Out From the Shadows of Minneapolis: Power, Pride, and Perseverance at a Northern Community College

Edited by Jay Williams, PhD & Alison Bergblom Johnson
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co-edited by

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Minneapolis College, the most selected higher education destination of students from all Minneapolis Public High Schools, is located downtown, nestled between the hustle of Hennepin Avenue and the green spaces of Loring Park. As a part of the Minnesota State system of colleges and universities, Minneapolis College most serves those students who are least likely to go to college. With three-quarters of the student body composed of those underrepresented in higher education, the hallways are filled with recent immigrants, those seeking to learn English, members of communities with the highest unemployment and incarceration rates in the state, veterans, those of low socioeconomic status, seekers of diversity, and those who wish to serve them.

Collected here are their stories, stories of overcoming, coming up, perseverance, pride, and power in the face of depressed opportunity and systemic oppression.
Dedication

We dedicate *Out From the Shadows of Minneapolis* to the loving memory of Kirk Washington, Jr. (aka Bro Sun), and to the members, volunteers, contractors, and staff involved in any era of the African American Education Empowerment program (AME). This text is testament to Kirk’s unending uplift of all those with whom he shared space on this planet. This text is dedicated to the unyielding voice of AME, whether whispering or hoarsely hollering, different words but a unified sentiment, survive, persist, and never let the absurdity of being black or otherwise left out in Minnesota break you.
As much as a literary anthology, the Out From the Shadows Book Project represents community organizing in pursuit of promoting first voice, a snapshot in time and place. Many of the stories included violate both literary and narrative norms. Including them in the form the authors’ preferred privileges authenticity and agency over convention. At times, this formulation might challenge readers, but there is power and value in first voice that demonstrates the world view of people whose narratives are often excluded.

We invite you to enter this text emotionally as well as intellectually.
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Introduction

by

Shannon Gibney

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In her now famous 2009 TED Talk, Nigerian American writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity." Each of the pieces you are about to read in Out from the Shadows of Minneapolis: Power, Pride, and Perseverance at a Northern Community College fit Adichie’s description of the better qualities of stories and storytelling. They are raw, and they are not easy. They intersect and are created through the social safety net’s failure, intergenerational poverty and violence, and an unbreakable will to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In telling their stories of coming to and moving through Minneapolis Community and Technical College, or Minneapolis College as we like to call it, these students from diverse backgrounds and historically marginalized communities highlight the transformative role that education has played in their lives. They
also show how the urban two-year college can be, and in fact often is, a haven for adults whom mainstream and resource-rich institutions have largely forgotten.

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report that, “In fall 2016, 36 percent of undergraduate students attended public and private two-year colleges. Of full-time undergraduates, 20 percent attended public, two-year colleges.” The CCRC and NCES also report that “In fall 2016, 5.9 million students were enrolled in public, two-year colleges”. The CCRC and NCES state, “About 2.1 million were full-time students and nearly 3.8 million were part-time. About 6.2 million were enrolled in all types of two-year colleges.” Collectively, these statistics mean that one-third to a half of all college students in America today are at some kind of community college, many of them in urban centers, just like the students you will hear from in this volume. In addition, “In fall 2014, 56 percent of Hispanic undergraduates were enrolled at community colleges, while 44 percent of Black students and 39 percent of White students were at community colleges,” (CCRC).

Consistent with the backgrounds of *Out from the Shadows* writers, the browning of America is disproportionately evident at our two-year colleges, which means that a host of racial/racist, cultural/ethnocentrist, social/intolerant, religious/Islamophobic, and other intersectional issues are also present. And yet, beyond the numbers, we know very little about these students themselves – particularly in their own voices. This anthology aims to begin the essential work of changing that.

But all community colleges are not the same, so some context about Minneapolis College will be helpful in processing the powerful stories you are
about to read. Minneapolis College is located on the edge of downtown Minneapolis, and as of 2017, was home to about 11,000 students. About 55 percent of our students identify as female, 42 percent as male, and 3 percent as unknown. The average age is 27, with 27 percent of our students being first-generation college students. A full 64 percent of Minneapolis College students receive financial aid, including 40 percent who receive Pell Grants. We have the brownest student body in the state: 30 percent Black, 12 percent Latino, 5 percent Asian-American, 4 percent unknown, 2 percent Non-Resident Alien, 1 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 39 percent White. Our students include ex-offenders, refugees, those working full or part-time jobs while in school, parents, high school students, and everything in-between. The writers you will hear from are Black and Hmong, single mothers and formerly homeless, graduates and on their way to graduating. They have learning disabilities, families that have always supported them, families that have never supported them, and so much more.

In “Dyslexia Disforia,” Alyssamarie Hanson details her K-16 school experiences, as a student with dyslexia: “During my academic journey I came to believe that the education is based on ableism. The system is designed to fail children with learning challenges and learning disabilities.” Hanson continues, “I was so naïve at that time in my life that I didn’t even notice how teachers treated me. I think they kept me in places they thought was best for their budget. Making it easier to dismiss me as a learner.” Speaking about her grandparents’ decision to throw her and her son out of their house, Jewlene Bellamy writes in “Evolution of a Jewel,” “They loved me in the bright light of day, but loathed me in the dark deep of night.” And in “Out With the Old, In With the New,” LaKeshia E. Vance-Wilkerson narrates her and her children’s journey from Chicago to Minneapolis, being informed upon arrival at a hospital that there was no housing for the homeless, and that they should just go back home. “Home wasn’t home anymore and it wasn’t safe were my thoughts,” Vance-Wilkerson writes. “I
looked at the woman and I pleaded with her to help us. I gave her great detail of how the home was that we left. How it was no longer liveable and that we were pretty much squatters in our home. How children are being gun downed and my children are burying their friends.” Each of the essays is singular and specific, yet they tell a fairly universal story of adversity, grit, and transcendence. In this way, they may feel somewhat familiar to you, even as you marvel in the knowledge that these are students who are either on the path to or in the midst of attending college.

We hope that Out from the Shadows of Minneapolis empowers and humanizes experiences of urban community college students, to use Adichie’s language. We hope that by witnessing students’ dignity broken, but later repaired in the telling of their own stories, you will develop an appreciation for their resilience and brilliance. Above all, we hope that you will see the transformative possibilities of education at the two-year college, as these students apply what they have learned in their lives to the classroom and beyond. For example, in “Paraphernalia,” Teresa Kontney writes,

My past pushed me to want to help others move away from addiction and find their passion. My passion is helping those who have had to deal with losing their kids, those dealing with CPS, and those needing help to regain their self-esteem. I have lived this lifestyle so I know firsthand what clients go through and I can understand firsthand the hardships one must endure. I broke free and I know that other women can break free too, so I chose addiction counseling as my major.

These stories have the capacity to change all of us, to deepen our appreciation of the transformative possibilities of the community college, and its capacity to bring people from all walks of life to a space of safety, recognition, and growth. We are thankful to the students for the courage and labor of sharing their stories, and to you, for deeply listening. Enjoy!
Shannon Gibney is a writer, educator, activist, and the author of See No Color (Carolrhoda Lab, 2015), a young adult novel that won the 2016 Minnesota Book Award in Young Peoples' Literature. Gibney is English faculty at Minneapolis College. Her critically acclaimed new novel, Dream Country, is about more than five generations of an African descended family, crisscrossing the Atlantic both voluntarily and involuntarily (Dutton, 2018). When she's not writing, you can find her reading, running, or hanging with her kids.

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Part 1 Power
Everything seemed the same and yet so different all at once. I couldn’t reconcile that two decades had passed since my duties as a Veteran’s Upward Bound (VUB) work-study ended. Sauntering through the hallways at Minneapolis College, fond memories of my days on the campus compelled me to pause and exhale a joyous breath.

The VUB director, Craig, shook my hand enthusiastically and introduced me to a small group of individuals. “Everyone, this is our new VUB Advisor.” I flashed an overly eager smile, mentally trying to latch onto the whole thing. It was all so surreal. My two-toned grey Rafaella blazer and black slacks helped me give the appearance that I had my act together. However, no one in that room knew about my history at Minneapolis College. No one there knew that twenty-three years earlier, two devastating storms had demolished the foundation of my
existence. The storms resulted from my misguided perceptions about heroes and men.

○

In a stuffy little bathroom on 13th and Morgan, just off Plymouth Avenue, Maurice submersed his pale-skinned body into superheated water. Candle flames around the tub accentuated the hazel-green eyes that once captivated me. Yet those same eyes had turned into piercing glass that cut into my heart. Each glance stung like salted drops in the Pacific Ocean, penetrating a wound. Then without warning, Maurice spoke: “Marce, I want you out by Friday.” His words capsized my life raft, leaving me grasping for pieces of planked wood. With blank eyes I stared, rowing the boat of my consciousness through a hazy fog. My throat sealed itself, like a ship’s hatch door during a flood drill. My words drowned in the surge of emotion. I couldn’t respond. “How did this happen?” My mind looped around in circles creating knots of deeper confusion. I realized that my naiveté had led me astray. Once again I blindly trusted a man to be my protector, and to provide a safe haven for me.

○

In 1991, just before the infamous Halloween snowstorm hit Minneapolis, my father welcomed me to his home with open arms. I was on the run. A man I married in the navy, who suffered from PTSD, had turned me into his personal punching bag. During my escape, Dad assumed the role as the commanding officer and strategized the mission for “Operation Leave-His-Ass.” I followed his orders to the letter because I knew that Dad had always shielded me—his Princess Jezebel—from harm. He guided me daily as I called him teary-eyed from a phone booth at the downtown YMCA. “Jez, I got your plane ticket covered, I’ll pay your last month of rent, just move back to the ship.” He assured me. Then Dad would continue, “Go to the lawyers and get the papers, act like you love
him…” Once I returned to Minneapolis, under Dad’s protection, I believed that I could get my life back on track. Finally, I could pursue my dream of getting a college education.

Minneapolis Community College (MCC) had a program called Veteran’s Upward Bound that helped military vets access and succeed in college. I immediately enrolled so that I could take the free refresher courses. Although I had “seen the world,” I lacked academic confidence. Also, after my discharge from the Navy and leaving my shipmates, I was like a desolate island centered in the midst of haunting waters. Veterans Upward Bound seemed like the perfect fit.

