences, seeing the beauty in

both.

Yours and Mine: In-between Two Realities

> Oprah Winfrey: You were at the crux of it for eight years as Clair Huxtable. I
> remember when "The Cosby Show" first came on there were a lot of, particularly
> White and some African American people also, saying "Oh that wasn't realistic."
> You all had to answer that question over and over. "How is it realistic to have a
> doctor and a lawyer in the same house?"
> Phylicia Rashad: Well, they didn't grow up in my community. I grew up in
> Houston, TX in third ward and it was very realistic and it wasn't just realistic in
> Houston, TX. It was realistic in Charlotte, NC, in Atlanta, in New York, in
> Richmond, in Hampton, it was realistic in a lot of places, in Los Angeles. It was
> realistic in a lot of places. I guess it just depends on who

Oprah Winfrey: Who you know
Phylicia Rashad: And what you know (Eberhart & Augustine, 2013)

Recently Oprah Winfrey sat down for a conversation with Black actresses in Hollywood. During the conversation, Oprah talked to Phylicia Rashad about her time on the long-running sitcom "The Cosby Show." This groundbreaking television show continues to present images of African Americans in a positive light. Moreover, seeing an African American doctor and lawyer in one household was a representation of the Black family that many had never seen before so this presented new possibilities that previously had not been highlighted. Phylicia Rashad states that it is who you know and what you know that makes the difference in your perceptions. Dwelling in-between two realities, their own and that of their mentees', the muses also must rely on who they know and what they know. To use our experiences with certain individuals and knowledge attained over the years about different places and events is important, but to solely rely on that can be limiting. What we have known in the past can be built upon through our relationships with our mentees. What we think we know about today's youth changes based upon the conversations we have with our mentees and the time we spend with them. It is through those interactions that we understand generalizing and categorizing cannot happen.

Aoki (2005b) writes about dwelling between two zones when teachers find themselves between the planned curriculum and the lived curriculum. Similarly, muses find themselves between their own realities and that of their mentees. When describing the in-between experience of one teacher, Aoki writes:

> Miss O realizes the challenges and difficulties that living within the Zone of Between entails, but she learns, too, that, living as a teacher in tensionality is indeed living teaching as a mode of being that with all its ever-present risks, beckons the teacher to struggle to be true to what teaching essentially is. Miss O, our teacher, knows that indwelling in the zone between curriculum-as-plan and

202

curriculum-as-lived experience is not so much a matter of overcoming the tensionality but more a matter of dwelling within it. (p. 163)

To find myself in-between is not the most comfortable place to be, but it is necessary. I cannot completely move away from my reality as a muse, but I must engage with the reality of my mentees, or I find that I cannot relate to them. Otherwise, this lacks the willingness, on my part to strengthen and develop our relationships. Like Miss O, I too, must learn to dwell within the tensions of the two realities. It is within this space that I get at the essence of what it means to mentor someone, and that is an extremely important piece of phenomenological inquiry. To get at the essence of being a muse, we cannot ignore the tension involved. Aoki (2005a) recommends moving towards juxtaposition between the two curriculums and for this reason, believes "it may be worthwhile to explore *the tensionality*" (p. 232) in this space. For muses and mentees, there needs to be a juxtaposition of some sort. Being able to connect and come together while in the midst of tension can help to strengthen the mentoring relationship.

During our conversations, the muses mentioned a number of entry points for tension in their mentoring relationships: decisions, "I always say, 'That's your choice. I would say that isn't a good choice, but if that's your decision, I can't hold that against you'" (Priscilla); entertainment, "They're just like looking at what's on television…listening to all these songs where these people are disrespecting one another…'You don't have to downgrade yourself to be or in order for somebody to like you or give you attention'" (Trina); generational struggles, "They [today's youth] have not had to go through the struggles that we did. It doesn't matter to them and some of them will just say that and they're being honest" (Angela). When mentees make choices that differ from those of their muses, listen to music their muses think is problematic and

203

do not endure the same struggles, this can all cause tension. Of course, the poor choices, problematic lyrics and incomparable struggles are all from the muses' perspectives. Mentees must make their own choices and will not always have the approval of muses, but it may be the best decision for them. As muses, we also might not appreciate the music or be aware of the societal struggles our mentees face, but through conversations we can learn about their interests and recognize the present day struggles mentees face and persist through in their lives. Within this space of tension, muses have learned more about themselves and how to share truths with their mentees. Let us not forget that mentees, too, are in-between. Muses are not alone in this space. We both must learn how to navigate this space and that comes with confronting the differences while also exploring the similarities among muses and mentees.

The muses in this study help to introduce to some, and reinforce in the lives of other mentees, that there are African American female Lieutenant Colonels, scientists and doctoral students. By sustaining and growing in these mentoring relationships, both mentors and mentees can enlarge the "who and what" they know. Personally, as a teenager watching "The Cosby Show," I did not know any African American lawyers or doctors, but what I did know as a result of the show is that it was possible. Two successful, college educated, African American parents could raise their children with love, respect, discipline and humor. What possibilities do the muses present for their mentees? What do both groups come to know as a result of their relationships?

Because I am Black?

We, as African American female muses, have come to the conclusion that race does matter in our mentoring relationships, particularly stemming from our own

experiences with race. Some of these experiences float around the question, "…because I am Black?" Was I treated that way because I am Black? Did you say that to me because I am Black? These questions float around a number of experiences in my own life, and there are times when I have been unsure of the answer and other times when I was fully aware that situations have occurred and statements have been made because I am Black. Racism, not only displayed blatantly, but in more subtle and systemic ways, is very much present and must be addressed in mentoring relationships between African American females. Walker (1991) writes about the perspectives of racists in her poem "First, They Said."

> Finally, they had to agree with us.
> They said: You are right. It is not your savagery
> Or your immorality or your racial inferiority or
> your people's backwardness or your obstruction of
> Progress or your appetite or your infestation of the land
> that is at fault. No. What is at fault
> is your existence itself.
> (p. 323)

After working through excuse after excuse and reason after reason, racism ultimately comes down to the existence of the other. When you are considered a savage, immoral or inferior, there are dismissive justifications for the hate and prejudice, but what happens when it is simply your existence? The look of the hate and the prejudice changes: It is no longer as blatant, but now more steeped in rules, laws and societal practices that cloak themselves in equality and fairness, but in reality are merely in place to dominate, control and stifle. Pitts (2008) writes:

> …to be black in modern America is to feel the touch of hidden hands pressing down upon you. You know they're there. Their effect is clear in government and university statistics documenting that, in terms of education, employment, housing, justice, health, and other quality-of-life indicators, people like you lag behind the nation as a whole. (p. 138)

When someone believes that your mere existence is a problem, what does that feel like? What is the feeling of those pressing hands upon "people like you"? With pressing hands there is a pressure. What does this pressure mean within mentoring relationships among African American female muses and their female youth mentees? Each muse reflected upon an experience or multiple experiences when her race became even more apparent to her or more apparent to others. In school, at work, within our families, what do these experiences mean? As muses, when do our experiences with race become a part of our interactions with our mentees? What do we encounter when this occurs? Honest care stems from a place of concern. Even at the risk of push back and tension, when you care you do not "stand from some special attitude towards the self" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 192). In other words, part of being a muse and displaying genuine concern towards mentees is focusing on their well-being before thinking about self. Of course, as mentioned earlier, there must be balance and boundaries even within care. Ultimately, honesty, even brutal, if necessary, is the conclusion because when African American women care (Roseboro & Ross, 2009), we tend to show it through honest conversation connected to societal experiences our mentees will encounter.

Out of awareness and concern for her mentees and students, Deanna tells them that the struggles they face as African American youth are real, so real in fact that in her opinion, they already have two strikes against them: "You Black and you Black." As her mentees and students refer to it, Deanna's "Martin Luther King" speech captures her concern and expectations of her mentees' and students' behavior:

> "People are gonna judge you not because of what's in your mind, because of the color of your skin. Already society has this stereotype of how we're supposed to be so why can't we be better than that? Why can't we show people that you are

intelligent, that you do have great manners, that you do have great values, that you are articulate, that you're not a troublemaker." I don't know maybe this is where my stress level comes in, I just feel like it's important that my job as a teacher and a mentor is to educate them on these things.

"These things" that Deanna speaks of include the societal perspectives and perceptions of who her African American mentees and students are simply based on the color of their skin. For Deanna, it is necessary to share this information with the African American youth she works with because it is her job to prepare them for the categorization that may occur in their lives because of their race. In her poem "Categories," Giovanni (2003) expresses her feelings about the missed opportunity for relationship because of the fear, even hatred, some Whites have for Blacks.

> And sometimes on rainy nights you see
> An old white woman who maybe you'd really care about
> Except that you're a young Black woman
> Whose job it is to kill maim or seriously
> Make her question
> The validity of her existence
> And you look at her kind of funny colored eyes
> And you think
> If she weren't such an aggressive bitch she would see
> That if you weren't such a Black one
> There would be a relationship
> (p. 165)

If, well when, mentees encounter individuals who assume they are a danger to society and should not even coexist with them, will Deanna's words help them to work through such a painful experience? Regardless of the warnings and preparation, each and every time I personally feel the gaze of hatred accompanied with racism, or hear of someone else's unfortunate experience, it hurts. I think it is in moments like this when having an African American female mentor, for me personally, matters most. Of course, race is not the only important factor, but it does matter.

Can We Relate?

Being able to see someone who looks like you where you strive to end up in the future is a strong motivator and reminder of your own potential and ability to succeed. According to Angela, Trina, and Deanna race matters in their mentoring relationships:

> I really do believe that if a child, especially an African American child has been mentored by an African American person and they really are getting it, there's no way they're not gonna wanna go back to their home base and want to give some of that back. (Angela)

> As a Black woman, I can tell a Black, some Black girls they just want to hear from their people somebody that looks like them. They can come up against so many different things when it comes to certain things. Why am I not getting the scholarships that maybe another, a White girl might get, or they're not even available like they are for Caucasians. I just think that dealing with a younger Black girl or whatever, they can relate. (Trina)

> By them telling you their life story and about them telling me what they did for a living, it inspired me that I want to be part of that. I want to make money. I want to be part of Eastern Star Organization. Everything I said I was gonna do, I pretty much did, just because of going to church with my grandma, staying there 'til 6, 7 o'clock on Sunday, just being exposed to those women, Black women. (Deanna)

For Angela, "getting it" means that her mentees grasp what she deems important. Trina notices the challenges her mentees "come up against" as they pursue higher education, while Deanna proclaims that when she sets goals, they are accomplished. What happens when mentees are not "getting it?" What challenges do mentees face within the mentoring relationship? What do muses think when their mentees do not live up to their accomplishments?

While recognizing the significance of race, the mentors also acknowledge that race is not the only factor within meaningful mentoring relationships. Ultimately, it comes down to muses and mentees being able to relate to one another. There is opportunity in each of the above statements for challenge and disagreement among muses

and mentees. Through the connectedness of race and gender, muses and mentees still need to relate in order to learn through their similarities and particularly their differences. Muses inspire and illuminate the potential of their mentees (Sullivan, 1996). This cannot happen if muses and mentees do not relate to one another.

Van Manen (1997) writes that our lived relation "allows us to transcend our *selves*" (p. 105) and it is necessary to move beyond our own experiences to relate to others. Relate from the 1520's *relater* means to "recount, tell." When mentors tell of and share their life experiences with mentees, this can help to bridge the gap between the two. By telling, muses make themselves vulnerable and express to mentees that they have similar experiences, even if there is an age or class difference. In the 1640's, the meaning for relate changed to "stand in some relation; have reference or respect." While they engage in these mentoring relationships, there also has to be a mutual level of respect, as well as some sense of understanding of the mentees' perspective. Moreover, why would I tell anything to someone that I did not respect or have some form of relationship with? Without respect, the relationship cannot grow. How can we sustain a healthy mentoring relationship without respect and understanding? Even within disagreements, respect and understanding of the different perspectives helps to keep the relationships intact.

When I think of the word relate, I think of being related, familial relations. This does not automatically result in closeness, but there is an instant connection. I am connected to my older sister through blood, facial features and our father, but I am much emotionally closer to friends than I am to my sister. Connection and closeness are both present in ideal mentoring relationships. While closeness is admirable, connection is

necessary in order for muses and mentees to relate. An *anam ĉara* or soul friend is someone you feel comfortable enough with to reveal "the hidden intimacies of life" (O' Donohue, 1997, p. 13). Although friendship it is not the most common connection we think about when we hear the word "mentor" at times, muses and mentees become soul friends. This friendship moves beyond the superficial and becomes a place of belonging and comfort that lasts through challenges.

Hall and Brown-Thirston (2011) value relatedness among mentors and mentees, even promoting training if necessary for mentors, "particularly those whose life experiences and frames of reference do not reflect that of" (p. 91) their mentees. We know that being the same gender and race does not guarantee that mentors and mentees will relate to one another. There are a number of additional factors that play an important role in the mentoring relationship, including age and class.

Age to Age

All of the muses in this study are at least one to three decades older than their mentees, and this most certainly plays a role in their mentoring relationships. Even though it is common in the African American community for older adults to mentor and support youth (Collins, 2009; Edelman, 1999; Taylor, LoSciuto & Porcellini, 2005), it is still necessary to find ways to bridge the gap between generations. Muses find that they must have the ability to relate through generational differences and perspectives in order to mentor because school-aged mentees have differing opinions and insights than do adult mentors. Additionally, it is necessary that muses "recognize that adolescent culture is not in opposition to adult culture" (Ma'ayan, 2012, p. 19). Muses and mentees are not at

odds, but very capable of building meaningful relationships. Even through our differences, we are purposed to support one another. According to O'Donohue (2004):

> Although each of us is fashioned in careful incompletion, we were created to long for each other. The secret of our completion can only be found in the other. Huge differences may separate us, yet they are exactly what draw us to each other. (p. 153)

The huge differences, such as age and class that can keep us divided are also the differences that can connect us and help us to grow. Race is also one of the differences that can connect us as individuals, even when we are not expecting that to happen. Angela, who previously shared that her initial relationships with individuals outside of her race were stifled and filled with suspicion, now realizes the benefits of connecting with others, even of a different race. Noticing the limitations that might come with generational and socioeconomic differences provides insight that all muses and mentees will deal with differences, but these can be worked through, and even possibly draw them closer together. Undoubtedly, race matters in mentoring relationships, but engaging in cross-race mentoring relationships is not be to perceived as divisive, but instead opportunities to grow through differences and learn through both differences and similarities. Older adolescent mentees are drawn to adult mentors that tend to share similar interests, so mentees too, look beyond the limitations in age and embrace the similarities in mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2010).

Priscilla says that although race is important in mentoring because often African American girls are "more under a microscope," she feels that "kids are very different. I don't think kids see the color like adults do." For Alice, an older mentor of the same race relates better to a younger mentee if they have "gone through similar experiences" where the mentor can provide guidance and support based upon her own experience. As the

youngest mentor in the group, Lauryn feels that although she is from the same city as her

mentees and they share similar experiences, "age does play a big part in between the

experience you have." In other words, Lauryn knows that she and her mentees, being

from two different generations, experience life differently so she tries not to judge her

mentees based on those differences. Researchers have found that studies exploring

intergenerational mentoring relationships are considered successful when mentors not

only listened, but also interacted with youth in a way that was not judgmental or critical,

but supportive (Taylor, LoSciuto & Porcellini, 2005).

When Edelman (1999) reflects on her childhood with community elders that

assisted her parents in raising her along with other children in the neighborhood, she

remembers that they did not just command her to do certain things, but engaged her in

their work within the community. From this experience, Edelman believes that "All

children need adults who believe in them and expect them to achieve, who love them, and

whom they love so much they live up to their expectations of success" (p. 19). Based on

our conversations, the muses also engage their mentees in the work they are involved in

within their communities. Both Deanna and Trina promote and participate in community

service activities and attend community sponsored events with their mentees to reinforce

the significance of giving back and supporting their own communities. To take it even

further, the muses also *create* community among their mentees. The culmination of time,

conversations and mutual respect has helped to build community. Lauryn shares:

> Throughout the past three years, I think and I'm not making this all credit on my
> own, I think I've helped to foster, and then they've helped each other to foster a
> community that was safe because they recognized literally the violence, mental
> and everyday violence, not physical that was going on between them as a
> community once I left, once certain things were said. They needed to create some,
> it wasn't always perfect, but some sense of trust. I actually had one of my seventh,

212

well now, seventh graders say, "We don't always get along, but we don't wanna leave your program, so we gonna be as good as possible." Right and they really have.

While building community, Lauryn's mentees are striving to live up to her expectations because being a part of her mentoring program is important to them. By engaging mentees with serving the communities while building their own sense of community, muses continue to make connections that work beyond age differences. Edelman recognized the women she writes about as community elders who were much older than her, but what she takes away from the experience is not the age difference, but the empowerment and expectation to excel in every area of her life.

Class Clash

In addition to the age difference, Lauryn also notices the role of class in mentoring. While speaking about the relevance of race in mentoring, Lauryn incorporates the role of class:

> I think class positionality, for one class isn't one rigid thing, but how we identify in between what we imagine as lower class or poor or middle class, whatever that is, really does shape our outlooks about what it means to be a Black woman. I think how we experience that identity category causes, I think a lot of times class can kind of, class and the people that we interact with either at school or our parents, their friends and their jobs can really shape how we have to deal with the issues of race.

Lauryn goes on to elaborate on the issue of class. Having grown up in the same neighborhood as her mentees, Lauryn knows that many of them live below the poverty line, but some of their living situations are more severe than hers as a child. This information helps Lauryn to understand the perspectives of her mentees better and she continues to listen and not judge their upbringings because they differ from her own. Lauryn shares that she has not been through all of the same experiences her mentees face,

213

"but I've been close to them even through my own or through my family or just seeing it around you so I get it and I get that you can't make judgments quickly." By listening to their stories and not jumping to judgment, Lauryn and her mentees find the respect that comes from relating to one another.

It is very easy to judge others based on their socioeconomic status and background, especially when it differs from our own. In *The Dear One*, Woodson (1991) introduces readers to twelve year old Afeni and fifteen year old Rebecca. Afeni lives in the suburbs in a middle to upper middle class neighborhood with her mother. Rebecca moves from the city to live with Afeni and her mother until she gives birth to her baby. Both Afeni and Rebecca make assumptions about one another based on what they believe the other has or lacks financially.

> Rebecca: "You got all this stuff. What more do you want?"
>
> Afeni: "What do you mean, what more do I want?" I said, tightening my hands into fists. "I don't want anything from anybody. Least of all you. What can you give me? You don't have anything." (Woodson, p. 47)

When having the opportunity to work through these assumptions, both Afeni and Rebecca notice what they admire in one another. In spite of their many differences, they share a love for family, friendship and being understood by others. After building a friendship with Afeni, Rebecca admits that it would be beneficial for all of her friends to have the same opportunity she is experiencing.

> It's just I wish – I wish all the kids in Harlem could live in Seton for a month and all the kids in Seton could live in Harlem for a month. I think people would be different then, all around. (Woodson, pp. 115-116)

Both Afeni and Rebecca had the opportunity to go beyond the walls we often build around ourselves and our own communities, only relying on what we think we know

about others. Rebecca realizes the difference it makes to put your judgments to the side and get to know people for who they are, not what they have. Although *The Dear One* focuses on the lives of adolescents, there is a lesson to be learned for interactions among muses and mentees. Before jumping to judgments, it is important to build a relationship and watch the assumptions fade.

The tension in class differences is not always obvious in the mentoring relationship. Trina says that she can relate to her mentees even though she did not grow up in the same type of environments and neighborhoods. Working with mentees who come from single parent homes and "the ghetto," as Trina refers to it, she tries to instill in her mentees an attitude that they should persist through every situation and can ultimately be successful. Can Trina's perception of her mentees' neighborhoods and upbringings impede her mentoring? Does the difference in home environments and upbringings make a difference in African American female interactions? Rhodes and Davis (1996) admit that class differences between middle-class mentors and urban adolescents present a distance that can lead to advice that is inconsistent from the norms and limitations in particular class settings.

From March 2001 to April 2002, sociologist Katrina McDonald (2007) conversed with eighty-eight African American middle-class and lower-class women around the ideas of Black sisterhood and the meaning of female relationships in their everyday life experiences. McDonald found that "what is most important about the discord that is observed among these contemporary African-American women is that about half of it is driven by their social class status" (p. 132). Based on this information, class does matter and play a role in relatedness among African American women. Although Trina does not

separate herself from mentees with different backgrounds, differing perceptions of their life experiences might influence her interactions with them. In response to mentees saying, "I didn't have the same opportunities," Trina says:

> I didn't necessarily grow up like that but I know about it. I think I'm a little bit educated in that area because I do work with kids that don't have as much as I might've had growing up or can't do the things I might've did. But again you have to take the situation and just look at it as "Look, it doesn't matter what you don't have" because you have people who have success stories who have grown up underprivileged and being very, very successful now. So again it goes to say if you're able to be given the opportunity to do certain things or educate yourself on certain things, it's what you do with that opportunity.

Aligned with Deanna's statement, "I was not a product of my environment," Trina wants her mentees to know that they do not have to succumb to that which is considered the norm in their communities, families and surrounding environments. They can push through and do more. Being able to say this to them, knowing that she has come from a completely different class background, Trina and her mentees must be able to relate. Some would say that this insistence of having opportunities to do more can create tension in Trina's mentoring relationships. It became clear in my conversations with some of the muses that they feel even though we all come from different backgrounds, that we are able to do more, but this is a very complex statement. This notion extends beyond working hard, because there are many Americans that work extremely hard and still live in poverty. I realize that the conversations and interactions among muses and mentees around class differences must be critical, and mentees must feel comfortable enough with the muses to challenge skewed views of their realities.

As Lauryn shares, class is not rigid and easily defined. Reflecting on her time in college, hooks (1994) remembers that "Class was more than just a question of money," but also, "shaped values, attitudes, social relations, and the biases that informed the way

216

knowledge would be given and received" (p. 178). Class is much more than money, and

the reach of class even extends to the lives of youth prior to entering a classroom. In

Meaningful Differences, Hart and Risley (1995) write about the vocabulary disparities

among children from different socioeconomic settings: welfare, working-class and

professional backgrounds – based on the amount of words the children heard per hour in

their homes with their family members:

> Simply in words heard, the average welfare child was having half as much experience per hour (616 words per hour) as the average working-class child (1,251 words per hour) and less than one third that of the average child in a professional family (2,153 words per hour). (p. 197)

This information is important to share because it highlights the impact class can have on

mentees far before they are ever aware or have an opportunity to push through noticeable

barriers. Class differences influence outcomes, and muses need to be aware of this and

be open to putting in the effort and time it takes to thoroughly address these inequities

beyond the reminders that mentees can do more than they realize. As encouraging as the

words of the muses sound, there must be an understanding of the disadvantages some of

the mentees, particularly from low-income backgrounds, face.

Angela, while pushing her mentees to excel, also notices the need in their lives,

partly because of what was done for her as a child.

> I kid you not, there are times when I see that my children have more than enough and I'll give it to some of these kids that I'm mentoring. If I know that they have a need, they don't need to know that I'm the one taking care of that need. I'll take that money and give them what they need…That's what I had growing up with some of the seniors that mentored me…I'll never forget, she took me one Saturday, down to the store, because back in the day people didn't have credit cards, but they had credit with the stores. We went to what you would call a Nordstrom's back then and she said "I want you to get some clothes." I'm like, "Why? I got plenty of clothes." Back then what did you need clothes for. She says "I want you to have some nice clothes." "I have nice stuff." She went and picked out, and I'll never forget to this day, I remember that burgundy skirt, that white

blouse and those matching leotards, we called them, but they were stockings. I always go back to that, how something that little made such an impact in my life because it really did because this lady didn't have a lot of money. She had her own grandkids. She had two grown kids. She didn't have to do that. That was her money. That was her time. That's the kind of stuff I think back on when you asked me how did the seniors mentor me and stuff like that. It's that kind of stuff that I look back on and I say it was something so little, so random that those are the things that impact your life that made you want to do that for someone else.

Angela reflects on what an elderly White woman did for her as a youth, connecting race and class. Although race matters and Angela would be the first one to proclaim that it does, she remembers when a mentor gave of her time and money. Along with Angela's story, there are many others that remind us that far more than race is what binds muses with their mentees. Without the ability to relate and bridge gaps pertaining to differences, including class status, tensions will arise.

The Visibility of Struggle

One of the kids brought a YouTube clip and there were these two, I know you don't know who the Smothers Brothers are but the Wayans do this little skit. You ever see the Wayans Brothers when they had the show "In Living Color?" They had the afros and they were talking. There was a video that was doing Two Chainz and the kids thought it was hilarious. Yeah, it's comical in a sense that they're making a parody of something but you don't realize they're laughing at you. This is a subtle form of them going back to where we were. It's just on a different level. You don't realize when you're walking around with your pants hanging down, they're watching you and they're thinking this is your mentality. You don't realize that because you've not listened to those seniors or whomever before you, will tell you if you don't see what we've gone through then you are destined to repeat it and not even realize you're in it. You think this is funny and they're belittling you. We'll be dead and buried. You don't realize, you'll get twenty years down the road and say "How did this happen?" Because remember that little thing you thought was a joke? (Angela)

Not guilty. It is amazing how two words can frustrate, anger, sadden, humiliate and shame. These are my own personal feelings after hearing that George Zimmerman was found not guilty in the murder of Trayvon Martin. Although I think we will never actually know the events of the night a seventeen year old African American male armed

218

only with a bag of candy and a bottle of iced tea was killed; the fact is Trayvon Martin

was killed. Eerily, public intellectuals and civil rights leaders have compared Trayvon

Martin to Emmitt Till. Connected to Angela's thoughts, what happens with this

generation when history undoubtedly repeats itself? When the muses cope with this

verdict and outcome, do their opinions influence the decisions and mindsets of mentees?

Trayvon Martin, is the visibility of struggle, struggle that continues in many different

ways. When African American female mentors share their own stories of struggle,

connected to their gendered and racialized experiences, what does this mean for the

mentoring relationship? What does it mean for the mentor? Mentee? Does the struggle

for African American women and African American female youth look and/or feel the

same?

Danley (as cited in Hall & Brown-Thirston, 2011) asks, "If, at the highest levels

of society, Black and Hispanic adult women are being vilified, marginalized, and

silenced, then why can't we understand that it happens at younger ages as well?" (p. xii).

This question sparks the conversation about the importance of muses being open with

their mentees about their own experiences of struggle. Struggle with being marginalized

and silenced does not start in adulthood, but we must recognize that our mentees deal

with some of the same struggles. In this section, the muses share their experiences around

the struggle associated with being an African American female. In many instances, this

struggle is visible, obvious, and apparent. Whereas in other instances, the struggle is

internal and even found within the mentoring relationship itself. Muses describe their

experiences, re-asserting their opinions when mentees question their words, versus that of

a White person. The most inspiring aspect of struggle in the muses' lives is how they can

219

pass lessons learned onto their mentees with the hope that they are empowered to push through barriers and obstacles they will face because they are African American.

In any mentoring relationship, words are important and powerful. Offering advice is a key component in mentoring. Advice from the Old French *avis* is defined as "opinion, view, judgment, idea." When defining advice in this way, it can become a problem in the mentoring relationship. Mentees do not want to endure judgment nor have the opinions and ideas of their mentors forced upon them. Yes, it becomes easier to receive advice from someone you have spent time with, built a relationship with and who really listens when you speak. Muses, I think, want their mentees to see things from their perspective so that they understand why they offer certain pieces of advice. From the Latin *visum,* advice means "to see." Muses want their mentees *to see* that their experiences as African American women are connected to the mentees' current and future experiences. Offering advice from this perspective also means that muses take the time *to see* situations from their mentees' perspectives. Without taking the time to do this, what type of advice can the muse really offer the mentee?

Heidegger (1962) writes that a part of being-in-the-world with others is talking. He also writes that "Being-with develops in listening to one another" (p. 163). As mentioned previously, listening is key in mentoring relationships. In order to offer advice as a muse, you must listen to your mentees. Muses want the same in return. Muses also want to be listened to, particularly when they offer mentees advice that is connected to preparation for dealing with experiences connected to race.

"Are you questioning what I say because I am Black?" Angela and Deanna share that they raise this question with their mentees and students because they notice the

words that the African American youth in their lives tend to value. Both muses share that it is difficult to provide advice to their African American mentees when they have to battle with how their mentees weigh their advice against the advice of White adults. When confronted with "that's not what she told me," Angela responds:

> Well that's because Ms. Darlene hasn't had to walk in our shoes. Ms. Darlene comes from the suburbs over in White America where she hasn't had to struggle. Not to say there aren't some Caucasians who haven't struggled, but at the same time, even when they're struggling, it's not the same…they're not going to ever have to go through some of the struggles that your parents and I have had to go through.

Peggy McIntosh (2008) writes about the invisible knapsack of privilege that White people carry, simply because they are White. This invisible knapsack prevents Whites from going through the same things that African Americans face. Moreover, McIntosh notes that privilege is more than just favor. Privilege can also "systematically overempower certain groups" (p. 126), and this is the point that Angela is trying to get her mentees to understand. There is advice she has to offer them because she has been and still is in one or more of the "overempowered" groups, so she can help to prepare them and advise her mentees since they are in the same racial, gender and socioeconomic groups.

As a teacher, Deanna gets push back from her students about the information she shares with them versus that of the White teachers. Deanna responds to her students' doubt on behalf of the African American teachers: "'Okay, but they never experienced that but we have, so listen to what we have to say.' It's always like you don't know what you're talking about cause you're Black, they know what they talking about because they White." This is a continuous challenge for Deanna because she knows that the students

respect her, but she still has to compete with the words of White teachers. When will her words be enough for her mentees?