After VUB I enrolled at the college, but in 1993 an unexpected turn of events catapulted me into catastrophic conditions. The “safety net” which I had used to gain footing began to quickly unravel. My father became addicted to crack. As a result, the peaceful stream of our relationship burst into a tormenting tsunami.

Dad spent copious amounts of hours in the basement after work each day. I coined it, “the dungeon” because he seemed unable to escape the temptation to be there. He occasionally ascended the stairs with a shot of E & J in his hand spewing incomprehensible words cloaked in putrid breath.

“You’re stupid and weak Jez, not smart and tough like yo mama!” Dad slurred.

“You’re just pussy whipped and mad coz she left your ass!” I snapped back, rollin’ my eyes.

We both staggered around the kitchen from multiple shots of spirits half the time, engaging in joking, yet mean-spirited banter. The situation exacerbated when he learned I had become pregnant. He disapproved and said that he’d kill me, and my unborn child if I didn’t leave. Dad gave me 24 hours to depart.
Feeling disillusioned, I left with my sea bag and a life growing inside me. Camping out wherever I could, I continued my work-study role as if nothing had changed. Eventually, I ended up on the steps of my unborn child’s father, Maurice. Although our dating life ended one month into the pregnancy, he did the honorable thing and gave me safe haven—for a time.

The first couple of months of cohabiting seemed friendly at least. He worked while I cleaned and cooked. We’d watch his favorite show, “The Simpsons”, and have a good laugh. I actually developed a faint hope that we’d say, “What the hell, let’s do the family thing.” However the next three months that I lived with Maurice, ushered in typhoons of strife. The hull of that love boat smashed violently against jagged rocks, especially when the other woman from his past showed up. I wondered if Maurice would command me to walk the plank.

“You’ve had enough time to figure somethin’ out, take your stuff and leave,” Maurice slurred while soaking in the tub with his usual glass of Hennessy.

“Where am I supposed to go?” I asked, feeling shocked that he’d even suggest such a thing.

“You got a lot of family, go stay with them,” he replied, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the tiles.

“You know I can’t stay with them, and my dad said he’d kill me if I came back to his house,” I replied with a seductive smile. “Let me refill your glass baby,” I continued while topping off his drink. “Besides, what about our baby? Don’t you even care about him?” I had hoped to guilt Maurice into changing his mind.

“You know I’m gonna’ take care of mine.” He stated as he sat up and looked me directly in the eyes. Mine? I thought. What am I, just a baby-carrying machine that he tolerates? Am I to be dumped in the trash after delivering HIS goods? Who’s gonna’ help take care of ME? Then after a long sigh, he said, “You can leave your bag and stuff here while you go to school and look for places but I
want you out by Friday.” Now, for the third time in two years, forceful winds had blown me from my dwelling.

Although Maurice’s words left me stunned, I stuffed in my tears and refused to let the lump in my throat swell in front of him. “4-0 sailors” don’t show weakness, I told myself half-heartedly. I was used to rough stuff. Phone cord strangulations and face slaps in nightclub hallways by my ex husband had given me thick skin. I learned to show strength in the face of adversity. I decided that I didn’t need Maurice’s help. Requesting favors from people didn’t suit me anyway, especially married men who still carried a torch for their estranged wives.

Maurice had come from an upper-middle class family. Standing at 6’1”, he earned his status as a star basketball player in high school and then graduated from a two-year technical school, which in turn lead to employment with stable income. His parents owned a large, colonial-style house and he grew up with home-cooked meals that usually came served with fancy salads. The house he grew up in had a “library” and “breakfast room” and grand shows of holiday decor.

Despite his upbringing however, he liked to hang out with friends in “the ‘hood” and eventually married one of the sistas. They had a daughter, and to Maurice, these two anchored him and gave him a purpose in life.

After a few years, storms blew through their marriage and his wife left him. Maurice later learned that she had become pregnant again with someone else’s child, while still legally married to him. The bottle became his best friend. A short time later, Maurice and I entered into a relationship, but he was still living in the loss. I’d often sit by the tub and listen as he drifted into conversations with an invisible other person, “My wife...MY wife, is pregnant by another nigga’...can you believe that shit?” Then he’d gulp a shot and pause, while fixated on the
sweaty wall in front of him. Unable to accept the circumstance of his wife’s pregnancy by another man took its toll on him. His dream family had morphed into a tortuous nightmare.

As Maurice said, I had a large family living in north Minneapolis, but many of their lives crumbled due to crack or they struggled with their own kids and problems. Not to mention, my pride wouldn’t allow me to ask them.

I thought to myself, how would I look? It would be like having my photo prominently placed on my ship’s “restricted sailors” board for all to see. My shipmates and I used to laugh at the dumb assess who ended up there.

“Marce is super smart,” my friends used to say.

“Marce was president of her class for four years. She’s one of the responsible ones,” family members claimed.

The options clearly presented themselves; I needed to adapt and overcome. I surmised that if I could make it through boot camp, survive a typhoon during the Gulf War, and escape a nut-case husband, I could skate through this situation. My primary fear however, centered with the fact that it was not just me I had to look out for, I’d soon have a baby whose very life depended on me.

“Poo-chan,” had become very active in the last month. Perhaps the constant flips and turns during macroeconomics class resulted from my over consumption of cappuccinos at the Espresso Royale. I drank more coffee because I wasn’t sleeping well at night and I wanted to be on my “P’s and Q’s” when I met with Kirstin, a Salvation Army caseworker. It took Herculean effort to focus on the instructor’s lesson that day. I knew that this appointment would
determine if “Poo Chan” had a home to welcome him at birth. If all went well with the meeting, I’d no longer be like a ship without a rudder, treading aimlessly amidst turbulent currents.

After class, I hurriedly gathered my backpack and paper sack filled with an apple and egg salad sandwich. It was essential that I made it to Harbor Lights on time. I waddled quickly with the basketball-sized bundle hidden beneath my pink two-piece jumpsuit.

The July sun beamed heavily on my face so that tiny beads of sweat dripped from the edges of my braided locks. The gestational diabetes I had developed resulted in regular bouts of dizzy spells and fainting. No matter what physical limitations I felt however, nothing was going to stop me from getting to the shelter. The blocks from 15th and Hennepin to 12th street were familiar, but once I turned left onto 12th toward the shelter, cramps shot through my abdomen. Uneasy feelings escalated as strange men approached me with catcalls and solicitations for money.

“Is you pregnant little girl? It sho’ looks good on you!” A drunken man shouted from behind after I passed. I had quit the church, but sure felt a strong need to call on God at that point and pray for protection. I quietly repeated over and over, Lord please protect my Poo-Chan, as I ventured forward.

Upon reaching my destination, I pulled open the doors to the shelter. Looking around, I felt lost in a sea of unfamiliar faces. The people waiting were like lost souls trapped in “Davy Jones’ Locker”, the place where drowned sailors met their demise on the ocean floor.

The women, looked like those who used to visit my dad looking for a hit. Their ashen faces and white crusty lips grumbled about how “bitches ‘round here don’t know how to do they job.”
The men I tried to avoid eye contact with scanned my body as they slithered by, submarine torpedoes submerged in their shorts. I imagined them hissing through their teeth, *I’m gonna’ find what floor you on.* Trying to show no emotion, I surveyed the lobby and found some chairs.

The grey halls of the waiting area reeked of cigarettes and the stench of pissy clothes. I couldn’t reconcile my position as I asked myself, *how the hell did a Navy Petty Officer end up here? This is not who I am.* Only ten minutes had passed in waiting, but it seemed like an hour before Kirstin arrived.

“Marcallina?” a voice called out sweetly. I looked up to find a Caucasian woman in her upper twenties smiling. Pale hands with un-manicured fingernails gripped the clipboard. Kirstin’s demeanor appeared modest and unassuming. She had wavy auburn, shoulder-length hair and wore no make-up; but deep in her sunken, ocean blue eyes something ushered in a ripple of calm assurance. She waited patiently as I restored the resource brochures and wiggled my body out of the chair.

Kirstin’s office, filled with blankets, boxes of diapers, soaps and other basic household necessities, looked more like a storage closet. She invited me to sit down to complete an intake packet. After filling in some of the blanks, my voice quivered as I asked, “Will I have to share a room with another family?” The Dorothy Day shelter in St. Paul, where I’d gone previously, mandated that single mothers had to share the space.

“…And will men have access to the floor where women and children sleep?” I asked twitching my feet nervously under the table. My mind drifted to the image of those guys in the lobby. Kirstin glanced sympathetically and assured me, “If you’re approved, you won’t be housed at this location.” I scrunched my eyebrows feeling perplexed.
“Because you’re so close to delivery, you and your baby will be placed in off-site, transitional housing in your own apartment. The Salvation Army would pay your damage deposit and the first three months of rent. Eventually you’ll pay full rent and have built up good credit.” She doodled on paper while explaining the process.

“How long will it take before I know if I’m approved or not?” I asked as an awkward queasiness overtook me. The thought of actually having my own apartment excited me. However, thoughts of disapproval took the wind out of my sails. In addition, with only four weeks of pregnancy remaining, I could have gone into labor at any time.

Over the next week, I gathered all the documentation required and wrote a “statement of need,” jumping through multiple hoops required for approval. The following week, I ventured back to “Harbor Lights” to meet with Kirstin.

Looking through my application materials in what seemed to take longer than a West-Pac deployment, Kirstin paused and with a half-smile said, “Good news Marcallina, you’ve been approved.” I stared at her in disbelief. Like the swell of an ocean wave, tears forced their way up, pooled in my eyes and flowed over my cheeks. I could barely utter a “thank you.”

So with the help of Maurice and his parents, I moved to my new apartment in Brooklyn Park. Walking into the bedroom that “Poo Chan” and I would soon share, I scanned the four walls visualizing Disney animated or Winnie the Poo decals. I rubbed my fingers across the glossed wood railing of the crib. I picked up the newborn-sized green and white flowered onezie that Kirstin gave me, and cushioned it against my face. Closing my eyes, I sniffed it and imagined a baby scent. “This is where we drop the anchor “Poo Chan”! We’re going to be safe and happy,” I assured him. That night, I slept better than I had in months.
The next day, I strolled into my work-study job with a hefty bounce. Jim, the VUB director at the time, invited me to sit in on the staff meeting. Joy and Kent, the instructors, asked me if I had any suggestions or comments. They always made me feel like I was an integral part of the team. After shyly contributing a few words, my thoughts wandered.