Although challenging for Angela and Deanna, both mentors recognize this and are fortunately able to have these conversations with their mentees. Angela reminds her mentees that "I'm always gonna have your best interest because to me I have an invested interest in you as an African American child." This is not to say that individuals of other races cannot guide, support and encourage African American children, but having been African American children and now living as African American adults, both Angela and Deanna have unique and personal insight to offer their mentees. Gadamer (1975/2004) writes that "To understand what a person says is…to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences" (p. 385). Muses know that their mentees cannot relive their experiences, but instead, want them to understand that distorted perceptions and racist barriers are real. Out of their care for mentees, the muses have a responsibility to share this information with them, even at the risk of being challenged and questioned. The continued support Angela and Deanna offer their mentees in the face of such challenges speaks to their level of support and care. This support is well-known among African American women and continues in the lives and interactions of the muses.

Remembering

Alice Walker (1991) asks, do we "Remember?" that from past to present, Black women have always offered hope.

> Remember me?
> I am the girl
> with the dark skin
> whose shoes are thin

222

I am the girl
with rotted teeth
I am the dark
rotten-toothed girl
with the wounded eye
and the melted ear.

I am the girl
holding their babies
cooking their meals
sweeping their yards
washing their clothes
dark and rotting
and wounded, wounded.

I would give
to the human race
only hope.

I am the woman
with the blessed
dark skin
I am the woman
with teeth repaired
I am the woman
with the healing eye
the ear that hears.

I am the woman: Dark,
repaired, healed
listening to you.

I would give
to the human race
only hope.

I am the woman
offering two flowers
whose roots
are twin

Justice and Hope
Hope and Justice

Let us begin.
(pp. 317-318)

This chapter ends the same way that it began: you cannot generalize Black women's experiences. From wounded to healed, African American female muses transition through struggle, distorted perceptions and mixed interactions to find that what they had all along is still present – hope: hope in one another and hope in our abilities to repair, heal and listen. This listening comes when muses and mentees engage in (un)silenced conversations. Muses, too, remember.

CHAPTER SIX:
(UN)SILENCED DIALOGUE

Yet I say you are young
And your lips are not stone
To be weathered
Rather a song
Learned when my aprils were fallow.
I sing for this beacon now
Lighting us home
Each to our separate house. (Lorde, 1997, p. 128)

In her poem, *Mentor*, Audre Lorde captures the importance of words between mentor and mentee. The mentee, although young, has much to contribute to the conversations that occur because her lips are not stone, rather a song that needs to be heard by others. Ultimately, mentor and mentee will part ways and head to their separate houses, but that song provides the light that they need to make it there. Muses and mentees must engage in (un)silenced dialogue. This is dialogue that is open, honest and at times difficult, but very necessary for the mentoring relationship. In education, Lisa Delpit (1995) writes about the silenced dialogue that plagues certain spaces and leads White educators to believe that students of color "agree with their logic" because "After all, they stopped disagreeing, didn't they" (p. 23)? This sort of miscommunication can lead to discord and tension in mentoring relationships, so it is important that muses and mentees build a relationship where they feel comfortable and confident enough to share their experiences, opinions and truths in order to grow and learn from one another.

Sexuality, relationships, self-esteem: Imagine exploring, discovering and learning more about yourself in these areas without the opportunity to share your feelings with someone else. Fear stops you from telling your parents. Embarrassment silences you with friends. Lack of time and opportunity prohibits you from sharing this with your favorite

teacher. What does it sound like in a space where (un)silenced dialogue finally occurs? Loud! From the West Germanic *khluthaz,* loud means "to be heard, celebrated." In this space, mentees' experiences are heard and even celebrated. When mentees are heard, affirmation occurs through sharing. Muses, too, have the opportunity to share and be heard in this space. From the Old English *scear*, share is "that which cuts." To share experiences in a space where you are heard and celebrated cuts through tension, discomfort and even anxiety that may arise when African American female mentees interact with African American female mentors. Also, to share and to cut through means to eliminate the façade and masks that we sometimes wear when around others. When the masks are gone, both muses and mentees can share in a safe space without the fear of judgment, humiliation or betrayal. This is a very special opportunity to be open and honest, when muses and mentees can allow the conversation to guide them (Gadamer, 1975/2004). With this, "No one" not even the muse, "knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation" (p. 385).

Within a mentoring relationship where (un)silenced dialogue occurs, the muses tend to "keep it real" with their mentees. For muses, this includes truth, vulnerability and awareness that they do not have all of the answers, but that they learn from their mentees while on this journey. There would be no (un)silenced dialogue without challenging topics to discuss and deal with in the mentoring relationship. Topics such as sex, relationships and self-esteem are prevalent in the lives of today's adolescents and need to be dealt with rather than avoided or quickly dismissed. As O'Donohue (2004) admits:

> We are not as near each other as we would like to imagine. Words create the bridges between us. Without them we would be lost islands. Affection, recognition and understanding travel across these fragile bridges and enable us to discover each other and awaken friendship and intimacy. Words are never just

226

words…When chosen with reverence and care, words not only describe what they say but also suggest what can never be said. (p. 54)

What bridges are we creating between ourselves and our mentees? When we awaken new and challenging ideas, are they dismissed or explored? Although these bridges are fragile, do muses and mentees build enough trust to connect? The muses know that having these conversations are necessary in order to build and maintain trust with their mentees, as well as reminding their mentees that the issues and situations they deal with are important and worthy of discussion and attention. When people are (un)silenced and (un)inhibited, understanding can occur.

Keeping It Real

"'Ms. Trina, one thing that we can say about you is that, you know, you always gonna keep it real' and they actually thanked me for, you know, keeping it real" (Trina). What exactly does it mean to "keep it real," particularly in an African American female mentoring context? Basically, when mentors "keep it real" they are being bluntly honest. While this approach might seem strange to outsiders who are unfamiliar with it, truth telling is necessary within mentoring relationships. It is important to recognize the care that is connected to keeping it real. Muses keep it real with their mentees because they care about them. This care is displayed in an appropriate manner. It is never about humiliation and embarrassment, but genuine concern and care. When a mentor tells me to fix my hair or change my attire, this is done out of concern for how others may negatively perceive me and this conversation typically takes place in private. Of course, the final decision about my hair, attire or anything else in my life is my choice, but the honesty from those I respect and admire is welcomed. When we look at recent events involving

social media, for example, the lines between "keeping it real" and care can become blurred.

Recently, after actress Gabourey Sidibe walked the red carpet before an awards ceremony, many people shared their opinions about the fit and style of her dress on social media. Many of the comments were negative and simply filled with malicious words, even if the intent was to be helpful. The problem here with "keeping it real" is that there is an appropriate time and place to share your opinions with others. If a mentor or friend privately discussed Gabourey's attire with her privately out of a place of care, that could be considered as "keeping it real," but to write the same comment on Twitter or Facebook for others to see is inappropriate and not meant to help, but harm.

In Medieval times *real* was defined as "belonging to the thing itself." In the beginning of Chapter Four, I explored the sense of belonging in the place of mentoring and how it is not always easy to belong. Well, the conversations between muses and mentees belong to them, and although these conversations are not always the most comfortable, this is their truth, their perspective and their experience. These (un)silenced conversations are real and belong to muses and mentees.

When writing about truth telling with African American girls, Ward (1996, 2007) writes about "resistance for liberation" (p. 95, p. 296). Instead of providing temporary solutions for African American girls when dealing with racism, Ward suggests truth telling that is constructive and encourages African American girls to think about themselves as individuals and their place in the surrounding communities. In other words, African American girls need to be built up and not torn down. Although Ward writes about resistance for liberation in the context of African American families and resisting

racist stereotypes, it fits with African American female mentoring relationships because in both contexts, it is important for African American female youth to hear the truth and reflect on their own roles, responsibilities and resistance opportunities.

Angela shares a story when she was bluntly honest with a group of her female mentees while they were conversing about some of the things she said to them. Angela supports addressing issues directly; otherwise they are ignored and overlooked.

> Well you call us broads sometimes. That's a broad in the sense of, not standing out on the corner, just your behavior. My thing is sometimes you guys get in this little ho stance, now I mean that genuinely, you act like whores. Anytime this boy has talked about you and you know it's true and then this one, I said, What kind of message are you sending? Y'all calling it ratchet but it's just a plain old whore. That whole ratchet thing doesn't work for me because it's wretched to begin with, it's not ratchet and take it back to my time you would've been called a straight up whore. I know y'all try to make it politically sound acceptable, but the bottom line is you still, what they would call in the 80s a skank, what they would call back in my day a whore a prostitute or whatever. The bottom line is it is what it is so stop candy coating what it really is so that you can get it to make it better. If I tell you you're being ratchet some people think that's okay.

"Ratchet" is a popular term used in music and media to describe a woman who is oblivious to the fact that both she and her behavior are obnoxious and unattractive to others. Because ratchet is a popular and culturally acceptable term among her female mentees, Angela emphasizes that with this term issues are not directly addressed and explored. This situation with Angela and her mentees is an example of "resistance for liberation" because Angela is not ignoring what the boys are whispering about some of the girls, and she also is challenging her mentees to move past catchy words that gloss over the real issues. Although this is not stated in the quote, Angela, knowing her girls, was also challenging them to think about perceptions of others. It is almost as if she was saying, "You all do not want to be perceived as whores, so let us talk about what is really happening. Saying 'ratchet' does not get to the root or truth of the situation, so let us

229

talk." With this, the girls have the opportunity to reflect and think critically about their own actions and how this helps or hinders their reputations and future goals.

While working with her mentees, Lauryn has to remind them about their attitudes and how this can limit their progress. She warns them about learning how to "play the game." Basically, Lauryn wants her mentees to learn how to navigate various spaces successfully, including classrooms and schools. This starts with building relationships with their teachers and understanding that they "need to be in somebody's good graces to get ahead in life from one point to the next." This situation applies to "resistance for liberation" because Lauryn is making her mentees aware of the possibilities that could come from positive interactions with their teachers.

In situations like this, both Angela and Lauryn, are returning to themselves. Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes, "It is true that often knowledge of other people lights up the way to self-knowledge" (p. 185), and this is the goal for the muses. They want their mentees to learn how to question, resist and navigate from their knowledge and their experiences. This starts with conversation and sharing a common language (Gadamer, 1975/2004). This common communication includes "a constant going beyond oneself and a return to oneself, one's own opinions and one's own points of view" (p. 547). As muses, in that in between space, we go beyond our own opinions and perspectives, but eventually come back to them, hopefully with new insights on how to engage and interact with our mentees. When challenging mentees on their leisurely approach to confronting issues with popular terms, and when commanding that they learn how to "play the game" in navigating various spaces for success, muses find themselves in dialogue that extends beyond what they are accustomed to and back to their comfort zone. Moving back and

forth while in between is a part of the mentoring journey. For Angela and Lauryn, keeping it real within (un)silenced conversations will hopefully lead to liberation for their mentees. By challenging and addressing certain behaviors and thoughts, mentors are trying to get their mentees to think critically about themselves and their surroundings, which is the goal of resistance for liberation, as well as a benefit of "keeping it real."

(Un)familiar Familiarity

At the age of sixteen, just a couple of months before the start of my junior year of high school, my mother and I moved from our home in New Jersey to our new home in Virginia. I remember that my new neighborhood was vastly different from my old neighborhood: quiet, clean and pretty much a ghost town. I wondered, where are the people? Is there a corner store nearby? Will I ever get used to this place? At the start of the school year, I was surrounded by the familiar – school building, peers, and even the rules at home – yet it was unfamiliar. There was the old me in a new place. Similarly, as muses, our conversations with mentees are familiar, in unfamiliar territory. This is a *new* generation, with *new* technology, *new* influences and *new* ways of being and expressing themselves. Even when I reflect upon my sixteen year-old self and try to speak comparatively, I realize it does not work: that was then and this is now.

After years of living in Virginia, I never really got used to it. As a muse, I realize there are certain topics and conversations that I will engage in with mentees that I may never become comfortable with, and that is perfectly fine. It is just another opportunity along this journey for me to learn and grow. My discomfort in Virginia led me to become an educator who now explores the lived experiences of African American female

mentors. I have learned that the unfamiliar is new with many opportunities and

experiences. In the poem "Here," I try to express the newness that comes with mentoring.

> What I thought I knew
> I realize
> I don't know
> Here
>
> How I thought I felt
> I notice
> I don't feel
> Here
>
> "When I was your age…"
> I admit
> It doesn't fit
> Here
>
> The things I would say
> Are silenced
> With you
> Here
>
> No, not déjà vu
> Almost everything
> Is different
>
> Here
> (Gamble, 2013b)

Lauryn shares, "Some of my girls, I think they know more than me, but I think

they've had a lot more experiences than me." She is aware of her own position in relation

to her mentees. Even though she is an African American woman working with African

American female youth, Lauryn can sometimes feel like an outsider because her mentees'

experiences are vastly different from her own. These different experiences include hot

topics such as sex, relationships with mom, and issues with self esteem. Cauce et al.

(1996) assert, "From an early age many African American girls…face a world filled with

'adult' decisions and danger" (p. 105). This world that many African American girls live

in cannot be ignored or dismissed, but instead needs to be explored. Who better to face the "adult" situations, challenges and circumstances that African American female youth deal with on a regular basis than the muses in their lives? The conversations pertaining to sexual activity, mother/daughter relationships and self-esteem give the muses an opportunity to listen.

For the muses, listening is a key component in creating a space for (un)silenced dialogue. Lauryn admits, "I realize I get a lot further when I listen." Lauryn is not referring to a lot further in discussion or the session's agenda, but a deeper understanding of and engagement with her mentees' experiences. Alice believes that half of mentees' problems are addressed when mentors "let them talk it out and get it out," and in return, she can pass along some of her own life lessons that may possibly help her mentees. When reflecting on his last days spent with his mentor Morrie, Mitch Albom (1997) asks the question, "But *really* listening to someone…how often do we get this anymore?" (p. 137), because he deeply admired Morrie's ability and desire to listen in the way people "always wanted someone to listen" (p. 138). Priscilla believes that "everyone wants to be heard." Everyone, including mentees, want mentors who *really* listen, giving time and attention to the details of their lives.

First, as a muse, based on the familiar, "I must listen to my life telling me who I am" (Palmer, 2000, p. 4). Once I recognize the familiar in listening to self, I can then listen to my mentees. I can now recognize in myself "the difference between sincerity and deception…tones of coercion and the tones of respectful suggestion" (Levin, 1989, p. 109). Moreover, I "can hear the difference between speech that is listening attunedly to the other and speech that is indifferent to the other and refuses to listen" (Levin, p. 109).

While learning how to navigate the unfamiliar territory, I must *listen* in what might be a new and unfamiliar way. Doing this during (un)silenced conversations also allows mentees to share important experiences with a trusted adult who will honestly assist in their decision-making.

Yes, We Talk About Sex

> Yeah, I was pregnant. I had a miscarriage and the stuff that was going through my mind: Oh my goodness! What am I gonna do? How am I gonna tell my parents? All of that. I went through a lot with that, but now I can say "Okay, yeah I went through it and this is how I dealt with it." (Trina)

Trina does not solely limit her conversations about sex to pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but she does start with these two topics. During her undergraduate years, Trina discovered that she was pregnant. She shares, "Still to this day, it's only a select few people that know that." This private experience of becoming pregnant and having a miscarriage during college is something that Trina will share with her mentees so they can better understand the possible repercussions of sex. Van Manen and Levering (1996) write that "Secrets are always relational" (p. 13), and "as long as the secret remains hidden, one may feel guilty about it" (p. 145). Sharing this secret helps Trina to move out of a place of secrecy and guilt, but that is not her focus. She shares her experience with mentees to help them and build stronger relationships. When engaged in (un)silenced dialogue, secrets are revealed because when someone is *really* listening, that is the best time to share such personal stories.

By sharing this story with her mentees, Trina is attempting to make them think about their own feelings and responses if they were in a similar situation. At the same time, Trina is once again, being vulnerable and showing her mentees who she is, what she has been through and how they can learn from her experiences.

Palmer (2000) believes "many young people today journey in the dark, as the young always have, and we elders do them a disservice when we withhold the shadowy parts of our lives" (p. 18). Trina is not afraid to share something shadowy from her past. As muses, when discussing something as personal as sex and sexual desires, we cannot be afraid of the dark stories and experiences that were unavoidable and thankfully a part of our experiences. The appreciation of the light really only comes from having dwelled in the dark. Will mentees feel more comfortable discussing sex when muses share their dark stories? When muses share shadowy experiences, is it possible there is a lesson in those stories alone?

Lauryn recognizes a "powerful 'feeling' of wanting" (Tolman, 1996, p. 259) in her mentees, stating:

> I've been really dealing a lot with pleasure and desire and what that means. It's like a taboo thing to even say that this age group should even have desire, but they do and we need to deal with that.

This desire is real and is another reason discourse pertaining to sex must occur. Beyond the physical, the muses want their mentees to understand the responsibility and level of emotion involved in sex. Muses explore what Ma'ayan (2012) refers to as "the hidden curriculum" (p. 57) where female adolescents are informed about sex by various influences around them. The muses not only explore this curriculum with their mentees, but become a part of it when they have these (un)silenced conversations.

With her fifteen and sixteen year old girls, Deanna conducts a ceremony titled, "Waiting Until I'm Eighteen." Prior to the ceremony, mentors and mentees discuss the responsibility of sexual relationships one-on-one, and the girls willingly pledge to wait until they are eighteen to have sex. Deanna likes this idea because her mentees "are in

this space and saving themselves until they are old enough and mature enough to understand the emotional baggage that sex brings." As Deanna promotes waiting until her mentees are eighteen or later when they feel mature enough to handle a sexual relationship, Lauryn notices her girls are not emotionally ready to handle sex. She shares that they "have these ideas about who they are sexually and who they could be, but you could tell it's a lot of emotional hang ups that's in it." As a part of this hidden curriculum, muses have to be aware of the various "texts" (Ma'ayan, 2012, p. 56) that influence their mentees. Once aware of the texts, muses can begin to challenge the "at-risk discourse" (Kehily, 2005, p. 93) dominating sex, particularly for female youth of color. Moreover, as a part of this hidden curriculum, muses can dispel the simplistic notions of the wholesome, virginal good girls versus the promiscuous, whorish bad girls, in regards to sexuality (Collins, 2009).

The muses strive to help their mentees understand sex beyond the physical and help them to make informed, well thought out decisions. This can occur with openness and a promotion of recognizing our own worth and value. Highlighting our own worth and value as African American women and imparting this in our mentees, steers away from the excessive monitoring of our mentees' behaviors and bodies. Instead, we raise questions about sexual desires while making "sure that we are holding onto our self-esteem and our personal power" (Ma'ayan, 2012, p. 70). Moreover, engaging in conversations about sex with African American female youth is an opportunity to confront, challenge and resist hypersexualied stereotypes around Black female bodies.

Sarah Bartmann, also known as Hottentot Venus, was an African woman put on display, literally, for Europeans to critique and use as entertainment because of the

236

supposed sexual deviance of Blacks (Collins, 2009). This display of Black female bodies

has since evolved and can be found on magazine covers, in music videos, and all forms of

social media. Again, confronting instead of ignoring the perceptions of African American

female youth as overly sexualized, helps to promote healthy perspectives on sexuality.

Trina tells her mentees, "You are sitting on a gold mine and you have the power.

Don't let these little negroes come up here or no little boy come up here trying to tell you,

no! That is a gold mine and you need to realize that." This "gold mine" is priceless.

Muses must continue to engage in this dialogue so their mentees understand what they

are "sitting on" is powerful, invaluable and their own.

Mother/Daughter Relationships

> Alix: It's my mom! I just feel like this stuff with my dad is becoming too much for me and every time something happens she's always bringing it up or reminding me that no one is doing anything for me and I just can't take it anymore. It just makes me feel bad about myself. As if everything going on is my fault.

> Wyletta: Oh no! Babe, regardless of what anyone says, NONE of this is your fault. Your parents have their own ways of dealing with issues and unfortunately you are in the middle. You cannot blame yourself for any of it. Sometimes your mom speaks out of anger and frustration, but you know that she loves you.

> Alix: I just wanna go away from everything and there's nowhere for me to go. I'm always upset and depressed and it' really a lot for me to deal with. I feel like no one understands me and if I try and talk to her about it, it gets worse.

> Wyletta: You can always come here. There's not much to do, but you will be away from the drama for a while.

> Alix: Can I, please?!

As a mentor, in a situation like this, is anything you say or offer to do really

enough? Fifteen year old Alix contacted me through text to let me know that she was

feeling down and depressed because of the interactions between her and her mother.

After a recent split, both Alix's mother and father were not communicating with her often and when they did, it was hurtful from Alix's perspective. As a mentor privileged to be the one whom Alix chooses to share her feelings and struggles with, I find myself, once again, in unfamiliar territory. As a teenager, of course there were moments of tension between my mother and me but never to the point of wanting to physically leave her and feeling so depressed that I reached out to a mentor sharing that I "feel bad about myself." In this unfamiliar moment, I went to what was familiar for me: my relationship with my mother. Since I am not yet a mother, I can pull from my experiences with my mother. For the muses, some of whom are mothers, they may pull from their experiences as mothers to their own children. I knew that in a situation like this my mother would offer up what she could, including her home as she has done so often in the past, to help Alix, if only temporarily. Muses use what is familiar to them in the unfamiliar times.

What is familiar to me is, "A woman who loves her children" because "that is a given in our society, reinforced at every conceivable turn...Look at our history – all the babies we've raised. Our own and other people's. By necessity or by choice" (Southgate, 2004, p. 115). The problem comes when people believe that "A black mother's love is supposed to be uncomplicated" (p. 115). Who says that a Black mother's love is not complicated? It is complicated, complex and unpredictable. Alix's mother loves her, but that love is not always the easiest to see and understand. What does a mentee feel when her mother gripes "openly and often about what motherhood" (Golden, 2004, p. 232) has denied her? What happens when mentees experience the complicated love along with the complicated relationships with their mothers? Where do the muses fit in these scenarios?

Tender turbulence. Familial relationships play a critical role in the growth and development of youth. The mother and daughter relationship continues to be highlighted as loving, yet complicated, and whether the relationship is thriving or not, this is a prominent topic of discussion among muses and mentees. Sims-Wood (1991) captures the mother and daughter dynamics shared by the mentees when she writes that in order to understand their stories, we must have "an appreciation of the turbulence and tenderness" (p. 139) within these relationships for African American mothers and daughters. In this turbulence with Alice's mentee, Michelle is seen in the conflict between Michelle and her mother, while the tenderness comes from Alice's advice to her niece. "I say to her, 'the person that you're fighting against now, you will need every day for the rest of your life, so don't fight against her…your mother understands everything you're going through because she's been there." Tension within the family is not uncommon, particularly with teenagers who desire more freedom and independence (Hall & Brown-Thirston, 2011). Alice did not expound on the details of Michelle's issue with her mother, but as a mentor, Alice reminded Michelle of the value within that relationship, and although she cannot see it now, Michelle will always need her mother, later appreciating her insight and advice.

Lauryn and Angela both have mentees that speak about the turbulence with their mothers because of the men in their mothers' lives. I know what it is like to be raised by a single mother with the privilege of her full attention and then here comes a man disrupting the relationship. As a teenager, I can admit it was my own selfishness and stubbornness that caused strife between my mother and the male friends in her life. For Bianca and Tina, the mentees of Lauryn and Angela, the issues are far different.

After telling her mother that her stepfather, John, had abused her (she never explicitly stated whether the abuse was sexual or physical), Bianca tells Lauryn that now the abuse is verbal. Knowing this, Bianca's mom is still in the relationship with John, and Bianca refers to her mother as "weak" because she feels that her mother should do more to defend her within the family. As a muse, Lauryn finds that many of her seventh graders can relate to this dynamic and within that the girls experience a "moment of coalition." This connects to Deanna's advice for her mentees: share your experiences because you can help someone who might be going through the same thing. Lauryn did not feel comfortable pushing for more information during this conversation with her mentees. Instead, she allowed them to support one another. Angela, on the other hand, provides Tina with a very honest response to her question: "Would you ever do more for your husband than your children?" When Tina asked the question, Angela knew something was happening in Tina's home to make her ask that question, so she wanted to be as honest as possible in her response.

> I know there are women out there that will put their man first. I'm not one of them. I said, You might want to talk to somebody else. I said, In fact, I'm too confident. My child is always gonna come before a husband or anybody as far as that goes. This child is dependent on you being able to direct them and if I've got a husband or a boyfriend that is jealous of my child this problem is big because this child didn't ask to be here and we're supposed to be the protectors.

As Angela shared her response, Tina nodded in agreement since she had found the reassurance she needed. I would hope that this dialogue with her mentor would lead Tina possibly to have a conversation with her mother about their varying perspectives on the issue. Yes, there are parents who put others before their children, and there are also situations where communication is lacking so there is an assumption of being less appreciated from the perspective of the child. As a muse, how do you tell your mentee

240

that not all mothers are the same? What do you say to explain to a child who is seeking

the attention and affection of his/her mom but is not receiving it? When do you tell

mentees that it is possible disappointment will make its way into the mother/daughter

relationship?

Southgate (2004) refers to herself as an unnatural woman because her opinions

about motherhood differ from other mothers. She confesses:

> I'm a fairly good parent, but it's not easy for me. It's not easy for anyone, but I
> find it harder than most. Family life – taking care of others, the bump and rub of a
> group – I've never been comfortable with it. My children's needs intrude on my
> need for solitude, reflection, selfishness, time to be. I resent it. I try not to let my
> resentment affect my parenting, but I must be honest. (pp. 115-116)

Southgate's courage to admit her true feelings about motherhood is refreshing. There are

other women who share her feelings. There is room to love, yet feel uncomfortable with

the conflict between a mother's desires and her children's needs. It seems as though the

muses help their mentees to cope with the conflict that can sometimes come with being a

daughter.

Assist in absence. For Michelle, Bianca and Tina, even among the turbulence,

their mothers seem to be present physically in their lives. For Priscilla's mentees, Katrice

and Shanelle, their mother is physically absent. Priscilla says that Katrice and Shanelle's

mother left them years ago and may call once a month, but is pretty much absent from

their lives. Since we know that the role of mother is very important in the lives of young

females, who fills this void when mom is absent? Priscilla, as a mentor, serves as an

othermother (Collins, 2009) by being there for Katrice and Shanelle. Priscilla encourages

the girls by reminding them:

> …even if you don't have a mom, there's still other people, females around you
> that can support you with whatever you need. So not having a mom, doesn't stop

241

you. Or not having relationship with a mom doesn't prevent you from going on and being great and doing great things.

Priscilla assists Katrice and Shanelle's grandmother in raising them and modeling respectful and appropriate behaviors for them as African American female adolescents. With a father who lives in a nearby state, the girls already have a support network to help them move towards their goals and cope with the absence of their mother through the help of their grandmother and Priscilla.

Part of the lived experience of being an African American female mentor to African American female youth is assisting. The muses assist in the "mothering" of their mentees. This assistance can be done through conversation or actually taking the mentees out and spending time with them, being there when mom is not physically present. The muses know "There is a certain usefulness in having to take care of someone else" (Southgate, 2004, p. 118) whether they are your child or not. To take care of someone is not just meeting their physical needs, but emotional needs as well.

The muses share their advice and opinions with their mentees regarding the mother/daughter turbulent, yet tender relationships. During our conversations, I only heard one muse mention meeting with parents, and this makes me think that the muses have a distant collaboration with mothers. Both muses and mothers, collaborate by supporting mentees, possibly in different ways. This seems to occur from a distance since there is not much face to face between the muses and the mothers of their mentees. What would the mentoring experience look like if muses and mothers closely collaborated in dialogue and encouragement for the mentees? Would the mentoring experience change if this collaboration was connected to teachers in the classroom, as well as parents?

242

Regardless of the type of collaboration among muses and mothers, all daughters seek love and acceptance from their mothers, expecting the same in return.

> I want so much to please her and yet keep some part of me that is my self, my own, not just a thing I have been turned into that she can desire, like, or do with as she will. I want her to love me totally as I am. (hooks, 1991, p. 149)

How Do You See Yourself?

Author and scholar Rebecca Carroll (1997) makes the claim that "Young black girls have neither the time nor the opportunity to concern themselves with the contemplation of self-esteem" (p. 141). This claim is problematic, particularly when young women of color need to have positive attitudes about themselves in order to remain resilient and pursue their own personal goals. Trina and Deanna notice the lack of self-esteem in their mentees, and since their roles in the lives of their mentees build self-worth and resilience (Hall & Brown- Thirston, 2011), they are aware of the significance of self-esteem for the mentees' confidence, belief in who they are, and ultimately who they will become.

Trina shares that she builds her mentees' self-esteem through words of affirmation. She reminds them that their own self confidence starts with them and not what others think or say. "You know that you're beautiful when you look in that mirror. It don't matter what color your skin is, how knotty your hair is, how fat, skinny, whatever the situation may be. You are beautiful!" Since the ideal figure in this country is not one necessarily attainable for African American women, Trina reassures her mentees of their physical beauty which includes "a continuum of brown skin colors, voluptuous silhouettes, and large facial features" (Cauce et al., 1996, p. 103), along with various

lengths and textures of hair. The issue with self-esteem also connects to sexual activity for some of Trina's mentees, along with other African American teenage females.

In their study on designing a curriculum toward preventative sexual choices in inner-city Chicago, Vera, Reese, Paikoff and Jarrett (1996) talked with mothers in the community who stated that low-self esteem among teenagers was leading to early sexual activity. Reminiscent of Deanna's mentee, Kimberly, who just wanted to be loved, Trina notices that her mentees try to build their self-esteem through sex, and shares:

> That's why I try to build their self-esteem as much as I can because some of my mentees have low self-esteem and they think that the only way they can feel good about themselves is by sleeping with somebody or being with a man or being with a guy.

This is a temporal solution to a serious issue that can leave a young girl feeling lost and confused. "Sex was different from what she expected. It was not romantic. It did not make her feel beautiful, or different, or loved" (Boylorn, 2013, p. 59). What happens when there is no beauty, difference or love after sex? Where do you find your own self worth? What is the role of the muse in this process?

While working with her mentees, Deanna first assesses and then challenges their perceptions of beauty with an activity titled "Beauty around the World." This activity is an opportunity for mentees to learn more about what is considered beautiful in different parts of the world and Deanna is sure to highlight features that are contrary to Eurocentric notions of beauty. After the first discussion around different representations of beauty, Deanna asks the mentees to write down how they would describe beauty. Most, if not all, write down "light skin, tall, good hair, light eyes, big butt." This limited description of beauty is not uncommon among today's youth, but what happens when you do not fit that description?