*I’ve been so blessed and made some pretty big moves this week. Who knows, after I graduate and get my BA degree, I may officially get to become a staff member here.* After the meeting I returned to my tiny office in the back.

As I sat at the desk with my hands rested on my stomach, I closed my eyes, and with a sigh of relief said, “Thank you God…thank you.” I realized that despite everything that occurred, I could see the sun on the horizon, and my compass had indeed, directed me to true north.

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My pursuit of higher education came not only from attending college but by a collection of events unfolding in life’s latter years. However well thought out my plans may have been, life has a way of teaching me otherwise, and this is what I mean. In January of 2008 my life had begun to spiral out of control because of many misguided choices and a host of bad decisions.

The first choice was to get some clarity of mind. So I checked myself into a treatment facility. Treatment facilities were nothing new to me. I had made six previous attempts at sobriety, but there was something different about this experience. I believe it was part maturity and part resolve; living life on the edge had become exhausting. I would learn something new about myself and build a spiritual foundation in which I would again see life through a different lens. I realized that as a young man my belief in God and the Bible were my first love, but as I lived life I thought I was missing something. So I would pursue the road broadly traveled. This road was one I would not be used to because it contained
things that were foreign to me. The willful desires of self-gratification through alcohol, drug abuse, and many sexual exploits.

It was in treatment I would realize that leaving my first love left a void that none of the alcohol or drugs could fill. I decided to go back to rebuild this foundation and part of this included higher education. This along with my spiritual foundation would give me the strength to go and take this new journey in life. The first understanding that this education of life would give me was the understanding of myself and the realization that if I did not help myself I could not address the needs of others. A very intricate part of who I am was buried in the old life of my bad decisions and choices.

Starting in the late ‘90s, I had built trust with people and they would send me their money, and some even their life’s savings. I did this through a gold and silver company I owned. After establishing their trust, I did destroy their foundation of peace. The way I did that was by making them my friends and then stealing the very thing they entrusted me with. I knew this went against my values and the principles. My initial intent was to never betray them, but when you mix drugs and alcohol as I did then those people who trusted me mattered no more. My use of drugs, cocaine, and alcohol would now rule me. It was through the eyes of addiction that I would put away my moral compass, which was “to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” And I would only think of ways to satisfy myself.

In 2010 I had a supernatural experience, I was sitting there getting high with two friends. While sitting I was talking about the Bible. I looked to my left, and my friend’s face starts peeling: first I see sadness, then depression, then the skull of death. The other friend on my right says, “You sure know a lot about the Bible.” At that time I heard a voice that said “I set before you, life and death.” I knew then had I continued to use drugs I would have died. I chose life by going to a spiritual treatment program.
From 2011 to 2012 I was in this treatment program changing my life. While in treatment I was fighting the state by taking their charges of fraud to a trial. Now remember, I had made the decision to choose life and to be transparent with myself. The night before going to court to pick the jury I was awakened out of my sleep. I looked at the time; it was 2:30am. I heard a voice say: “I desire truth in the inward parts.” I woke up and said, “What, Lord?” And I heard it again. So I went to court the next day and told my attorney: “Tell the judge. I did it! We are not picking a jury.” And when I did that the judge allowed me to finish treatment, and postponed sentencing. So in 2012, after completing the treatment program I was sentenced to state prison.

Because of my decision to choose life I had to first take responsibility for what I had done to others. I was, therefore, determined to find the good in this prison sentence. More importantly, when I made the decision to change my life it was my choice not to allow this consequence of prison to throw me off course. I learned that I’m stronger than I thought when I tap into that inner strength. I also learned that my inner man desires to do good. It wasn’t hard to stay sober in prison because sobriety is not so much about drinking or getting high as it is to make a sober decision to do what is right.

From 2013 to the end of the Fall of 2015 I was studying at Minneapolis Community and Technical College getting my higher education while continuing to stay on my journey. My journey is a spiritual race I run for humanity, it has nothing to do with creed or color. I have found there has been a marriage between academia and spiritual knowledge; one without the other, for me, is not balance. So, I run to keep balance in my life.

Before coming to college I had a foundation of spiritual knowledge without a foundation in academia. Once these were brought together I had a greater understanding of life. This is what MCTC would begin to do for me; it would
teach me skills I could use to enhance the spiritual aspects of life. There would be a marriage of the two.

I enrolled in MCTC from 2013 to 2015, I was determined that regardless of what might happen with all of the legal circumstances to execute my plan. When I came to MCTC I met and began to build a support network of people, students, as well as professors who I realized were there for me. They would help me in my academics. But then too I was building relationships that I could trust. And having never done that because I was always high. This would open that door of the merging of the spiritual and the academic, it was a door to build good relationships that I could trust. That was big, that was paramount. So MCTC was not only the vehicle used for academia it would also bring out the spiritual side that would prepare me for what was coming even though I didn’t know what that would look like. My initial degree plan was in drug counseling because I wanted to help people, and being a former drug addict I wanted to help people struggling with drugs and alcohol.

Upon taking a sociology class I realized there was a broader spectrum I could apply my God-given gifts and talents to. The sociology class would show me there was more out there than just the community hurting with drugs and alcohol. In the sociological context of helping humanity there are broader needs that have to be met: spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically – and financially. Bringing all of these together to help solve the situations is something I feel we can all do. I believe that each human being has the capacity to use whatever gifts or talents they have for the betterment of each other. In November of 2015 I was getting prepared to go to class and I was in the veteran’s lounge. I turned around and there were two US Marshalls. And it was so surreal. I knew who they were without having met them before. They were kind enough to not put me in handcuffs while at MCTC, but I was led away, and put into custody. From here I would be sentenced to forty-one months.
After sentencing I was sent to Elkton, Ohio, where I would be around people who had done all types of hideous crimes. But for me, this would be a learning experience and a true test of what I said I believed in as far as helping others less fortunate. I found myself not only engaging with people the world may have thought of as worthless misfits, but I became more understanding through engaging them and treating them with dignity. This showed me how very judgmental I was, and how contrary these false judgments were to who I wanted to be. I learned how to engage, and be transparent with others. The next leg of my journey was when I would be transferred to Duluth Prison Camp, in Duluth, Minnesota. The lessons I learned there were just amazing in that in what Elkton showed me would come alive and be practiced here. Men who were hurting inside reaching out and trying to find out what went wrong in their lives would gravitate towards me and I was able to give to them what I had done, my life’s journey, as encouragement to them. And in seeing that transparency in my life it helped transform theirs for the better.

Now, I’m back at MCTC, and things have come full circle. I’m focused and realize how to use this great opportunity of my life’s journey. This would not have been possible had I not stuck to my plan of being willing to go through whatever this journey of life would bring. So for me, I had to acknowledge that along this journey of life I will have to embrace my vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and learn to be transparent about them. This is what I have to do.

The sweet taste of true freedom, for me, comes only from God. It is the freedom from being locked up in the mind and not acknowledging the hurt and pain I’ve done to myself and others. True freedom is the unlocking of the mind, body, and soul. I believe this is life’s real education. If we reach out and embrace life it will take us on journeys we never really thought were possible.

So, right now as we speak I’ve been freed from prison, both prisons, all prisons, and the blessings are flowing. I’m learning to embrace difficult choices still. And
the choice of having a housewarming, as minuscule as this sounds, it’s just one of those things, that I am uncomfortable with. But my community, family, friends, can’t all be wrong. So I must look at this, and look at myself, I believe that this uncomfortable feeling speaks to what a dear friend told me years ago from a line in the song “Desperado,” “you better let somebody love you before it’s too late.” So, I’m having a housewarming.

If we really don’t learn ourselves and face the beast within ourselves it will always defeat us, it will steal our dreams and stop us from really loving ourselves and others.

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Imagine growing up in the United States, being exposed to many ethnic groups and cultures, coming together and getting along with no issue or problem at all. Wouldn’t that be amazing? If ALL races from many cultures came together and rose above with one another? Well here in this lovely country of The United States of America – shit like that does not fly by that easily. This is a snapshot of my story of being born on this soil of hatred, racism, sexism, in a misogynistic country. I hope to share this piece with you, the reader, the audience, whomever you are – please read and inhale what I am gifting to you. Writing this piece was an intense moment for me. My former professor at Minneapolis College asked me to write a piece about my run-ins with racism and hatred from others when I shared one of my stories from my past in class one time. It took a lot of courage and strength to write this, but I do hope this does give you an eye opener that racism is real and has been alive for centuries. I hope one day we do change this and put it to death and move on from it. No good comes from evil.
The first time that I am speaking of is my first encounter with racism. This is something I did not even know existed or heard of. This was something that did scar me for a very long, long time and my innocence was taken from me. Let me break it down for you what happened, this may shock and “wow” so just be aware. I was at a park, happily playing on the playground area and sliding the down slide over and over again, swinging back and forth as the air pushed me, each sway and a sun kiss each time I swayed forward. Just being a kid – with no worries or negative thoughts in the world but something dark always interrupts the fairytale. This, the first time.

I was playing on the playground and this girl that was my age approached me and asked if I wanted to play with her. I said yes because I was told to be nice and kind to those who are nice and kind toward me. I remember what she looked like and what she was wearing but her name is a blur to me. She was blonde, blue eyes like the water. I swear if you stared too long you might drown in them, pale and fair skin with a pink shirt and yellow and polka dotted shorts. She was cute and a fearless young girl. We played and played, laughing out loud like this could be the best day ever, but it turned for the worse. Her grandfather was an older man with blonde and white hair, pasty and burnt skin color, and blue eyes like the little girl’s but his eyes had red veins in them. Like he hadn’t slept for days and days or was mad as Hell at someone. He was mad-- at me. He told his granddaughter “they” had to go because it was getting dangerous. She looked around and pulled back from him. I was looking around because I got uncomfortable with what was going on. It was sad seeing this girl dropping her face, and her smile disappearing. I was focusing on her and did not realize her grandfather pushed me away from her and called me names and spat on me.
I was numb. The girl began to cry and pushed her grandfather, which woke him up, realizing how badly he fucked up. I turned around and went to my Dad with spit and sadness drenched into my pores and soul. My father looked at me and wiped the spit off me and asked what happened and who was responsible. I kept my head down and did not want to talk but I found it in me to point at the old man. My father walked toward his direction. I remember my brothers running toward them. You could hear them arguing and yelling at each other. Next thing, my father pushed the old man over the playground and had his fist up but saw me looking at him and walked away. The little girl was crying and crying, and nothing made it right. The old man started to feel guilty and ashamed as the bystanders shook their heads at him and he looked at his granddaughter. That was the first time and day racism made its presence in my life. This is something that made me scared to talk to any other race other than my own but even my race was mean to me.