244

When reflecting upon her upbringing in the south, scholar and author Robin M. Boylorn (2013) writes about how not meeting the typical standards of beauty left her humiliated and isolated. "Who is the prettiest, tallest, lightest, with the longest hair? Their hierarchies always left me at the bottom, the black sheep of the group" (p. 88). Boylorn is not alone in experiencing this hierarchy of beauty imposed by others based on Eurocentric notions of beauty. These ideals of what beauty is "defined by Eurocentric yardsticks" (Hall & Brown-Thirston, 2011, p. 25) are not only impossible to attain for African American women, but can also hurt the feelings of those who do not come close to fitting the typical description of beauty, while also causing them to question if they are beautiful. Jo-Laine, a fourteen year old African American female from Brooklyn understands that people may view her dark skin as lesser than, but she knows "What matters is what's inside, or rather, how you feel about yourself inside" (Carroll, 1997, p. 36). Conversations around skin complexion did not emerge with the muses, but the light/dark skin dichotomy still exists within the African American community. Muses and mentees of different complexions should have conversations around the myths and struggles connected to skin color. Remaining silent on this issue can do more damage than good. Deanna, through her "Beauty around the World" activity, attempts to get her mentees to come to a similar understanding around beauty.

Deanna also speaks more about the emotional aspect. Since, "A girl's self-regard does not develop in a social or cultural vacuum" (Erkut, Fields, Sing & Marx, 1996, p. 61) we, as muses, must be aware of the social and cultural factors that influence self-esteem. Embarrassment and shame about family and upbringing, according to Deanna,

245

are the things causing her mentees to feel uncomfortable with who they are as

individuals:

> I think what's keeping a lot of them back is their lack of self-esteem, is their lack of confidence. Some of them are embarrassed about their upbringing. Some of them are embarrassed that their parent might be incarcerated or parent is absent in their life and that's keeping them from opening up. That's keeping them from being their true self.

As a teenager, Deanna had her own struggles with confidence, and when she finally

reached a point where sharing her mother's incarceration and father's struggles with

others was no longer difficult, she knew that was her breakthrough. She wants the same

for her girls. "Once they have that breakthrough and see why they are doing the things

they are doing or thinking the way they think, I feel like that's building their confidence

back up and helping them on their long journey ahead."

While sharing her thoughts about what she has learned about herself over the

years, Nikki Giovanni (as cited in Harper, 2008) writes that she appreciates her own

nothingness. Nothingness, meaning the unique characteristics she recognizes in herself

that others do not pay much attention to, might be missed as not too exciting or

admirable. In this nothingness, she realizes that others cannot define who she is, but she

does the defining of self. She writes:

> Are you lonely sometimes? This is good. Gives you time to think. Do you feel misunderstood? Wonderful. Gives you a reason to pursue definitions. Do you feel unloved? Great. Gives you a reason to sympathize with other endangered species. Makes you know you have to reach out, reach up, reach a little further. Reach again and grab a hold of yourself. (p. 276)

This is a unique and powerful way for us as muses to think of ourselves before attempting

to share with our mentees that our beauty and self-worth starts with us, from within. It is

okay if we do not have what everyone else has, and it seems as though we lack the traits,

gifts and abilities that others praise and envy. For Deanna's mentees who might feel

unloved, she reminds them to share their stories with others. In other words, she

encourages them "to reach out, reach up, reach a little further" to help someone else who

is struggling with the same situation. As muses, this means that we must know

nothingness and recognize it in ourselves, then we can begin to build nothingness with

our mentees. This is part of the breakthrough that Deanna experienced as well as Trina's

self-confidence, even throughout her struggles with weight gain. Our nothingness is what

makes us unique. It is what makes us who we are.

Contrary to Carroll's (1997) claim, Trina and Deanna know that their mentees

have the time and opportunity to appreciate their nothingness, seeing their own self-worth

in new ways. In Queen Latifah's video narrative before she accepted the "Rock Star"

award at the 2013 Black Girls Rock celebration, she spoke about her own confidence

while breaking barriers in Hollywood. She shares,

> Whether it's being an A-list celebrity in this body and this color, whether it's
> being a Cover Girl spokeswoman with this face and this body, those are just
> things that I already think I can do. I just have to figure out how I can get you to
> believe that. (Bond & Orlando, 2013)

As an African American woman who has thrived in music, television, film and beauty

products, Queen Latifah empowers other women by sharing that her job is to know what

she is capable of regardless of her skin color and body type. She just needs other people

to recognize what she already knows about herself. That is an excellent lesson to teach

our mentees. Know who you are, even embracing the nothingness, and allow others to

see it as well. As muses, we help to fortify, and if necessary, rebuild (Hall & Brown-

Thirston, 2011) positive self-images in our mentees, beyond the physical, by engaging,

once again, in (un)silenced dialogue.

Looking Back: Journey Reflections

Not only is this journey through conversations around being an African American female muse a process, but it is also an adventure. This unpredictable journey is an adventure because each conversation and each theme "ventures out into the uncertain" (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 60). Approaching the lived experiences of African American female muses phenomenologically allows me to ask questions that lead to possible situations, perspectives and experiences, both familiar and unfamiliar. What is the significance of place in mentoring relationships? What do we see as African American women who mentor African American female youth? What is the lived experience of being engaged in (un)silenced dialogue?

Possibilities in Lived Experience

Unique to the experiences of the muses, yet overflowing with possibilities of connection for others who read and explore this work, are glimpses of lived experience that speak to the unpredictable nature of the journey. Belonging is the lived experience of muses when we explore the significance of place. Each muse feels that she belongs in this place of mentoring, but merely feeling that you belong somewhere does not guarantee constant enjoyment and comfort. Taking the time to reflect on how muses find themselves in the place of mentoring, what they bring with them and the difficulties they work through all connect to their sense of belonging. Belonging is a part of the journey that fluctuates and changes, yet still remains.

Who we are as African American females mentoring African American female youth, we have the opportunity to see ourselves. Seeing ourselves comes through examining our interactions with other African American women, both negative and

positive, while learning and continuing to engage in support, honesty and encouragement likened to the historical ways of African American women. Also, in seeing self with our mentees, we explore the in between space in mentoring relationships. We are in between our realities and theirs, which can be tense and uncomfortable, but points to the essence of what it means to be a mentor. Moreover, when seeing ourselves, we admit that undoubtedly, race matters, but we cannot ignore the other areas we need to be aware of in our mentoring relationships. The visibility of struggle also allows us to see ourselves and the power and influence of our own words and why they are so important when shared with Black youth, particularly females. Throughout it all, in seeing ourselves, we see the support among African American women.

In (un)silenced dialogue, we realize that the unfamiliar in the midst of the familiar is okay. Again, it speaks to the tension and discomfort that is a part of the essence of being a muse. We are familiar with our own idea of what it means to keep it real, but what about when our mentees keep it real from their perspective? Are we familiar or unfamiliar with their insights? In conversations around what can be considered tough topics there is a familiarity because of our own experiences, but what happens when it changes on us with this new generation? The unfamiliar is not to be feared, but embraced since with it we learn and grow along this journey.

Metaphorically Speaking

The cover of one of my favorite journals reads, "When nothing is certain anything is possible." Possibilities lead to uncertainty just as well as uncertainty leads to possibilities. In mentoring, nothing is certain, which means there are countless

possibilities relationally, spiritually and educationally. When four of the muses shared

their own metaphors around mentoring, they also connect to adventure and uncertainty.

> There's a song that says, Olivia's late she got distracted on the way to Grandmother's house. Instead of Little Red Riding Hood, Olivia because the way the song goes not only did she get distracted on the way, but she got turned out. She got lost and turned out… Now you could either stay off that path and get back on it. In Olivia's case she didn't get back on it. It cost her. That was her demise. (Angela)

> In the time of storms somebody comes alongside with an umbrella… I see that as a mentor is coming alongside the girl wherever they are and providing them whatever resources. Whether it's encouragement, some education, some tutoring, whatever it is they need to get to point A to point B, I can come alongside and provide that. (Priscilla)

> Mine was building a cathedral and the reason why I say that is because it takes years and years to build a cathedral. You have to put the ground work in; design it first, put the ground work in and sometimes the designers don't even live to see the actual outcome of it. I think what I do with my girls, my metaphor is like a cathedral because I feel like I am building the ground work for something amazing, but sometimes you always don't see your work until after the fact. One day I'm building a very beautiful cathedral, inside and out. (Deanna)

> Love is a natural force and I say that because love can change things… love is a natural force because how you love a person and look at a person can change what they do or how they act. (Trina)

There is uncertainty in the path Angela or her mentees will travel. There is no guarantee

that Priscilla will always be there to cover or protect her mentees. It is uncertain how long

it will take mentees to become successful individuals to be admired and revered, and if

Deanna will ever actually see the change and growth in her mentees. As far as love being

a natural force, we are unsure of how long the process of change through love takes, or if

Trina will ever see the love she gives returned or reciprocated.

In spite of the uncertainty, every muse in this study is committed to working with,

supporting, encouraging and challenging African American female youth. The

uncertainty does not change their commitment, nor does the process. This journey that

began for me as a researcher over two years ago is not over. Actually, this journey

continues beyond me and the muses in this study. Now is the time to explore further the

people and places beyond the classroom and recognize their value and immeasurable

worth in the lives of today's youth, the insights that can be taken away from this study.

CHAPTER SEVEN:
PEDAGOGICAL INSIGHTS: THE MEANING IN MENTORING

My phenomenological journey began over two years ago. There is no way I could have predicted the journey ahead of me. At the forefront of my mind was the mission to find educational meaning in mentoring. Although I already had my own preconceived meaning, this journey has opened my eyes to much more than I could have ever imagined. Throughout every book, article or poem read, every movie, documentary or television show viewed, every song, statement or conversation listened to, I wondered, "What does this all *mean*? What does this *mean* for education? How will this *meaning* inform our interactions, as educators, with students? Will this meaning *mean* anything to anyone else? " Since I learned early on in this journey that phenomenology asks, "What is the nature or meaning of something?" (van Manen, 1997, p. 184), it makes sense that these questions were ever present.

Interestingly, this phenomenological journey mirrors my doctoral experience: engaging, challenging, at times painful, enlightening and fulfilling. As a hermeneutic phenomenologist I have found exploring the different aspects of the lived experiences of Angela, Deanna, Priscilla, Lauryn, Trina and Alice engaging as well as challenging, knowing that I would find myself in unfamiliar territory with varied experiences and have to work my way through. The painful portions of this journey include the ugliness in racism and false perceptions of who we are as African American women, while enlightening moments have been highlighted by the beauty in our similarities and differences. I now, once again, find myself in the space of fulfillment where I can continue to unpack the meaning of the muses' experiences and broaden the understanding of education. Our conversations have revealed so much about me as both an educator and

a student. How will these conversations "speak" to other educators, students and mentors? Reflecting upon these conversations, what can we begin to consider in education?

Reflections: Looking Back on the Road Traveled

There comes a point in every journey when you look back. How much ground have I covered? Where have I come from? Where am I now? What have I learned along the way? After engaging in the conversations with the muses, it is now my time to reflect. I must admit, there were some unexpected bumps along the road which made the journey even more compelling and enjoyable. The pain found in mentoring, as well as the feelings of inadequacy muses experience when they feel as though they have given all they can, but yet it is not enough, was unexpected for me. Listening to Deanna recall her childhood struggles with both parents and conversing with Lauryn about her internal battle with her own desires and capabilities as a mentor was not easy for me, but still it was enlightening. My narrow ideas about mentoring are being expanded and lead me to the space of reflection.

Reflecting on our conversations and the various topics that were discussed, I realize that the lived experiences of African American female muses help to extend the work of Black feminist thought. Conversations around some of the more recent popular cultural phenomena help to extend outlets to resist stereotypical images of African American women. Interestingly, reality television and social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, among others, help to perpetuate and challenge the controlling images of African American women. From scantily clad, simplistic images of African American women to webpages devoted to promoting more

253

complex images of African American females, there is a clear dichotomy around the conversations of Black feminism. Popular reality television shows with African American women as the main "characters" spark such heated conversations that many supporters and frustrated consumers use social media, blog more specifically, to address the problematic representations of African American women. Many of the bloggers are African American women and they do not need book deals with major publishers, nor acceptance from reputable journals to share their perspectives on the simplistic, narrow representations of women of color on television and in media. This is what Collins (2009) refers to as alternative knowledge claims that that are typically ignored and not viewed as valuable in comparison to conventional knowledge claims. This alternative knowledge is powerful and challenges the myths about African American women with the use of the very tools that help to disseminate stereotypical images.

Moreover, the use of social media to distribute petitions banning violent content on these shows exhibits the power in using technology to challenge what others deem "entertaining" and "acceptable." For muses, we must remember that resistance and activism in this generation might show itself quite differently from what we have been used to in the past. Creating and posting videos on YouTube as a call of awareness in the plight of Black men, blacking out Facebook profile photos to represent injustice, or taking the unpopular stance of critiquing and challenging the problematic song lyrics, images and representation of African American women are just a few of the ways we witness active resistance today. After realizing the theoretical implications, I find an even greater appreciation for conversations and reflection.

My reflections are usually recorded in a journal for my eyes only. This way, my thoughts are private and uninhibited. Reflecting in a shared forum such as this is a bit different, but similar, because they are still written. According to Levin (1985), "Writing is an act of submission" (p. 185). I find myself submitting, yielding, to the lived experiences of the muses in a way that allows me time to reflect, think, ponder and question. This is not just about reading transcriptions and reviewing quotes, but truly submitting in my writing to make meaning of the muses' lived experiences and my own. I ask myself, what have I learned from the muses as we have journeyed together?

Equipped and Chosen are Few

Every mentor in this study is now referred to as a muse because of her position towards and interactions with her mentees. These women engage in relationships with young African American females that are not solely based on imparting their knowledge, but also being open to receive with a willingness to be changed in the process. Each muse has a level of care and concern for their mentees that, unfortunately, not everyone has or knows how to show towards others. The muses take the time to listen, support and converse with their mentees, knowing that this sustains meaningful relationships. Simply put, everyone cannot be a mentor. Everyone is not equipped with the care, time, patience and concern that effective mentors must have in order to make a difference, and be made different, because of their engagement in mentoring relationships.

Angela believes that "Anytime you have the opportunity to talk with somebody or interact with that person, that's a form of mentoring" and can "form dialogue." This is part of the reason that the role of mentor is not for everyone. Unfortunately, not everyone takes the time to talk and interact with others to consider how they can assist or support

them. When sharing the challenges involved in mentoring, the muses admitted that it is not always easy to talk, to listen and to make themselves available to mentees, but because of their commitment, they continue to do this within their relationships. Trina shares, "You have to have a special place in your heart for people…to want to help people" in order to be a mentor. There are many people who have this special place in their hearts and others who do not. Exploring the essence of what it means to be an African American female mentor, I recognize that having a deep care and concern for others is essential. Without this, you might be able to support others but not in the same way as the muses.