I lost faith in humankind at a young age and that should have not been the case. Kids learn from us. Kids can see what is going on and comprehend a little bit. Just a little bit could hurt that child for long time – like it did me and many others who experienced this act a young age. Many of you are wondering what happened afterwards. Well, we did not call the police, and the police did not show up. We simply left and did not go out for many weeks to parks, lakes, or malls. We simply avoided any area that White people were in. I would not talk to one or even look at them in the eye. I had a fear of them. I was scared to approach any kids or adults that were White. I struggled a lot in school but I tried my hardest to not show it at home. My father felt powerless after the event. He started to withdraw from everyone that was not family or close friends. He simply did not like to talk to anyone unless he had to.

My father told me a story about when he first to the United States in the ‘80s, and that was it was different. People were calmer, nicer, more welcoming, and simply did not mistreat you by the color of your skin. It just did not happen at all.
I had a hard time believing it because of my experience with it. He stated that during the Reagan Administration, he felt welcomed here. He was excited to come here and get all the opportunities that he could and provide for himself and his family back home. My father’s story was very similar to my mothers’ as well. She too came here during that era. They stated they never faced racism at all until my experience. I felt like there was some root of evil that was birthed hundreds of years ago but is now making its appearance again in this era. But it starts with one man, our “amazing leader” – Mr. Number 45 himself. I refuse to mention his name. It disgusts me to my very core.

When the 2016 Presidential Elections happened, it was saddening and shocking to see all the hatred, bigotry, homophobia, and racism be birthed again. It was sad to see where America was heading. We were going to a dead end – fast. Watching all the ridiculous and irrational candidates on both sides was funny and sad at the same time. I could not believe that these individuals could have a job that gave them power. The rest of the individuals were just as foolish as he was. 45’s facial expressions would get to me. I wonder how his family could stand the sight of him. I wonder how anyone can? I always questioned what was so great about this man? There was nothing amazing about him at all. He did not seem like he was a man that could lead a company because he was bankrupt. But how did we let him be in charge of our country? I was devastated with the outcome of the elections.

When this man was running, all presentations at each state were heart wrenching to watch. I could not believe that people were there to support him! I was sad to see children and women there. This man nationally and internationally said, “GRAB THEM BY THE PUSSY.” Like who the fuck says that shit? That is so nasty and not what a president would say. It’s not their demeanor. This man has children of his own – daughters. What would make it okay for someone that is going to lead a nation to be taken seriously like that? What would make it okay for a nation to think this is funny and stand behind
him? What would make it okay for someone to say bigoted and racist things where the minority population is growing? HOW? Can someone please to explain to us?

This man called Hispanics “criminals, rapists, and thugs” and said Middle-Eastern people should be banned. Everything was being reversed that the Obama administration was trying to do or get done. We are being oppressed and challenged under this administration. I felt targeted even though I am from here. I was being asked by people if I was born from here or if I had DACA because I am a minority. I was disgusted with both genders belittling me because I was shade darker than them. I was tired of being called names or of having people ask me if I enlisted to become documented; it pissed me the fuck off. I was scared to go out because of the possibility of encountering one of these mad people. I did not even want to speak my foreign language because I did not want to be targeted anymore; I was scared to take my child with me. I was sad that she came in the era where racism comes in all ages and shades. I was scared of it. I did not want her to be exposed to it while being out in public with me. I mean who would? Who would want to have kids in this time? It is not a time to be alive. It is not a time where progress is being made. It is not. I never felt so ashamed to be in the skin color that I am until I came to this college. I always felt so targeted before I came here. This school was a safe haven for me. Like it probably was for many others. I love everything about being a minority. Being Latina. I am a rose in the making and will establish my roots deep in this world. For those of my own to carry it on.

45 will never silence me. He pushes me to be the hardest, strongest, and ambitious Latina. I promised my daughter that I will not let this man stereotype us and oppress us. I will rise above it all. The stereotypes, the statistics, and those who are believing that we are just “greasers that take everyone’s jobs,” – that was something that I could not stand hearing because no one was taking anyone’s job. My people would work the shit jobs that require hard work and
long days. I remember my parents working these jobs before they got better jobs that they have now. When you go on the streets of the Twin Cities and the surrounding suburbs of these cities, you see mainly Caucasian men or women on these streets begging for money instead of a job. This is a fact that we never address at all but we can acknowledge Hispanics coming into this country “stealing jobs and doing crime” here on the news, or wherever else. I never felt we were stealing jobs or doing crime – some of us do but not all of us do. Therefore, I feel we should not be stereotyped by these stigmas at all. It is rude and arrogant to do.

I always worked hard since I was sixteen-years-old because I got tired of depending on my hard-working parents, and I wanted to see what it was like to work and go make my own money. When I was a junior in high school, you think of the future a lot because there’s pressure in America to know what you want to do with yourself by the start and end of your senior year. At the beginning of senior year, there was a staff waiting at this board where all seniors are supposed to go and write down where they were going after high school. I did not have anything until I was the last to put on there that I was going to the military. Oh yes, I went off to the military – how chaotic and insane of me, right? I legit thought that I was going to be a badass and saving this country from our “enemies” overseas but in reality, our enemies are on this land of ours. Do not get me wrong, it was an amazing experience because I learned about myself a lot and made a new family but there were some low and ugly parts of this world that I wish did not exist.

Let me fast forward you to the day that I met my new leader; he was pretty cool at first and seemed like he was going to care for me but as the years went on and on, he became more of a prick. An asshole. Of course you cannot say a thing to your superiors because you are “supposed” to show respect to them, however, I do think you should give respect when it is earned. I mean isn’t that how things should be? But as the 2016 Presidential Elections came around, I did
see a whole new side to this individual that I did not like at all. I started to not like going there; I felt uncomfortable there. The family that I did make had a different side to them that I thought would never exist. I did not like this reality of these people as they would state their opinions of 45’s speeches and how they did agree with him. I started to hear “I am not trying to offend you but…….” That saying would irk and make my blood boil quickly. Hearing that did make me change my ways and views on those that would say and make excuses about 45’s speeches, talks, and policies. Trust me--- seeing and hearing the way these people would talk about him like he was some God was disturbing. “He really cares about the people.” Oh yeah? What people? Here is the best one yet, “he is going to take care of the military and refund us a lot of money. He is going to give us a raise and better bonuses.” I know what you are feeling, you just want to say “wow” or just want to laugh. Trust me, I laughed so hard in these people’s faces. This was the nature that I was exposed to after this man was running for president and became president. I don’t even acknowledge him as the president because that is something that he is far away from. A president is supposed to be a leader, a rational person, and someone who cares for those that help and build more opportunities in their homeland. The lovely individual that we are stuck with, is not; this man is filled with animosity, hatred, racism, and bigotry.

If I could go back and not enlist, I probably would if I knew what the future was going to hold. I wanted to go all out and prove to those that I could become someone, and that, I still am doing. Do not get me wrong. I did meet some amazing individuals along this process and it did teach me a lot about myself in this journey.

Another path of this journey of being exposed to racism happened recently at Target. Imagine joking and laughing in Spanish and turning to hear someone say, “why can’t people learn the language here.?” Yes that did happen to me. I still remember the old hag that said that to me. I was pretty disgusted and ashamed of the human race. I tell ya, I wanted to punch life and soul out of that waste of a
life human being. A mother who had 3 kids with her watching this. They looked embarrassed and ashamed that their own birth giver said those wrenching words as they knew their mother fucked up at that moment right there. My mother, she is pretty old school and does not take shit from ANYONE. She was enraged and went to the lady and yelled at her where another elder woman, who witnessed this, stepped in and defended my mother. The woman told her she should be ashamed in herself as she is teaching her children how to hate and that is not good. The elder woman did handle this case pretty classy you should say. I would have never thought to hear someone step in and show someone their true ugly colors. As the older woman was defending my mother, the offender’s husband came around the corner. He was confused and asked why his wife was being attacked. The older woman scolded him about his wife and the man looked embarrassed and grabbed the kids and left the store. Others looked at her in disgust as she just stood there in shame. The store manager came around the corner and asked her to leave. The lady asked and pleaded to finish her shopping and that she would not bother others; the manager refused and proceeded to tell her to leave and that they did not accept that type of behavior. The lady started to cry, stated that she was sorry, and left as we shook our heads at her. We hugged the old lady and thanked her for helping us out.

I felt so powerless in that moment. That my daughter was there to witness this animosity. I was pretty silent and quiet after that event. I was very serious. I did little communication with my mother afterwards. My mother knew I was so upset and did not want to talk. I had no intentions anyway. I had no reason why I needed to speak anymore. I was scared to be scorned by another person for embracing my first language by using it. I feel like I’m seeing this happen everywhere else. Others feel as scared as I do to embrace who I am. Where I come from, I am not 100% American to the White culture. I wonder to myself, what is an American? Because when you think of it, America belongs to the Natives and Mexicans before the colonizers took it from them.
This is just a piece of my story to you. I hope you take these small stories and learn from them. Learn to love your neighbor and appreciate them for who they are. This does go a long way as well. Being evil and filled with hatred does not benefit you in the long run. I learned a lot in these obstacles that I came across and overcame. I became very resilient and open to those around me. Whether you are Black, Asian, White, etc. I appreciate you all and I hope you learn to spread love and good from one and another. I hope one day all groups will be able to reunite and become as one and will rise together.

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Part 2 Pride
I am all smiles.

For everyone else it is a regular mad dash to the office, weaving in and out, left blinker, right turn, and traffic updates blasting through their speakers. Nothing is going to remove today’s smile, not even as we come together bumper to bumper. Last evening was delicious: sweet anticipation, spicy expectation, and my Sunshine’s company, which always satisfies.

We were in our regular collaboration positions. I stand, staring into the closet, intently studying its contents, like a scientist committed to a cure. Chin-in-hand, squinting into the undiscovered and Sunshine, the youngest, is sitting between the doorway and the hallway. There is more play area there and less danger of Daddy stepping on or kicking over another very important Lego creation. He sat
crossed legged in his spot, watching, playing, and suggesting. I loved the routine. It always gave us time to tease, that was our thing. In mixed company we may have even sounded snarky so we would never have played this way if anyone else was around, but it was just us and this was our little pact.

I like to start with selecting the perfect ‘new-ish’ pair of socks. Argyle is my favorite. Next the shoes: suede or leather, black, brown, or neutral? If leather, they should be spit-shined, or will that imply over confidence? Three suits and three shirts ready for whichever combo sang out. They are all freshly laundered, starched and creased, awaiting recruitment. The cufflinks, tie-bar and lapel pin sat atop the dresser, eagerly awaiting our choices. The crowning piece is always the necktie; it must be noticeable but not bawdy. It has to dance the well-selected accent line without approaching ostentatious. Tonight we are leaning toward Royal Blue. Yes, that is the one, money ball at the buzzer for the win, and swish! We check and double check. Tomorrow, I will project preparedness and responsibility, officially outfitted, professional, and ready for some next level shit.

Some nights I would get, “Daddy, that’s just old and ugly! Why do you even own that and whoever bought it for you does not love you or is not your friend!” On other nights it would be, “Now that is what I’m talking about Daddy, you are looking good!” He is already the Boss.

“Sunny, if you could do anything what would you do?” Back in the center of a thousand Legos. He was both completely playing and completely listening. He cocked his neck and head, his eyebrows scrunched together. “I think I’d stay home and play with my Legos and play video games on my Xbox.”

“What if I said think of something a little bigger. How about a private school or a trip to the Grand Canyon?”
“Disneyland! Wait, Disney World, no wait, it’s in Florida you know that right, Daddy?!”

“I believe I do know where Disney World is and you don’t worry so much about what things cost. Sunny, maybe very soon we could see Florida.” We grin and laugh, teasing and agreeing. Tonight everything is deeper, louder, and longer.

Tomorrow is going to be a GREAT day.

My chest inflated with purpose, and my shoulders squared for the ready.

“Tomorrow, things change for us, we’ve massaged, been patient, and dutiful. Tomorrow we get a small slice back.

II.

Arriving early, meant avoiding my insides twisting and knotting with anxiety about timeliness. Today’s brilliant morning light charged my glow and the lazy breeze fueled my speedy gait. I bound up the stairs-one-two-three, through the underpass. The guards professionally organized the herd into this business cathedral, “Please have your badges ready, Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Welcome back!” ….“This will go quickly if you have your security badges out and ready to go…” Just past Checkpoint One is an obscene cavity housing three elevator bays. Me and my fellow huddled masses scamper toward the center. Middle-grounders cubicle-dwellers. Floors ten to twenty-five, a sort of specialized purgatory, better off than floors nine and below, fetchingly referred to as “The Lows”, with us Middies neither here nor there.

The Righties are customized and luxuriously outfitted. Their strides are intense, their nods airy and aloof. Everything and everyone to the Left barely existed to the Righties. We hated them for their superior attitude and matching designer attire, and secretly we writhed with desire to be counted among the despised.
The Righties strode past their smiling guards checkpoint to the etched golden doors, above. Floors twenty-five to Paradise, as far as the rest of us onlookers were concerned. Tailor fitted, fresh-faced, shiny and manicured. I will not be denied. Mounting obligations, and desire mixed with pressure. I will have the day. We will be validated. Sacrifices rewarded. Our diminutive department has witnessed evolution over the last three years, and I am spokesman, trainer, fireman, left-fielder, and talent scout. I am a Company-Man, undoubtedly. Conferences, seminars and cross-platform meetings, present and accounted for.

BING! The fifteenth floor. The Middies mass-exodus. Our next stop is righteousness.

Surprisingly once everyone settles in for the day the floor begins to hum along and I make it my point to react to everyone, “Hello! Hey! How are youuuu! How was the weekend?!…” “Why, thank you for asking my weekend was simply, over too quickly, I could complain, but who’s listening? It’s GREAT to see you.” I am a smiling, shining, greeting machine to peers and bosses alike. On this pod-farm, emails need tending; timelines need nurturing; and passive-aggressive personalities need constant sunlight. The break room was the grapevine. Today’s production has me cast as the ultimate Team Player. Changing filters, rinsing pots, filling reservoirs, and measuring my secret recipe of grounds to water, fueling the cabaret. This morning is different.

Always keep break room time to a minimum; it’s strategic. My voice travels and can be heard across a football field in the fourth quarter after a tie-breaking touchdown run. On my way back to my cube or what I commonly referred to as my orifice, I feel satiated. “If you stay ready you don’t have to waste any time getting ready! Yes Ma’am.” Momma’s ricocheting words stiffened my resolve. “I promise, I am ready Momma.” “No worries, no reservations, Sunny.” The flashing pop-up reminds me that it is time. Iuntether myself from the desk, and I’m off toward the gates of deliverance, onward and
upward. I mutter softly to myself, and shake hands congenially. “I owe everything to the strength of this organization and what we have built together. This is a team-victory. I could have never done this by myself.” Blah-blah, “…of course I believe that I am the ideal candidate; thank you so much for the opportunity; you’ve made the correct choice and I won’t let you down.” I reach down and press the triangle. It is my fate. Up it is. Go Time!

From the middle floors the elevator’s mystique is a little anticlimactic. Not for long. Bonus! I am solo, feeling lucky. Better take advantage. The mirrored box is perfect for last minute primping. I look like a Righty: tighten my centerpiece knot; brush any bits from my shoulders; fluorescent light dancing on my polished brogued toes; no disastrous piece of spinach from breakfast, a breath-mint, and one last open-handed pass making sure my Caesar-fade is capitulating. Any freelancing at this point is detrimental. My entire demonstration is on-point from all angles, “Ready Sunny. Thank you Mamma.”

Chest full, facing front, my image splits as the mirror recedes. It’s Go Time!

“Mr. Elliott?” shifting her clipboard, she approaches swiftly, extending her right hand.

“Yes, and please, call me Michael”

“Thank you, Michael. I am Delilah. This way please. We are right on time.”

She is harried, maybe too caffeinated. Maybe her maxi floor length skirt is a smidge too tight. Maybe the shiny patent leather shoes have too high a heel? Still, she is professionally polite. We traverse the floor, and arrogance, agitation, and fear scent the air. Everyone scuttling about with their headsets and hold buttons, checking and double-checking, timetables, and deadlines. In and out of corner offices, hyper-vigilant.

I was fully doped. I peered into the office imagining my own migration. I noticed the darting eyes and whispers, questioning our arrival, calculating the odds for
the newest contestant, yours truly. No direct eye contact, no direct acknowledgment, any loss of focus for a subordinate could be the butterfly wings that whips up a tempest of perception. Corporate gossip is carried along on electric wings: emails and IM’s, undisclosed conjuring, off-the-record discussions; unofficially/official headwinds and guillotines. I stay close to Delilah, my navigator, but not so close that personal boundaries are jeopardized. We sail towards our terminus. As we approach the entrance, it looks more like an inner-sanctum, hallowed, and ritualized.

“It was nice meeting you, Delilah, Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure. They are waiting for you. Thank you so much for being on time and not forcing me to track you down, I really don’t like having to go down. Good Luck!” We are no longer professionally conjoined. I stand on the precipice, alone. One last grasp at my lapel, like parachute straps, I hold my breath and launch into the portal.

The floor was black and lustrous. As I skated across, I couldn’t feel any better if there were two of me. The room is much bigger than expected. A wall and a half are floor to ceiling glass. The clouds looked close enough to hug. For a moment the table looked like it was floating, ridged, and suspended in the clouds. Disquieting and ominous, like a consecrated altar. The customized 20-foot, electric shades are slightly lowered, the room faintly shadowed. Today’s rays, frosted everything in fiery amber hue. Made of pure decadence. Five by twenty-five, four inches thick, stone with smoke grey streaks, eight stone legs. Stout and sturdy. Sliced from some ancient Neolithic discovery, in a place forgotten by modern humanity. No noticeable seams or joints. Black! Every inch polished so well that it looked wet.

Plush, high-backed leather chairs. There they sat in black and dark blue, three deep, inert. My Tribunal Elders. Are they frowned or furrowed, pleased or perturbed? I could not clearly make them out. On this shining black stone sea,
one office telephone, the receiver sitting in its chrome cradle, and silent flashing lights, each light screaming for recognition.

The silence was thunderous.

Just right of center is the etched crystal pitcher and accompanying goblets. A fellowship of plump strawberries, bright yellow lemons, and a bowl of crushed ice defy the radiance. At the left edge of the platform sits the speaker and receiver I assumed were for me. It's still ghoulishly silent.

“All of this quiet is way too loud,” I say hoping to add some levity and cut through the overburdening silence. I start towards them, managing about two strides.

Elder One, on the right, gives me the universal stop sign, hand up peering over half-eye glasses. My heels ground into the marble flooring, as I steady myself against the great slab. Elder Three leans into the console, index finger extended. First a buzz and then metallic emissions from behind.

“Please feel free to have a seat. We thank you in advance for your time, if you don’t mind we have a great many things to get to this day and so very few hours with which to complete them, Surely you understand. So we will dispense with pleasantries, if you do not mind. —”

Salutations obliterated. Page one of the script shredded. I quickly soldier’s pivot and expediently get to my end-zone and my speaker. Almost there and I begin to focus on the common, hard, matte-black chair, with mocking back support. More torture device than chair. Devilishly lying in wait, lurking with intent, seated gallows scented with defeat. Aluminum bleachers are more inviting than this particular demon seat. My back was already sending its disapproval, tense and tightening, contemplating the ultimatum that lay just ahead. Once in what could be described as seated, most accurately as struggling, I notice that we are just a little too far away for me to operate the intercom. I try dragging my accomplice
forward, with each tug, producing a penetrating screech. This monstrosity is deceptively heavy! We finally make it to port. Wearily reaching up from this anchor, I reach for the microphone button, “Thh-Thank you…” The room is engulfed in reverberation and feedback. That tonal torture like when a guitar is too close to the amp. Yeah, that sound. I release and jerk backwards. Looking to the opposite end-zone, I see Elder One leaning forward to speak at me this time,

“If at any time you require something to drink, please let us know and we would be happy to have Lisa bring in a bottled water.”