Similar Journey, Different Paths

As doctoral candidates, my colleagues and I have discussed how we each arrived here at the University of Maryland. Some of us taught for a few years before entering the program, while others continued straight through from their undergraduate programs. While some have attended Ivy League institutions and even studied abroad, there are those of us who went to community colleges and even worked in other fields before deciding that the University of Maryland's College of Education is where we wanted to grow and learn. Similar to our experiences, each muse not only found her way to mentoring differently, but also brought along different approaches, goals and experiences. Although each muse is engaged in a mentee-centered relationship, each one finds herself in the place of mentoring differently. Deanna and Priscilla are educators, Angela and Alice have military backgrounds, Trina is in the medical field and Lauryn is a doctoral student. While Priscilla and Alice are very soft spoken and not very talkative, Trina, Angela, Lauryn and Deanna are just the opposite, visibly excited about sharing

their experiences working with African American female youth. Their careers, along with their personalities and backgrounds, provide the muses with very diverse experiences to share with their mentees. These different representations of African American women can only add to the choices, opportunities and goals of their mentees.

Alice is a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force, and with her stories of adversity and strength, I was encouraged. As an adult who never had an interest in serving in the military, Alice's lived experiences inspire me, so I can only imagine how they might motivate an African American female mentee who has a desire to serve her country in the Armed Forces. Alice, along with the other muses, brings something unique to the mentoring journey. Each woman has reached this place of mentoring, but arrived in a different way. This reminds me that even with the mountain of books and resources geared toward how to be a mentor, there is no one model of what a mentor is, let alone a muse. There are those who want to save everyone, others who use sarcasm in their conversations, some who try their hardest not to be judgmental and those who just want to "keep it real." With Angela, Deanna, Alice, Trina, Priscilla and Lauryn, just six African American women, I do not seek to describe and identify what a mentor looks like specifically, how they behave and with whom they should work; rather I seek to illuminate the complexity of the mentoring experience and acknowledge that race is visible and relevant.

My Knapsack is Not Invisible

> That's when I'm reminded of my purpose, to be for them what I didn't have as a young ballerina: a mentor, a role model, someone who looks like them.
> (Bond & Orlando, 2013)

Unlike the invisible knapsack of White privilege that McIntosh (2008) writes about, the knapsack of race the muses carry is visible and plays an important role in their mentoring relationships. During our conversations, the muses expressed that even though it is not the sole factor in their mentoring, race most certainly matters. Why? Why does race matter when African American women mentor African American female youth? I have learned that race is significant for a number of reasons, but primarily it affirms aspirations of who African American females can become. In her acceptance speech while being honored as "Young, Gifted and Black" at the 2013 Black Girls Rock Award Ceremony, ballet dancer Misty Copeland reminded viewers that she is an inspiration to those Black girls who aspire to be ballerinas. As the only African American woman dancing professionally in the American Ballet Theatre, Misty is a trailblazer and understands the power in being a mentor and role model to other African American ballet hopefuls. Trina shares, as a mentor she is a real-life model in front of her mentees. If they aspire to be African American female scientists, their relationship with Trina can affirm that and much more. This is not limited only to the profession of the muse, but I know having African American women in my life who have achieved successes I never have is encouraging for me, even if my goals and desires are different from theirs. Deanna believes that "You make a better connection" with someone of the same race in mentoring relationships because you have similar experiences. She wants her girls to see "Black women doing their thing" and know that there is far more than what they see and hear in the media and popular culture.

Connected to affirmed aspirations is the breaking down of stereotypes. Lauryn asserts, "The people that we interact with either at school or our parents, their friends and

258

their jobs can really shape how we have to deal with the issues of race." I agree. How we

deal with stereotypical representations of African American women cannot begin and end

with dominant discourse, but the perpetuation of these stereotypes must be challenged

with our families, friends and mentees. What better way to challenge stereotypical images

than to live totally opposite of them? Priscilla knows that presently and in the future her

mentees can say, "Here's a positive Black woman," recognizing that the stereotypical

images are not a representation of most Black women.

Experience: The Muses' Preparation

> Some of the wisest words I have heard and most important lessons I have learned
> did not come from Harvard or Yale or Princeton or law schools or Ph.D. trained
> mouths. *They came from poor women and men educated in the school of life.*
> Their books were struggle. Their pencils and pens were sharpened by poverty.
> Their mother wit was created by the daily battle for survival. Their inner faith was
> nourished by their outer losses. (Edelman, 1999, p. xv)

During the first session of a sociology course, the professor requested that the

students share their intellectual turning point with the class. I remember sharing that my

intellectual turning point occurred when I discovered that my grandmother completed

formal schooling through the sixth grade. Born and raised in rural Mississippi during the

1930s, my grandmother was married at sixteen and never graduated from high school.

This was not uncommon at the time, but came as a surprise to me because until that point

I had associated knowledge with schooling. Because of my grandmother's history, I

learned that wisdom comes with experience. Like Edelman's mentors, my grandmother

teaches me, directly and indirectly, through her life experiences. My grandmother's

struggle, poverty and faith are all embedded in her stories and advice. I doubt that any

formal training or preparation can take the place of her experiences.

Although in a number of formal mentoring programs there is required training for mentors (Miller, 2010), the muses in this study use their experiences as preparation and training to work with African American female youth. Connections with other African American women and places such as school, work and church "prepare" the muses to build relationships with today's youth. Collins (2009) writes, "Black women's centrality in families, churches, and other community organizations allows us to share with younger, less experienced sisters our concrete knowledge of what it takes to be self-defined Black women" (p. 278). Lauryn credits her mother, aunts and African American educators at her local elementary school for her desire to work with her mentees. While Angela and Deanna note the presence of community elders in their upbringing, Trina and Priscilla highlight the role of the church in their present mentoring relationships. Both past and present, the muses have been and continue to be "trained" and "prepared" to mentor through their experiences with other African American women and their surroundings. As educators look forward, it is important to remember that preparation is not always formal and easily assessed. Many life experiences help to prepare muses with the ability and desire to maintain relationships with their mentees.

Serving as a model and example for other African American female youth is a part of being an African American female muse, but what is the essence of this lived experience? As a phenomenological researcher, I gain pedagogical insights from the essence of these experiences.

The Presence of Essence: Muses and Beyond

Phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand the essence of what it means to be. According to van Manen (1997), "Essence asks for what something is, and without which

it would no longer be what it is" (p. xv). The essence of being an African American female muse includes characteristics that are not solely unique to mentoring, but are imperative in order for the mentor to muse transition to take place. First, muses engage in real listening. They listen to their mentees when they speak, sharing their insights and perspectives on everything from school to sex. Muses understand that there is a tension in the mentoring relationship, and it can become even more apparent while listening to their mentees. Although opinions and experiences differ, sometimes drastically, listening is necessary in order to maintain and grow mentoring relationships. Muses also listen to their own voices, thoughts and opinions. This is necessary in order to know when to speak and when to withhold information that might be damaging to the relationship with their mentees.

Closely connected to listening is care. At the essence of being an African American female muse is care. The muses are not ashamed to say that they care, and even love, their mentees. As mentioned in Chapter One, Loreman (2011) writes that when we explore love across religious, philosophical and psychological texts, we find that love includes 1) kindness and empathy, 2) intimacy and bonding, 3) sacrifice and forgiveness, 4) acceptance and community, as well as 5) passion. Looking at the elements of love, there is nothing inappropriate about muses loving their mentees. In fact, by showing love for their mentees, the muses themselves feel that they are giving their best to the mentoring relationship. I have learned from the muses that people give and receive care in different ways. Although he writes about love, Gary Chapman (2010) shares that there are five love languages we use to express our love and to receive it from others: physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts and acts of service. Each of us has a

primary love language and this is how we show and receive love in our interactions with others. Knowing someone's love language is important because without that information, they may feel as though we do not love them. For example, if a husband's primary love language is quality time and his wife's is words of affirmation, while the husband thinks he is constantly showing love to his wife by spending quality time with her, she may not perceive his actions as loving because he is not affirming her with his words. This can happen with muses and mentees in reference to care. How do we deal with this disconnect? Muses and mentees must share with one another what matters most to them in reference to care, and this comes through conversations when muses and mentees both have the opportunity to share how they receive and display care.

While exploring the essence of what it means to be an African American female muse, it becomes clear that honesty shows itself through care and conversations. Muses talk about "keeping it real," in other words, being completely honest with their mentees. The genuine nature of these relationships expands when muses are vulnerable with their mentees and see themselves in positions of learner and one being inspired, instead of a constant view of teacher and imparter of knowledge. In "offering others what you have to give" (Albom, 1997, p. 126) as a muse, the relationship has the potential to grow for both the muse and mentee.

Reflecting and taking time to pull from the familiar is another element of being an African American female muse. Reflecting about who they are, how they find themselves in the place of mentoring, and what benefits they receive as muses is at the essence of mentoring. Without reflection and taking the time to see oneself in the mirror – the beauty and the ugliness – it would be even more difficult for muses to relate to their

mentees, pushing through generational and socioeconomic differences. At the same time, there is a balance in reflection, so that muses understand their past experiences should not overshadow and somehow serve as the ultimate examples to their mentees. Reflection, hopefully, leads to a better understanding of self and translates into more insightful understanding of mentees.

My own reflection of my time as a classroom teacher makes me think about how I listened, cared for, opened up to and reflected on my own experiences in order to be a better teacher for my students. The essence of what it means to be an African American female mentor to African American female youth is not just limited to listening, care, honesty and reflection, but the most dominant elements are shared here because I wonder how this can help to inform educational research? What can we learn about ourselves as educators, working with African American female youth, from the muses in this study? What do their lived experiences teach us about our own narrow horizons? Inviting muses, along with other community pedagogues to the conversation can strengthen our own understanding and approach to helping our students succeed academically.

A Seat at the Table: Community Pedagogues

All my life I have searched for a place of belonging, a place that would become home. Growing up in a small Kentucky town, I knew in early childhood what home was, what it felt like. Home was the safe place, the place where one could count on not being hurt. It was the place where wounds were attended to. Home was the place where the me of me mattered. Home was the place I longed for, it was not where I lived. (hooks, 2009, p. 215)

What is a community? Community from the Latin *communis* means "shared by all or many." Gadamer (1975/2004) writes about the importance of "sharing in a common meaning" (p. 292). As an educator and researcher engaging in conversations with African American female muses, I recognize our shared meaning of influencing the lives of

African American female youth. Through our conversations it became more apparent that

this shared meaning is not solely contained at home, in schools, or in the communities,

but is intertwined throughout these three places in the lives of our youth. Extending the

comfort, safety and overall sense of home to other places and people in the lives of our

youth starts with a shared sense of responsibility among family members, educators and

community members. Epstein (1995, 2001) refers to the connection between families,

schools and communities as "overlapping spheres of influence." While there has been

extensive research around family and parental involvement in successful educational

outcomes for students, there is a need for more research exploring community places and

individuals who potentially impact the lives of youth (Williams, Davis, Miller Cribbs,

Saunders, & Williams, 2002; Wright & Smith, 1998). Carter (2003) suggests educators

become more aware of their dismissal of the cultural capital and social rewards poor

Black students receive in their communities that are shunned "within the school walls"

because "officials devalue precisely these cultural attributes" (p. 149). The dismissal of

students' invaluable contributions and experiences stops when we begin to value the

"reciprocal influences" (Wright & Smith, 1998, p. 159) of community settings.

Community pedagogues, including mentors, coaches, program directors in

community centers and religious leaders, among others, engage in pedagogical

relationships with our youth, often outside of the school setting. Van Manen (1991) refers

to a pedagogue as one who leads. This leading is not limited to classroom teacher and

students, but to many adults. He writes:

> The pedagogical relation is an intentional relationship between an adult and a
> child, in which the adult's dedication and intentions are the child's mature
> adulthood. It is a relation oriented toward the personal development of the child –
> this means that the pedagogue needs to be able to see the present situation and

experiences of the child and value them for what they contain; and the pedagogue needs to be able to anticipate the moment when the child can participate in the culture with fuller self-responsibility. (p. 75)

Van Manen's words align with the topics that emerged from my conversations with the muses: maturity, openness, relationship and responsibility. Pedagogues build open relationships with youth to instill maturity and self-responsibility in order for youth to pursue future goals and endeavors. Putting all of this responsibility on classroom teachers is unfortunate and frankly unrealistic. This approach is unfortunate for both teachers and youth. Recognizing that not only "families come with their children to school" in their "minds and hearts and in their hopes and dreams" (Epstein, 2001, p. 4), but they bring their communities with them as well. The muses share their desires for mentees to go back into their communities and serve as examples for other youth they interact with on a daily basis. Recognizing there is "a common thread that binds them and that in spite of" (Angela) their differences, they can learn from one another, muses envision their mentees making a difference in their communities. In this chapter, I take it a step further and think about the difference that the community makes in the lives of the mentees.

What more can we as educators and researchers learn about African American youth by engaging in conversations with community members? What will we find when exploring educational places beyond the classroom? When students have the opportunity to share their insights about the links between their communities and classrooms, what will we learn about ourselves and approaches? What possibilities present themselves through community educational exploration? In this section, I address these questions and more.

Community Conversations

> It [being a part of the research study] actually helped me to broaden my whole mentoring horizon because I tended to, with this program in particular, I was gearing more towards just the academic side. Just doing, "Let me help you with your studies," but it's never that. You get sucked into the other areas and those other areas are where my passion is…the nurturing side. Helping them, in some cases, the girls have children. You know, giving them a break. "Let's go to the mall. You shop, I'll play with the kid." Just to show them that "Everyone doesn't mean you harm. Some people really do want to see you succeed and want your child to succeed." (Angela)

While reflecting on being a part of this research study as an African American female muse, Angela mentions how her horizon, connected to mentoring, has broadened. She realizes that beyond academics and grades, there is a nurturing element in her mentoring relationships. Helping her mentees to grow means that Angela is "not being limited to what is nearby," but is fortunately, "able to see beyond it" (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 301). Similarly, Trina shares, "I didn't even realize that me being a mentor or even the experiences that I've [gone] through, how effective it was on me and not just them." Trina's horizon was broadened as well because she began to realize that mentoring impacted her life along with the mentees. Just based on our three conversations, Angela and Trina, along with other muses, noticed a shift in their thoughts and approaches towards mentoring. I wonder, as researchers and educators, are our horizons broadened through community conversations? There is, undoubtedly, pedagogical value in the communities our students live in, and including community pedagogues in the dialogue around academic achievement, curriculum and school reform is necessary.

Baldridge, Hill and Davis (2011) assert the need for community collaboration in education because this supports the unique needs of Black youth, while also providing

possible models for school reform. Additionally, Boutte and Hill (2006) remind us to recognize the value in Black communities because "When educators see and understand the beauty and wisdom that exists in students' communities, they can then begin to translate this knowledge and values into their classrooms as necessary and foundational building blocks for teaching and learning" (p. 327). However, the reciprocal nature of this dialogue cannot be ignored as concerns of the community itself are also met through collaboration (Hall & Brown-Thirston, 2011). With knowledge of pedagogues beyond the school settings, we need to continue engaging with community pedagogues and exploring pedagogical places to broaden our own horizons.