Even in my current shaken state, I’m focused on those brackish words. Who the heck is Lisa? Bottled water? Why can’t I have any of the water that is already available? Bring me in bottled water. I awkwardly wait longer to avert a second explosion and jab intrepidly at my button a second time.

“Thank you, I am fine right now.”

Elder Two begins, “Thank you again Michael, as you know we are gathered here for your annual review. We value you, your time, and have gotten some glowing reports about your abilities and your performance. It seems that you are capable, adaptive, intuitive and eager. Those things being stated, we have been entrusted to chart the courses, decide for the fate of this company, employees, and stakeholders. We must determine what is useful for the “long-haul.”

In unison The Tribunal three sank back into their luxuriousness.

Elder Two again leaned forward, my speaker chirped, “Honestly there are no serious concerns, and your performance has been exemplary. We see many accomplishments, training yourself and others, volunteerism, and you are highly regarded as a team-player by yours and other teams.”

“We must remember that there is always room for improvement.” Unfortunately, at this time the company finds itself in a moment of uncertainty and it would not be responsible right now for us to make any offering to you. We will not be able
to offer the Business Analyst position to you at this time. Additionally there is an expenditure freeze on all budgets, including but not limited to salaries.”

Now I am unattached, unprotected and boozy by the impossibility of what I was hearing. My consciousness rushes past their shapes, beyond their words. I am no longer in this tomb, but weightless, mingling amongst the clouds. This one looks like a seahorse and that one a giant squid. I see a bear and an eagle. My tranquil excursion is interrupted by scorching dryness at the back of my throat, it sucks me back into this den. My tongue is sticking to the back of my teeth and my lips sticking to the fronts. My heavily starched collar is now cutting off my circulation. Fireflies dance in my vision. I am astonished and then my stomach joins the macabre, along with its close friend nausea.

“Yes, I think I would like that bottled water now.” “Would you be willing to please repeat that last portion, right after, “…we value you….and exemplary….and ….capable, adaptive…..I am so very sorry, I simply began to fade.” Sitting back, white-knuckling the plastic side rails of the contraption they have seen fit to perch me upon. I attempt to steady, root myself. Thankfully seated, my legs have abandoned me.

Robotics erupt from the speaker, “Michael, we’d like to know where you’d like to see yourself in five year? We believe that great things could be coming your way, of course we cannot predict the future and we can in no way make you any guarantees, but your talents can definitely be of USE to us.” Her empty smile, vacuous words, like a viper slithering down the cold, wet slab, onto my hand and up my arm. I felt its icy embrace around my lungs and heart. Their fangs sank into my spirit. No doubt you would continue to use me.

The speaker ruptures the silence. “Honestly speaking Michael, you are well liked. You may even be capable. In many ways this came down to your education, more specifically, the lack of education. Experience is good, some college is better, but degrees are best. The next rung that you are reaching for
Pride

requires a degree, any degree. You may be professionally at the end of the road, at the ceiling for pay and advancement, at your current education level. To advance without a degree would mean that someone was willing to take a chance on you and be willing to roll the dice and gamble with you.”

I am stunned, drowning in dejection, and disconnected. Staggering back to the elevators, zombified.

III.

Peaky, I stepped in like a marionette fighting the strings, resistant, rebellious, in contempt of my pre-ordained steps, thoughtless, soulless, and pointless. The doors closed, I held my breath and I closed my eyes. I could not stand to look at me. I stank of anguish, saturated in forfeiture. The elevator seemed more crypt than conveyance. I close my eyes and step into the void. As the mirrors collide I am standing in the kitchen. Cinnamon, sweet heavy cream butter, vanilla. I am swept away in comfort.

“Ma, is that sweet potato pie I smell?”

“I know you know about eatin’, but what you know about baking Son?”

“Ah, you got jokes!”

We are both only half-joking. If she leaves these pies unattended, I will risk a mouth-burn to devour as many pieces as I can before I’m cut off.

“Come on in here and sit with me, I have to watch the timer. There’s tea and lemonade in the fridge, you’ll have to add your own sugar or honey.

She liked to mix the two and let the lemonade sweeten the tea.

“Come and sit down, you know I can’t stand you hovering over me, eighteen or not, you will never be more grown than me!”
I have been taller than her since I was about twelve. Since then we sit or she stands. Her heart is my entire universe. When she isn’t paying attention, I stare: finding all of me in all of her, my hue, my hands and feet, my eyes all gifts from her. She is the yardstick, the one whose faith has given me superpowers.

“Is that smell what I think it is?”

“That depends on what you think it is.”

“Smells like you’ve hijacked Auntie’s sweet potato pie recipe?”

“No, no, no, my sister has been sharing her secrets and sworn me to secrecy.”

My Auntie is the guardian of some of the most delicious family cooking-secrets and nothing is safer or more secure than in the possession of The Sisters. That’s what they call themselves the enclave of feminine-Powerhouses that keeps us all progressing. Now my Auntie Carol is stalwart. If she says something you can bank on it!

“Wipe your lips, you’re getting my table wet. Sit down while they cool.”

Momma is the rock. She was everybody’s reservoir, an internationally renowned source of consistent knowledge. Regal, noble, sometimes gentle and expecting no less than excellence in return. Without pressure or request, you’d find yourself on your best behavior, remembering the finer points of etiquette, but not from fear, not that she hadn’t intimidated more than a few, but esteem and veneration. She would invite you to her table and suddenly the walls came tumbling down. An expert interrogator, she was part Sherlock Holmes, part Richard Roundtree, part Big Momma and a whole lot of Angela Davis. She is my priest, professor, sergeant-at-arms, and nurse. Always reasonable and unbiased, what she had to say was what was best for you. The sting would dissipate and the lesson was pure life-long gold.
Her table was her office and her misdirection was artful. First, all smiles and sweets, and before you knew it, confessions and you helping pick your own atonement. Modestly built for the intimacy, sitting at that table you couldn’t escape the intensity. There was only familial space here, elbows touched, knees bumped sometimes coming and going was a coordination of efforts. Moods could not be mistaken or overlooked and Momma’s table managed it all. She kept it set; place mats, cutlery, the napkin holders matched the salt and peppershakers. Coasters sat in the middle next to a floral decoration of some kind, freshly cut or dried to perfection. Momma’s table is the feeling station, all feelings were allowed. Loud voices, disrespectful tones and malicious verbiage could get you excused or uninvited. Hearts and souls found respite, a place to unburden. Spirits awakened to heights previously undreamt. Family and friends became fully frontal. Confrontation was not an unwanted guest. Pain gave way to biblical forgivenesses.

Woody, well oiled, used well, and the lemon-scented aroma was hearth and home, in a house or an apartment. Seasoned with honesty and authenticity. This cherry-brown, space, with deep brown tiger-marbling, five matching chairs, and an extension for holidays, guests and special occasions. It’s sturdiness handling births and deaths. The silent nonpartisan journalist of our lives. Solidly rooted, it moored us and reinforced our bonding. It radiated love and demanded etiquette. Love is the consistent rule at this wooden construct, freedom and forgiveness was rarely painless, but it was also never reckless nor nefarious.

She caught me with a mouth full of pie and homemade whipped cream, “What seems to be the problem, Sun?”

“It’s work Ma, Dang!”

“Watch your mouth and finish chewing. You were raised indoors.”
“Yes Ma’am, excuse me. I am just tired of how unfair everything is! I feel like I must work harder, be smarter, move faster and better than everyone else, and even that is not good enough. I’m tired of being told no! All of my efforts feel like a failure or a waste of time. I sit aside patiently watching others have things seemingly handed to them. It’s not fair!”

She pirouettes, whirling from table, to sink, from stovetop, to refrigerator. Sometimes I preferred her multi-tasking… one sideways glance could stop a bull elephant. She stood occupied with rearranging the middle shelf to find a cool place for the cream. Then, she rinsed her plate and cup, and placing them in the sink, she sighed deeply and faced me.

“Sun, you are so correct. The world is not fair and I’m sorry if I have led you to believe that it is.” She looked saddened for a moment and then her tone strengthened. “You are my Sun. I know what you are capable of. I raised you. What you have to do is take the No’s off of the table! Once you have removed all the No’s from the table, there is nothing left but Yes! And if you still hear no, well then you use that as fuel. You may shine brightly Sun, but you first have to remove every reason that could cloud a victory. Only then is your truth available. No’s can too easily become excuses. We have no time in this house or this life for excuses! — Four legs on the ground, that’s how you broke my last chair and almost knocked yourself out, I do not have time to carry your behind to the hospital today!”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Rocking my chair back onto all fours, the elevator door opened, and like a slipping transmission everything jerked into reality. It was after five o’clock. My sodden steps, past the break room, to my orifice, keys and badge; through the mezzanine, checkpoints and parole.
We may as well have been walking backwards: away from our desks, to the elevators, through the mezzanine and out on furlough. Conditional parole.

IV.

The entire solemn ride home, past conversations like a boomerang, mentoring me again.

“Have you always been on time? Do you meet or exceed your deadlines? Do you always do your job with a smile? Are you knowledgeable? Are you a resource, or just a placemat? Do you go above and beyond, without standing around for hoping a parade?”

“I think so. I guess so. How am I supposed to know?!"

“Guaranteed the bosses will know. Eliminate however you could be denied, prove to yourself you are the best! Be sure that you are the Best! NO’s off of the table!”

Reality became solid and with an involuntary shiver, I was orientated, in the driver’s seat, with everything dimming and settling in for the coming darkness.