Exploring Pedagogical Places

> …places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further, places make us: As occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped. (Gruenwald, 2003, p. 621)

During my elementary school years, I clearly remember the time spent in church singing in the choir. Committing to the rehearsals, learning my notes, memorizing song lyrics and learning to collaborate with others are all things that I realize helped to build my self confidence and sense of accomplishment as a child. Now as an adult, is actually the first time I have realized the extent of what spending time, actively involved in church meant for my academic success. School was not the place where I felt most confident or at my best, but church was definitely one of those places in my community where I knew that I could just be me, without having to prove myself to an authority figure. Outside of church, I also played softball and learned how to cope with defeat in a mature and respectable manner. Engaging in conversations with the muses not only reminds me of the people in the community who work with our youth, but also the places

where they grow and thrive in ways that educators can overlook. Gruenwald (2003) states

that places are the "centers of experience" because "we live our lives in places and our

relationship to them colors who we are" (p. 625). The church and the athletic fields most

certainly shaped me as a youth, along with many of my peers.

From a multi-year national study on Black church sponsored community based

programs, Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) found that Black churches not only support

already existing educational programs for youth, but also create new opportunities for

both members and non-members of their congregations. Black churches tend to do this by

collaborating with parents, schools, and other members of the community to create

activities for youth and "as the central institutional sector in most black neighborhoods

and community life" (Collins, 2006, p. 184); this is crucial. Unfortunately, in a study

conducted almost twenty years ago, Black churches were not focusing on some of the

more pressing issues African American youth encountered (Rubin, Billingsley, &

Caldwell, 1994). Arguably, this is still the case today, and points back to collaborative

efforts, as it seems no one place, school, community setting or even home, provides youth

with everything they need to thrive. Still, the Black churches' connection to community

based programs emphasizes how we must draw on community resources to strengthen the

lives of our youth, while building trusting relationships and creating safe spaces.

As I reflect on community spaces where I spent a vast amount of time outside of

school, I also think about the hair salon. Ever since I can remember, my mother would

drop me off at the hair salon every two weeks to have my hair braided. My mother knew

that I was safe there and that the women would make sure I was taken care of and well-

behaved. It was during this study that I realized the first entrepreneurs I was ever exposed

to are African American women who managed their own hair salon. Two sisters, Rena

and Janette, managed a salon that was filled with African American women from

different backgrounds and professions, who set aside time to have their hair styled, as

well as engage in "women's talk" (Alexander, 2003, p. 117) which includes relationships,

politics, media and everything else in between. What examples and encouragement can

entrepreneurs like Rena and Janette provide for young African American female future

entrepreneurs? Harvey (2005) writes that African American female salon owners tend to

enjoy making other women feel good about themselves and train other business hopefuls

in preparation to open their own salons. Places such as Black-owned hair salons and

barbershops also need to be included in our research around community influences, since

many Black youth spend time in these places witnessing interactions among adults from

their own communities and witnessing firsthand entrepreneurship, along with the

shattering of negative dominant Black images (Alexander, 2003). As Gruenwald (2003)

contends:

> The point of becoming more conscious of places in education is to extend our
> notions of pedagogy and accountability outward towards places. Thus extended,
> pedagogy becomes more relevant to the lived experience of students and teachers,
> and accountability is reconceptualized so that places matter to educators, students,
> and citizens in tangible ways. (p. 620)

These places matter, so we must begin to pay attention to the invaluable lessons we can

learn as educators. By engaging students in our conversations, we will become aware of

more community resources and how to serve them better while making them a more

integral part of the education process.

Finding the Missing Voice: Students Speak, We Listen

Researchers suggest that we blur the boundaries between teachers, students and communities in order to provide students with the most inclusive educational experiences (Evans-Winter, 2005; Winn, 2011). An integral part of this process is including student voice in our exploration toward educational paradigm shifts. As mentioned throughout this dissertation, teachers, administrators and researchers must listen and consider the significance of the student perspective. As aligned with the muses' experience with really listening to their mentees, "Teachers can elicit student voices. And teachers can, in the process, be led to discover their own voices" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 93). When students speak and we listen, our own tension with conforming to classroom, administrative and research-based norms can be examined and given voice.

What have we already learned through listening to students? Research with African American students shows us how they make space for themselves in marginalized school settings (Venzant-Chambers & McCready, 2011) and what specific strategies they consider culturally relevant, effective teaching (Howard, 2001, 2002). Among students of color, including African Americans, Latinos and Asians, we learn the causes of school failure from low-achieving students' perspectives (P. W. Lee, 1999), reasons youth of color participate in community-based programs (Perkins, Borden, Villarruel, Carlton-Hug, Stone & Keith, 2007) and what students, families and teachers do that is helpful and harmful in producing more student effort towards schoolwork (Sands, Guzman, Stephens & Boggs, 2007). These studies are representative of only a fraction of the numerous studies around student voice and what student insight has taught us as researchers and educators. We must continue to talk to students about the issues that

plague education – the achievement gap, disparity between the number of students of color and teachers of color, standardized testing, among many other topics – since their experiences provide unique and specific insight for parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers and the education research community.

In research highlighting student voice, care repeatedly shows itself. Although this is not groundbreaking, it needs to be stated: students want teachers who care. Students of color, in particular, voice that teachers should care about the "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) they bring to the classroom and learn how to build classroom communities comparable to their family and community environments. Care cannot become an afterthought or simply kind words attached to discussions between teachers and students. Care, based on the essence of being an African American female muse and the responses of students, must be incorporated in the curriculum and daily interactions of teachers and students. Care, as a form of concern, ought to show itself in the activities, assignments, discussions and integration of family, school and community elements teachers make a part of their classroom norms. This care also comes through in honest reflection on our own biases, prejudices and assumptions about our students, their families and communities.

As agents of change, we must listen to students and include them as permanent members in our conversations around student achievement, education reform, culturally relevant teaching, and the gap between families, schools and communities. In an attempt not to oversimplify including student perspectives in education conversations, Cook-Sather's (2002) "twin challenges of authorizing" (p. 4) the student point of view is presented. The twin challenges are "(a) changing the structures in our minds that have

rendered us disinclined to elicit and attend to students' voices and (b) changing the structures in educational relationships and institutions that have supported and been supported by this disinclination" (p. 4). These challenges are individual, collective, and structural. The changes necessary to combat the twin challenges take time and require student empowerment, as well as a conscious decision on the part of educators and researchers to "learn to listen differently" (p. 8) to students and to ourselves. Cook-Sather also challenges us to create forums where conversations among students and educators occur because beyond our internal changes, action is required. Ultimately, without the perspectives of students, we knowingly continue on a journey void of necessary directions.

People, Places and Possibilities in Partnership

> When the schools and organizations recognize their intrinsic value along with the value in their connections to others, their ability to develop a diverse set of strategies to achieve their goals is maximized. (Weisblat & McClellan, 2013, p. 143)

In their study evaluating one urban high school's progress, Weisblat and McClellan found that community engagement resources can maximize their goals set for the school. Their research emphasizes that maximizing the interconnectedness of school, family and community resources leads to numerous possibilities. One of these possibilities is recognition of students' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992), including the cultural aspects of what students bring to the classroom and to their approaches to learning (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007). Without an understanding of students' families and communities, teachers will not incorporate students' funds of knowledge, and this is unfortunate since teachers, along with students, benefit when this occurs (Ikpeze, 2013). Students know that their knowledge and

272

experiences are valued within the classroom, while teachers engage in culturally relevant

instruction that helps "establish a fundamentally new, more symmetrical relationship"

(Moll et al., 1992, p. 139) between schools, families and communities.

Recognizing resiliency. Resilience among students of color from urban

communities emerges from school, family and community partnerships. Evans-Winter

(2005) reflects on specific support systems while sharing her own story of resiliency:

> Students who stayed in school survived those barriers that were related to race,
> class, and gender with the support of the people and physical resources around us.
> When reflecting on my own schooling experience, I realize that my family, the
> African American community, and adults at school played a major role in my
> personal and educational development. My teachers, godparents, grandparents,
> the church, successful adults, and others encouraged me to be a strong-minded
> individual as well as the best student that I could be. Students learned that we did
> not need privilege on our side to succeed at schooling, simply courage and
> endurance…education was promoted as an opportunity to open doors and to battle
> the inequalities present in our daily lives. Thus, most of us struggled through
> racism, sexism, and classism at home, school, and in our neighborhoods and
> against larger forces outside our communities and completed school successfully.
> (p. 3)

Bryan (2005) defines resilience as "the capacity of an individual to overcome difficult

and challenging life circumstances and risk factors" (p. 220). Poverty, teenage pregnancy,

drugs, alcohol and tragic loss are some of the challenging forces Evans-Winter and youth

in her community pushed through with the support of family, community and school. In

her own research years later, Evans-Winter finds that the resilience of African American

female students is still very much connected to families, communities and schools,

particularly when the boundaries between the three are blurred. In other words, we cannot

restrict certain expectations and experiences solely to one sphere of influence, but instead

we need to recognize their interconnected influences.

The muses in this study help to foster resilience in their mentees. Priscilla's presence and time spent with her mentees, Katrice and Shanelle, whose mother is physically absent, builds resilience to help them push through a difficult circumstance. By discussing various topics with her mentees and challenging their viewpoints, Lauryn is building resilience in her girls. Lauryn also shares her own personal story of resilience with her mentees and reminds them that they need the support of others in order to succeed. The possibility to build and foster resiliency in students impacts academic achievement, arguably the most pertinent topic in educational research.

Acknowledging achievement. Throughout all of my years as a student, I remained concerned about my grades. The origin of this worry is unknown to me, but yet it exists. As a graduate student, the concern to excel academically heightened, along with a sense of anxiety. Feeling stifled and unable to include my experiences as a teacher in my writing and research, I wondered if my grades would suffer. Fortunately, I did have some professors, who allowed me to include outside experiences in my writing, and this helped me to make meaningful and insightful connections to the various texts. While engaged in dialogue with a fellow scholar around the grading process and the role of the professor, hooks (1994) shares:

> When you acknowledge that we are observers, it means that we are workers in the classroom. To do that work well we can't be simply standing in front of the class reading. If I'm to know whether a student is participating I have to be listening, I have to be recording, and I have to be thinking beyond that moment. I want them to think, "What I'm here for is to work with material, and to work with it the best way that I can. And in doing that I don't have to be fearful about my grade, because if I'm working the best I can with this material, I know it's going to be reflected in my grade." I try to communicate that the grade is something they can control by their labor in the classroom. (p. 157)

In the classroom as a student, I often approach material (books, articles, documentaries, interviews, etc.) with influences outside of the classroom because that is what I am most familiar with as a learner. What would happen if teachers in K12 classrooms began to think about student achievement similarly and comprised the role of observers? Where would a teacher's thoughts travel if they were "thinking beyond that moment" of this lesson, this quiz or this test? Possibly, teachers, administrators and researchers need to begin thinking beyond one particular moment and one particular source for student achievement. Research states that there are many factors impeding student achievement, but one source of positive impact comes from family, school and community partnerships.

Various studies support that African American female students' relationships with caring adults (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012), high achieving students' community involvement (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000) and schools' connections to family and community resources (Sheldon, 2003) positively influence academic achievement. This achievement is typically measured in the form of grades and standardized test scores. The narrow scope of student achievement is unfortunate, but it is important to remember that students bring "ideologies and practices they have constructed from their home and community lives" (Hubbard, 2005, p. 619) into the classroom with them, so the connection between partnership and higher levels of academic achievement is not surprising. As educators, the muses remind us that building relationships with students includes learning about their families, community activities and schooling experiences. Taking an interest in students' lives, beyond academic reports and test scores, helps to strengthen the relationship between muses and mentees. Predictably, this will occur with

teachers who do the same. Edwards, McMillion and Turner (2010) write that unfortunately, teachers are either too busy with the many demands aligned with teaching in today's educational climate, or they are unaware of how to build meaningful relationships, particularly with African American students. Continuing to engage in conversations and research studies with community pedagogues, educators can learn more about students and how to build relationships with them more successfully. The power dynamics in achievement and partnership also must be addressed in order to strengthen both the teacher and student experience in schools.

Power in partnership. Promoting and implementing partnerships in education cannot occur without discussions about and changes in power relations. As mentioned earlier about including student voice, changes require time and action. Additionally, power itself is not negative, but instead how the holders of power use and misuse it is the problem (hooks, 1994). Delpit (1995) writes about "the culture of power" that exists in education, listing five aspects:

(1) Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
(2) There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power."
(3) The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
(4) If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
(5) Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 24)

For addressing the preventative power in partnerships, I focus on numbers two and five.

As for aspect number two, what happens when you do not know the codes or rules for participating in power? When the codes or rules are unknown to you, some might argue that you become powerless. This is not necessarily true.

> …But unless I learn to use
> the difference between poetry and rhetoric
> my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
> or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire…
> (Lorde, 1997, p. 320)

In the poem "Power," Lorde writes about those who fit into the culture of power as destructive and harmful towards those who do not have the same power. She realizes that even those individuals who do not fit into the culture of power have power they can either use or waste. As a poet, Lorde knows that her poetry has power, and if she does not realize this, the power she has will become harmful to others, just as those in the culture of power have been, or her power will become useless and serve no purpose. Students, even in a space where they feel powerless, also have power. Students, unfortunately, who do not fit into the culture of power, may not even know they have a voice or valuable input and experiences (Lincoln, 1995) because they are unaware of the cultural codes in order to share their insights. Lorde, as a poet, used her poetry as power. Educators have to find what works as our power to begin to change the power dynamics in education.

Since those in power usually are unaware of their position within the culture of power, as Delpit (1995) highlights in number five, they need to be confronted with this reality and take time to listen. Once again, listening finds its way into the conversation around mentoring and partnerships among families, communities and schools. Cook-Sather (2002) writes, "Most power relationships have no place for listening and actively do not tolerate it because it is very inconvenient: to really listen means to have to respond" (p. 8). The response from the listener is the start of a conversation, which has also been previously connected to mentoring relationships, but most certainly has a role in relationships among the overlapping of families, schools and communities.

Some might consider administrators, educators and researchers as the holders of power in the field of education, while others might completely disagree. Whether it is policy makers, researchers, politicians or parents, we need to have more dialogue around the problematic power dynamics in education that do not allow space for families and community members, such as the muses in this study, to contribute to the conversations about possible approaches and changes in education for the betterment of students. Most importantly, students need to know that they have power as the primary focus in education. Students also need to be reassured through action, on the part of their teachers, administrators, families and communities that their voices, opinions and insights matter and need to be a continuous part of the work we do as educators.

The possibilities in partnership provide us with hope for the future of our students. Since hope is "such as clear mark of human experience" (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 344), it tends to bring us closer together as educators and community members. The muses provide those "spaces of hope" (Greene, 2013, p. 123) and educational research makes "pockets of hope deeper and wider" (Edwards, McMillon & Turner, 2010, p. 12), reassuring us that partnerships can improve the educational experience for African American students, their families, communities and schools. The voices of the muses also remind us about how education is woven throughout all areas of our lives and not limited solely to schools and classrooms.

Education as Life: Glimpses into Mentoring Pedagogy

I think it's [mentoring] a part of life and education: the education of life. Everything that you do in your life is education for someone. How you lead yourself. How you portray yourself on a daily basis is an education to someone who may see you: young man, young woman, whomever. It's just mentoring makes a way of, well it's how you carry yourself because it depends upon where you are and what you're doing and who may see you will be an indication of the

278

type of person you are. An individual, especially a young individual will make an informed or uninformed guess about you as the mentor from church, the operations manager, the mother: all that is a part. Education is lifelong. It doesn't stop from your high school, grammar school, college years. It's a life experience and it's how we live. (Alice)

Since education is originally defined as "a leading out," it makes sense to connect education to life experiences. As community pedagogues, the muses recognize how mentoring relates to the education of their mentees. The conversations with the muses provide what van Manen (2005) calls "an occasional glimpse" (p. 7) into what I can learn from community pedagogues and incorporate into my practice as a teacher and researcher. From each of the three themes presented in chapters four through six, there are meaningful lessons to grasp. Again, these occasional glimpses can change and evolve over time with continued conversations between community pedagogues and researchers, both serving today's youth. Since "Education is not about what is. Education is about what is not yet but can be imagined" (Pagano, 1990, p. 85), we must continue to imagine that more collaboration and richer educational experiences among students will occur, while educational power holders work towards change. This work includes, but is not limited to, research studies such as this that provide an opportunity for community pedagogues to share their insight on working with today's youth. When we provide space and opportunity for meaningful dialogue to occur among all of education's stakeholders, we are beginning the work toward change.

Reflection, tension and dialogue are three of the glimpses provided through the emergent themes in this phenomenological study. What can educators learn from these glimpses? Why should educators engage in purposeful reflection? What should educators

do within the inevitable tension found in working with students? What does open dialogue mean for building relationships between students and teachers?

Purposeful Reflection

The first theme, "The Significance of Place" promotes the usefulness of reflection. When we reflect on our practice and what we bring with us into the place of education, we become more aware of what belongs and what does not. Teachers need to confront the biases, assumptions and prejudices they bring into the classroom, particularly when working with students they deem *different* from them. Van Manen (1997) writes that reflection is easy and difficult: easy because we can reflect on our experiences each and every day, but it is difficult to consider the meaning of the experience itself. It is easy to recommend that teachers reflect on their experiences in the classroom, but it is more difficult for teachers to grasp the meaning behind these experiences. The difficulty in meaning making can be supported through professional development centered on reflection. With veteran teachers who work in the same school with novice teachers, this professional development can continue year-round. For novice teachers recently graduating from an accredited teacher preparation program, hopefully reflection is something they have become accustomed to when working with teacher educators who incorporate reflection into their lessons and activities.

While assisting a professor in teaching an Adolescent Development course to resident teachers, I learned the value in shattering assumptions through meaningful student assignments. One of the assignments the resident teachers had to complete was a final paper written about one of their own students. This assignment started with resident teachers choosing a student who was different from them in some way (male/female;

Black/White; siblings/only child) and then "shadowing" the student for an entire school day. One-on-one interviews, collecting student artifacts and conducting a phone conversation with at least one of the student's parents was also a part of the assignment. By engaging in conversations with the student, their parent(s) and following them throughout the school day, resident teachers learned so much about their students, and I think surprisingly for themselves. The resident teachers were able to recognize their own assumptions made about the student prior to really getting to know him or her. Although this assignment was not presented as an exercise in challenging assumptions and biases, the assignment did just that with the resident teachers. With reflection, educators face their own successes, failures, triumphs and challenges, as well as incorporate the best practices for students. Thinking about what is best for students can help to ease the unavoidable tension present in working with youth.

Necessary Tension

In the second theme, "I Am Who I Am," tension was present within the mentoring relationships. Similarly, tension is present when working with youth as an educator in the classroom setting. This tension might reveal itself through generational, socioeconomic and/or racial differences between teachers and students. Regardless, this tension is necessary because it is at the very essence of what it means to be an educator. Working with students, there must be more inclusion across the board around diversity and equity, challenging and if not eliminating, at least diminishing, deficit and stereotypical views of our youth. Teachers must engage in culturally relevant teaching, which defined by African American students includes care, community and family-like classroom environments and entertaining learning environments (Howard, 2001). Culturally

relevant teachers can continue to strengthen their relationships with students, even through the apparent differences and begin to notice the similarities that connect them. Relationships that grow in the midst of undeniable differences come through being open-minded. As Pagano (1990) writes, "Open-minded persons *claim* their own knowledge and tell their own stories, but they are always mindful of the fact that they may change their minds. Open-minded persons do not merely tolerate other voices; they listen and respond" (p. 85). Open-minded teachers are not unwilling to change their minds and opinions on various topics, so they can continue to build relationships with students because they are not stifled by one way of seeing the world.

Teacher educators are in an instrumental position when working with perspective teachers around tension in education. By truly aligning their syllabi with the mission and vision of most colleges of education, teacher educators incorporate diversity and equity throughout their texts and assignments the entire semester to help challenge assumptions easily made through lack of experience and the unknown. In connection to the reflection assignment, teacher educators can incorporate opportunities for prospective teachers to communicate with students and community members through volunteer hours in local schools or other community settings (after-school programs, community centers) prior to student teaching placements. These opportunities can help to ease the tension between students and prospective teachers as they have an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue, while spending time with students in spaces that might initially be new and even uncomfortable for prospective teachers. Dwelling with students in a community that is unfamiliar to them might help prospective teachers better understand students, parents

and community members of a different race, socioeconomic and educational background. To live within the tension, open and honest dialogue must occur.

Open Dialogue

Part of the tension in being a teacher and working with students who are from a different generation and background is possibly eased through openness and vulnerability. The most important piece in dialogue, once again, is listening. How can we truly get to know someone without listening and sharing of ourselves? Yes, this is a bit different for the muses because most of them were not restricted or confined by school rules and conduct, but teachers also can be open with their students in ways that help to build relationships of trust, and it starts with teachers' listening and being vulnerable. Simply put, teachers need to listen – really listen – to their students. Setting aside time during the start or end of class for discussion, providing journals where students can share their thoughts, or just making oneself available through email or an "open door" policy makes students aware that the teacher is willing and ready to listen. Also, as a teacher, sharing life experiences that possibly connect to the content or the present-day life experiences of students is another way to engage in open dialogue around topics that are often silenced. Another benefit for teachers when listening to students is connecting them to the proper person or resource to help in assisting their academic and social growth. As stated previously, making sure our students succeed is a collaborative effort. This open dialogue is also important among colleagues in school settings, possibly in professional learning communities (PLCs). As a classroom teacher, I learned to cope with and progress through issues with the help of my colleagues in my PLCs. In the PLCs we built relationships and found the support systems we so desperately needed to vent our

frustrations, but more importantly, we received honest feedback and critique from fellow teachers. Fortunately, I was accustomed to this type of communal sharing because my professors in my teacher preparation program encouraged prospective teachers to engage in this type of dialogue.

Whether in small groups or with the entire class, prospective teachers need the chance to share their thoughts and experiences. One of the spaces where this occurs is provided by teacher educators. Pagano (1990) claims that "The process of education takes place through conversation" (p. 134). Conversations are a vital part of how we learn from one another. Teacher educators, for example, cannot ignore race. Similar to the muses, teachers must admit that race matters and teacher educators need to "explicitly instruct teacher education students in how race and culture impact their decisions, their classroom environment, their interactions with students and parents, and their attitudes about education" (Edwards, McMillon & Turner, 2010, p. 164). This open dialogue is honest, aligned with care and concern for students, their communities and the perspectives they offer to the conversation. Prospective teachers need to know that their students will also need the space to share their concerns, thoughts, ideas and even struggles with a caring adult. Beyond academics, students have experiences with their families, health, relationships, among many other things, that can influence their performance and attentiveness in school. Through dialogue, teachers and other caring adults can help assist students to reach their goals in spite of the struggles they face.

Though these glimpses give us insight into how the lived experiences of six African American female mentors inform our roles as educators, the journey to explore

more equitable, empowering and enjoyable educational opportunities and insights continues.

The Journey Continues

This journey was not easy. There were moments of joy and surprise, as well as moments of hesitation and frustration. Still and all I find solace in knowing that the journey does not end with me. Although this seems like the end, this journey continues when community pedagogues are included in educational research and inquiry. The voices and experience of the muses inspire me to finish my initial phase of this journey because I want others to know how invaluable the lived experiences of African American female mentors are to others if we just take the time to listen and notice. Throughout this journey, like the muses, I continue to learn that the individuals and experiences that can so easily be overlooked help to shape the world in which we live. As an African American female, I am reminded that through listening to the muses' stories of triumph, struggle, pain and happiness, they provide me with the words to express to others what their stories mean in the context of today's educational climate.

Starting this study with my own experiences of having the honor of maintaining relationships with African American women who mentor me, I conclude this study by promoting partnerships that can strengthen relationships between schools, families and communities. Initiating and sustaining these partnerships are not easy tasks, but far from impossible. As educators, we have the responsibility to reflect, observe and make the necessary changes for the betterment of students, in the midst of challenge, critique and confusion. This journey continues as we are bold enough to make the choices that best reflect our past lessons learned. In the words of Maya Angelou (1993):

Each of us has the right and the responsibility to assess the roads which lie ahead, and those over which we have traveled, and if the future road looms ominous or unpromising, and the roads back uninviting, then we need to gather our resolve and, carrying only the necessary baggage, step off that road into another direction. If the new choice is also unpalatable, without embarrassment, we must be ready to change that as well. (p. 24)

APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INVITATION

Hello ladies,

My name is Wyletta Gamble and I am currently a doctoral student in the Minority and Urban Education program at the University of Maryland. You are receiving this letter because you currently mentor an African American female youth. I think that you serve a unique and important role, so I would like to engage in a series of at least three 60-90 minute conversations over a four month period about your mentoring experiences. Two of these conversations will be one-on-one and the final conversation will include all participants in a group setting. The scheduling of these conversations will be based on your availability. Following each conversation, I will ask you to read a transcript of the previous meeting to make any necessary changes or further explore your thoughts and experiences previously shared. Additionally, at the conclusion of each one-on-one meeting, you will be asked to spend at least one hour with a writing prompt to be further discussed in the next meeting.

Thank you for considering my request. I want you to know that your experiences are invaluable and serve as a bridge between educational research and the communities in which we work with children. I hope that this research leads you to a greater understanding of your own experiences as a mentor. Moreover, I hope that in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the experiences of African American female mentors.

If you would like to participate in this research project, please contact me by phone or email. I look forward to hearing from you.

Wyletta Gamble
(703) 850-1174
wgamble@umd.edu

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Project Title	Mentor to Muse: The Lived Experiences of African American Female Mentors Mentoring African American Girls
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by Wyletta Gamble at the University of Maryland, College Park, under the direction of Dr. Francine Hultgren. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are a self-identified African American female mentor. The purpose of this research project is to investigate the human lived experience of African American female mentors mentoring African American girls.
Procedures	The research process will take place over four months, and the procedures involve at least two individual interviews (one-on-one) and one group meeting with all participants. There will be written reflection activities to do following each individual meeting. Wyletta Gamble will conduct the interviews at a time and location that is mutually convenient to the participant and to the investigator. Each interview should last about one hour. The interview will be conversational in nature and will explore your specific experiences in your role as a mentor. All meetings will be audio taped. The interviewer will take handwritten notes. The topic for each of the meetings will be those experiences of mentoring (broadly defined as mentoring roles connected to family, community, etc.). Sample questions: What motivated you to become a mentor? Describe your first mentoring experience.
Potential Risks and Discomforts	There are possible risks in this study. You may disclose personal information (i.e. 'stories' or personal anecdotes) related to your mentoring experiences during the course of this study. You will be asked to face some sensitive issues of race, gender, age, and ethnicity. You may experience feelings of discomfort as a result of being audio taped. Allowing participants to review audio-taped discussions and conversations to make additions, corrections, and/or deletions at any time should do much to reduce the risk of discomfort. Audio-tapings and video tapings may be reviewed by participants after completion. You are encouraged to ask the researcher questions throughout the duration of the study and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Potential Benefits	There are no direct benefits, however, potential benefits to this research include a greater understanding of your own experiences as a mentor. We hope that in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the experiences of African American female mentors.
Confidentiality	We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, the confidentiality of the participants' identities will be accomplished through several means. (1) Names of participants will not be included on collected data. You will be asked to offer a single fictional name which will be used in all documents; (2) All collected material and information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet; (3) electronic files will be secured on a private computer using password-protected computer files; (4) consent forms will be separated from material by participants. Only the researcher and principal investigator will have access to the material collected. ___ I agree to be [audiotaped] during my participation in this study. ___ I do not agree to be [audiotaped] during my participation in this study. In addition, collected data such as transcriptions and audiotapes will be kept for ten years then destroyed. Written data will be shredded, computer data will be deleted, and audiotapes will be erased. *If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.*

Medical Treatment	*The University of Maryland does not provide any medical, hospitalization or other insurance for participants in this research study, nor will the University of Maryland provide any medical treatment or compensation for any injury sustained as a result of participation in this research study, except as required by law.*
Right to Withdraw and Questions	*Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.*
	If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:
	Dr. Francine Hultgren Department of Teaching, Learning, Policy and Leadership 2311B Benjamin Building University of Maryland College Park, MD 20742 301-405-4501 fh@umd.edu Wyletta Gamble 209 Smarty Jones Terrace Havre de Grace, MD 21078 703-850-1174 443-502-2474 wgamble@umd.edu

Participant Rights	*If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:* **University of Maryland College Park** **Institutional Review Board Office** **1204 Marie Mount Hall** **College Park, Maryland, 20742** **E-mail:** irb@umd.edu **Telephone: 301-405-0678** *This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.*
Statement of Consent	*Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.* *If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.*
Signature and Date	**NAME OF SUBJECT** **[Please Print]**	
	SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT	
	DATE	

APPENDIX C: REFLECTIVE WRITING EXERCISE

Before our next meeting, please take time to respond to the following prompt:

> After sharing your own definition of mentoring and that which motivates you, take some time to reflect on your position as a mentor. How have you been changed and/or influenced through the experiences with your mentee(s)?

You can either provide a handwritten or typed response. Once completed, please contact me through email (wgamble@umd.edu) or by phone (703-850-1174) so we can arrange the appropriate mode of delivery for your response.

APPENDIX D: METAPHOR LIFE MAP ACTIVITY

In phenomenological inquiry, the use of metaphor is very useful in helping to uncover

lived experience in addition to our conversation. Before our group meeting, please

complete the following activity.

> Share a metaphor that helps you further express and describe your role as a
> mentor. With the use of your metaphor, create a life map that depicts a minimum
> of **three** significant mentoring moments in your life.

Be sure to:

1.) Use illustrations and words with this metaphor activity.

2.) Reflect on mentoring moments as a mentor and/or mentee (if applicable).

3.) Think about various contexts including, but not limited to, academic, professional,
and communal spaces where mentoring has taken place.

4.) Include, when necessary, aspects of your identity (race, socioeconomic status,
sexual orientation, religious belief, etc) that contribute to the memory of
significant mentoring experiences.

Do not stress about doing this activity the "right" way. This activity is meant for you to
reflect on some of the most significant mentoring experiences in your life and think about
them in a way you may not have thought about them before. Enjoy!

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