It was Friday. After dinner, no rush to bedtime or pajamas. There are many unanswered questions. Sunny was intuitive, he’d wait for me to come to him. In his room he was fully enthralled, creating his latest ambitious scene. At his bedroom play-table developing tonight’s epicenter. The fate of many universes hung in the balance, as the light side clashed with darkness for ultimate control. If I stood quietly, he won’t notice me right away and I can steal a few moments listening to him narrate aloud the perils of Captain America, Falcon, and the Avengers.
“OH NO! What will Captain America do?! The evil Hydra has set a trap, captured all of the Avengers, and they have him surrounded, there is no way out for Cap this time…or is there…”

The floorboard squeaks and Sunny turns his head to see what caused the noise. Seeing me, he springs to his feet. “Daddy! I didn’t see you standing there. You haven’t said, how was work today, Daddy? Did they like your tie? Of course, they liked you tie, I picked it out! Did you get the new job? When are we going to Disney World?”

Standing next to his table, he lowers his head, first snorting like a bull, then raising his head and arching his back, he pounds his chest. I pound mine and we clash like Godzilla and Gigantor, legendary combat, falling onto his bed. Our nightly tussle has begun. Hugs and kisses, tickles and laughter.

As we lay there, our legs hanging off of the side of the bed, chests heaving, the silence is broken,

“Are you sad Daddy?”

I hadn’t said a word and thought that I’d done a good job of hiding my disappointment.

“You know I always try really hard but, they told me, no, Sunny”

“But are you sad Daddy?”

He stretched his willowy limbs around my neck, squeezing with all of his love.

“Not when I am with you!”

We move to his little table, stickers, paint splotches, dried glue dozens of actions figures. He’s retrieved Captain America and Falcon from the clutches of Hydra.
“Sunshine, do you remember what college is and why I tell you how your education and completing college is super important?”

He recites dryly, rolling his eyes, “Yes Daddy yes, I remember, I have to go to school until I graduate from college. No matter what. Otherwise I will be disappointed. I’ll have bosses that boss me around all day and I don’t like to be bossed around!”

“That’s mostly correct, Sunshine. Do you remember that Daddy has not finished college?”

Sunny perks up, “Is that all?! Just go to a college, go to the Principal’s office and ask very nicely for a degree. Take it back to work and show them your degree and they will give you the new job and we can go to Disney World.”

“I wish that it was that simple Sunshine. Going back to college may be too hard for us right now. It might mean less money for toys, and honestly, Daddy is a little nervous. I have been away from a classroom, exams and studying for a long time, since before you were born.

“Whoa.”

“I know, right!”

Maybe I’m too old; missed my window; I’m not sure I can keep up with the fresh faces and flexible minds.

Slithering up onto my lap, nesting his shoulder in my chest and looking down at his Falcon action figure. I could tell he was mulling over the possibilities of this new reality. Fewer toys always require serious thought. We three sat warming each other, pondering how we would save the universe. There is no place to hide when you are looking into the face of your treasure.

“But what are we going to do?”
“We will have to take the NO’s off of the table, Sunshine.”

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Some of my friends describe the North side as the ghetto. Peers from college say it is extremely dangerous. I called it home for most of my life. The faint smell of grilling as I drove through the streets was a reminder that it was getting warmer out. In the summer, there were kids out throwing balls in the streets. Corner stores and gas stations were frequently busy. As a Hmong daughter, raised in a traditional home on the North side of Minneapolis, there were expectations of me since I was young. I had to learn the basics of cooking a meal, making sure there was rice, and doing well in school. I had to clean, do laundry, and help babysit as needed. It was an expectation for me to help my parents as much as I could. The decision to move in with my significant other was not an easy one as it took me a year to come to the conclusion. However, the more I did of what I wanted, the happier I felt.

Growing up, my dad had to learn how to hunt, how to farm, how to survive during a war, and how to provide for his family. He was reliable and smart. He
was the oldest and the only son for most of his life. He has a younger sister and many years later, he has a half-sister and a half-brother.

When the war was ending and the American soldiers were leaving, Hmong people were completing forms and hoping to earn a spot to come to the U.S. It was a dark and gloomy day. The voices in the living area of the home became louder. My grandfather refused to go. “There are giants in the land you are moving to! You will get eaten if you move!” My dad made his decision to immigrate to the U.S. He is determined to live his life in a promising land, far away from the one he knew.

My dad would share stories about how poor he was as a child. He would tell us how far he had to walk just to go to school. It was so bizarre I almost don’t believe it. He would have to wake up and prepare three hours ahead before his journey to school every morning.

In the dark, before the bright yellow sun rises, my dad would wake up at the crack of dawn. The loud “cock-a-doodle-doo” from outside meant it was time to start the day. There were no alarm clocks and the family’s rooster was the only reliable alarm.

In the small corner of the house made of bamboo and hay, would be a small shadow of a young boy, turning pages of his one and only notebook he owned. My dad was always studious, trying as hard as he could to be ahead of his classmates. Although the rooster was the only other living creature up, there was no light to read or to study math by. My dad refused to be defeated by the lack of resources. It would have been easier for him to sleep in and wait until the sun rose for him to have light to study. Instead, my dad would gather sticks and logs of wood to start a little fire. He used the ashes from the fire as his light to study.
My father grew up with only one sister. She was about two or three years younger than him. While he was up studying, she was sleeping. While my father attended school, she stayed behind with my grandmother to farm and to feed the animals. They had three large plots of land to harvest fruits, vegetables, and rice.

When the sun started to rise and the temperature started to increase, it was time to start the long walk of five miles to school. Other children in the neighborhood followed one another to the same destination. The staggered group of young students traveled on the brown, dirt roads without any shoes, hoping they didn’t step on anything that could cause infection.

There were days when he was late and he would know what was coming once he gets to school – punishment. In front of his class, his teacher would make him kneel while holding a large rock in each hand. His hands had to remain at a 180-degree angle and if his arms fell below it, his teacher would use a long stick to hit the arm that was falling. The punishment was purposely done during class, as a way to publicly humiliate students who were late, who were caught cheating, or who misbehaved.

An hour later, he would wipe the dust off his black uniform pants and join his class. The day would go on as if he was never punished because students were frequently punished. Students were publicly disciplined so they would become more motivated to do better and to be more studious. There were not many options for the youth in the villages. They often had to pick between going to school or helping the family farm. Some youth did not have the luxury of picking and often times, those were young women. I think it is unfortunate that the girls, more frequently than not, automatically have to help the family babysit younger siblings and farm. The freedom to learn is sacrificed and I wish there were more opportunities for the young women to choose how they want to live.
I grew up very differently. My parents were more involved. I know I have more control of how I live my life. My mother and father did their best with what they had to raise the ten of us. Half of us shared the same father and the older half had their own. Their father died in the Vietnam War and a few years later, my mom married my dad. I have always viewed my older siblings the same as my other siblings. We all fought one another at some point and ganged up on each other at another. The rivalry was real. We built alliances and held grudges. We got even and this made my childhood complete.

The white truck with distinct music defined my childhood. The catchy loud song from a block away lets me know that the ice cream truck is getting close. Although my parents always warned us about buying ice cream from the ice cream man, my siblings and I would always beg my parents for some spare change just to be able to enjoy a small popsicle in the heat, on a sunny summer day.

On days when my parents didn’t have money, my siblings and I would gather and hide inside the house and crack the windows wide open. When the ice cream truck rolled by, we would yell, “Stop!” as loud as we can. Once the truck stopped and we saw that no one was in line to buy ice cream, we giggled and lightly hit each other out of happiness that we got him. As soon as the truck started moving again, we would all yell, “Stop!” We did this until the truck passed our block. We had a ball.

As a child of ten, there wasn’t always enough to go around. We all had our own hiding spots for popsicles in the freezer. It was survival of the fittest and we all made sure we’d make it.

When my parents came home from the grocery store, we all rushed outside to help bring groceries in. When it was time to divide the bag of candy, we all gathered at the table to make sure we each had a pile. The oldest at the table was responsible to evenly distribute the candy. Any leftover candy would end up
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in my parents’ pile. Once we collected our pile, we all look for my dad to tell us where to hide our goods so that no one can get to them. One by one, we lined up to hear where my dad’s secret spot was. When it was my turn, I leaned in and my dad whispered, “In your basket of clothes.” It took me many years to figure out that we all had the same hiding spots, in our own basket of clothes.

At Washburn High School, I was taking some advanced classes and I was eager to figure out the next step in my life. The St. Olaf TRiO Educational Talent Search program did a tremendous job helping me apply to colleges. TRiO Educational Talent Search is a federally funded program that provides services to first generation, low-income and under-represented students. On the way home from the bus stop, I grabbed the mail and saw something for me. I knew right then that I had been accepted to St. Olaf College because of the thick white packet. I was ecstatic! Although I had many responsibilities at home, my parents always supported my academic endeavors. They knew my heart and they knew that I would come back with a degree.

In May 2014, I became the second person in my family of ten children to graduate with a Master’s Degree. I earned a Master’s in Non Profit Management from Hamline University. At the time, I thought about running a program, because I believed in the outcomes. I have continuously set goals for myself with the support from my parents. I started seeing that my accomplishments were bigger than me. It was a chance for my parents to experience a glimpse of their dreams through me.

My dad was in his room, clicking away on his black Sony laptop. I sat down on the small stool and broke the news. I told my dad my decision. My dad didn’t say much. He told me that when he made the decision to leave his father behind
in Thailand to immigrate to the United States, his father and relatives felt neglected by him. My dad said, “Perhaps this is karma because I left my family.”

“Dad? Today I’m moving out. It’s not because I’m tired of living here with you and mom. I want to live on my own and I need to have my own space.” I explained that I would still be around to help. I will come visit and buy groceries every now and then. As my dad was sitting down, I gave him a hug to reassure him that I will still be present in his life, even if I am no longer living with him under one roof.

After living with my family for five years after I graduated from college, I had decided to move out. Although I was nervous, I figured that it was time. I was in my late 20’s, with two degrees, a car of my own, and a secure job. This is widely expected of adults in America. However, moving out before marriage is frowned upon in the Hmong community because I am a woman and I am not married.

I moved into a one-bedroom apartment in a suburb on the outskirts of the city. My roommate is my boyfriend. The quietness of the place brings both serenity and boredom. You can hear the clock tick when the t.v. is turned off. There is no one to fight over the remote. There are no more secret hiding spots in the fridge. I feel so thankful for my parents and the way they raised my siblings and me. I have always felt lucky to have such wonderful childhood memories. It contributed to my humility and it makes me want to do nice things for my parents as a way to thank them for raising us to be the best we can be.

Although some of his stories are not relatable, I have always admired my dad. I have had the privilege of living in a safe home with electricity and running water. I am thankful that my parents show that they care and they support me. I rarely heard my dad complain about how hard life was. It was a way of living and it was what he only knew. His persistence and ambitions is what makes me want to be just as great as my dad. He is often the light that guides me when I am
lost. My dad made decisions that will better his future, just like how I am making my own decisions to better mine as his daughter.

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Part 3 Perseverance
The Man of the House

by

Ivery Lue Baynham

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The Beginning

Her name is Anita. She is no more than nine years of age. Yet her experiences and comprehensions are wise beyond her years. As tears drip down her caramel complexioned cheeks she holds him. A limp lifeless body, crumpled and broken by the same man who has just defiled her youth and innocence. The young boy in her arms calls himself her protector, the man of the house who will make things right. He believes in God and they have both been taught the glories and the benevolent love God has for his children. In Sunday school, they would learn all the Greatness of the Lord. How Jesus overcame odds that seemed impossible. They would sing songs like “Nothing is too big or too small for God to move,” and read scriptures that state things like, “With God on your side no weapon formed against you can prosper.” Her little brother who now lies in her arms unconscious has obviously taken their parent’s word, the word of their Grandmother, the word of their aunts, uncles, pastors, and
deacons to heart. He thought and believed in God so whole heartedly that he confronted Momma’s boyfriend when he heard his sister saying, “No. Stop it nobody is supposed to touch that.”

Her tears begin to stir the little stick-shaped boy in her arms, only two years younger than herself. She draws him closer as he wakes. She is crying for his pain and not her own. She loves him. Not because he is her only little brother, not because he has seen what she endures so they are the only ones that know Momma’s boyfriend’s little secret. She loves and admires her little brother because he has a courage that she, at times like this, wishes he did not. She admires his heart and his reckless abandon for himself for his love of others. She knows that he is only trying to be the Man that Sista’ (their Grandmother) and Little Momma (their great-grandmother) taught him to be. She is not crying for herself, she is crying for his pain. Not the busted lips or bloody nose, no those wounds heal all too quickly. See she knows her little brother. She knows his heart and his will. She is crying for how he will blame himself for not being able to stop the men who take her innocence and sense of safety again and again. Her tears are for his self-hatred. Her baby brother will inevitably place disdain upon himself for having a penis and the destructive way that his lack of power will eventually corrupt his thoughts until it saturates his heart. She knows that his innocence has been forever tainted not unlike her own. She cries because although his body is stirred by her tears her baby brother is no more. He has died there in her arms and what will awaken will never be the wide-eyed, loving, little red-head she called Ivery. Her little brother is stirring as the moisture flows from her face to his. This is the last time she will ever hold him again. This is the last time he will ever be vulnerable to anyone including her whom he would give his own life to save. The baby is no more.

Manhood is a harsh world of pain and sacrifice he will come to know well. He sees her tears, her eyes are closed, she is trembling with hurt and shame. His eyes well but he doesn’t cry. In that moment, he has made a vow to his sister.
Perseverance

He will never let anyone hurt her again. He will never fail his family again. He swears to himself that he will find a way to protect his sisters and mother. His pain becomes a deep rage that will not be fulfilled. He has become what she fears the most. A man…

Loss; Broken Perception of Masculinity

Tina, my eldest sister, call makes it through between my calling and texting. She’s somber in tone, her voice lifeless and devoid of any emotion. As if she has been completely and totally drained of any further emotional output. There is a long silence after my “What’s wrong?” no time for hello. I am shoving this violation of my life into the hidden place within my heart that all the unexplainable and uncontrollable things go. I do this because I am needed. In my life this is the epitome of what Manhood is about; absorbing pain.

I am being called because I can help; I have the power that we as men call upon to rectify wrongs and injustices. I have ANGER. Anger and RAGE are the tools used by men to even scores. Get people back who have wronged you or those you love. I am prepared because like anyone who knows how to be a Man will tell you, preparation is the key to success. As an African-American male, I am always prepared. Throughout my life there has always been so many things to be angry about. I was taught that a real man is ever ready and stable. I wonder now in hind sight how does a “REAL” man prepare for loss? How does this perception of a Man actually fare when living in the real world?

My eldest sister begins to weep slowly, silently at first, until this too is drained from her being. As the man, she has leaned on for three decades now I brace myself to consume the sorrow of her heart. This is how I will uplift her. My sister who is my elder, yet my gender has made me her rock and corner stone. The man of the house. Silence. She tries to collect herself to speak. “Ivery, she’s
The Man of the House

dead. A, Anita, Ivery, Anita is dead. She’s dead!” I no longer feel like her rock. The Man in me falters. The little boy who has been locked away behind years of emotional scar tissue begins to tremble.

My armor has lost its ability to induce fear. I was waiting for the target to direct my ever-ready rage. The dogs are no longer scratching at the door of my heart awaiting their next victim. There is silence. A cold wind is filling my lungs, yet the room is hot enough for my pores to continue to release beads of sweat, in the attempt to lower my body heat. I feel numb. There is an unfamiliar moisture beginning its way from my eye to my check and down my face. These are tears. The only foe I have never defeated. The only advisory that my anger and rage shy away from. I am face to face with Loss. I am hurt. My world has stopped.

Pain is the one thing that every individual on this planet will have in common with any other person. Pain is an Universal experience that has no regard for age, ethnicity or social status and tax brackets. Pain is pain.

The Power of Perception

As an African American male growing up in the inner city, I was taught strength by my Great-grandmother and my grandmother. My family has always been featured in our cities newspaper every few decades or so. We have always uniquely had at least five generations of living relatives. This exceptional wealth of knowledge unexpectedly creates unconscious benefits as well as unconscious weaknesses. These are called Sticomas. Having the availability of not only my great-grandmother but my grandmother’s wisdom and guidance has always been a crucial part of my upbringing. Oddly my Masculinity has been based on women. The experiences that those women had with men, be they
joyous or painful. Seeing these women continue to open their hearts and become vulnerable repeatedly to men, led me to hold women in a regard I have yet to be able to explain. There is an unspoken, unnamed strength that the women in my family carry. Not just my relatives, all women have this inner strength. Women are held in such a high regard perhaps because the elder men of my culture/family are dead.

Don’t get me wrong, I have uncles that would take me from time to time. Nothing as consistent as the teachings from these women. Of what my manhood was and should be. Shootings, drugs, crime, and prison statistically destroy more Men in the community that I grew up in than any forces of nature. Strangely, when I think back on my youth I cannot honestly remember a single male from my city dying of what would be considered natural causes.

Being a devoted Baptist family, I was taught to trust in the Lord and that God has a divine plan for us all. The only requirement to have a long life, so I thought, was to be obedient. We learned to use the lessons of strength, justice, the universal law of love that I was taught, and to help one another. I learned from having two older sisters how to speak from the heart to a woman. I was taught that being a rock was what manhood was all about: to constantly grow and improve. To talk about feelings but never show any. “Real men don’t cry” or “Man up boy, we don’t have any punks in this family.” Can’t forget my favorite “Stop crying like a girl or I’ll give you something to cry about!” These are just a few jewels of advice passed down about being a man, by the women of my family. Nobody likes to lose. I more than others, because Life is supposed to be filled with winners. Like most other little boys, I was constantly taught to win. I wanted to have some form of control in my life. This kind of thinking was instilled in me at a young age because I was the “man of my home” (fatherless household with two older sisters and no brothers). I was the rock, the dependable one in times of crisis and need. This was my identity that I worked diligently to maintain, cultivate and grow within me. I gained a very important
reputation based on causing others to fear me. To be able to inflict pain became the greatest tool I ever learned as a child. In the world of men fear is control. To be able to instill fear in the hearts of adults became paramount to keep my sisters and mother safe. In my youth having such adult responsibilities helped me to be successful at every task I had set my sights on. I won, I was unbreakable, I would bend but never break. I could hurt others with a vicious conviction. I was the man.

I never included my own biological father as he was never truly present in my life. Nor have I ever counted any of the wasted sacks of skin that my mother dated who called themselves men. This unique situation opened the door to many misunderstandings on what it is to be a man. As well as what type of relationship women desire from the men in their lives. My sister Anita and I managed to get into adulthood without overwhelming resentment. There became an element of fear I felt from her, that I then didn’t understand. It was a barrier that defined the bond between the rebel spirit that was my sister Anita and I.

Anita and I moved to Minneapolis from Indiana in the mid 90’s which drew us closer as siblings. In my adolescence there was a time when we only fought like cats and dogs, some of the most vicious physical combat I have ever experienced in my life. A time that I knew she loved me, but in our teen years anyone who met us would wonder why we were constantly trying to kill one another. Being the only two kids in school with the country twang of our Indiana accents, to being left to defend one another from the city of Minneapolis with its ever present evils. We forged a new connection. Through the time away from our home city, Anita and I not only bonded but we grew as individuals. My sister would become my biggest fan and the inspiration behind much of the change in my life. Responsible for the open vulnerability you are reading at this very moment.
Anita, who supported my secret desires to write and draw as a child, would later in life be the one who would teach me by example. She taught me, I could break the stereotype of thug and gangster. She nurtured my feminine side. Always affirming in me to put my emotions into my lyrics and writing. It felt as though she loved me again and I was her brother once again. Anita, who always believed that I had something to offer the world and pushed me to make better choices. Because to her I had potential to be the “Man” our family needed. A new kind of Man. One she could trust and other women would trust as well. My trophies for wrestling and martial arts meant nil if anything to her, she would support my music, spoken-word poetry and writing. She cared nothing at all about the praise I received for being the “man” many had taught me I needed to be. In hind sight I see how the man I had become in my teens caused her disappointment, pain and fear. It was as if she knew me better than I knew myself at times. It makes sense considering I am the only little brother she ever had. She became my best friend, supporter and fan of my work. Be it written, spoken word or a hip-hop performance she was always front and center cheering me on to do more with my life than to settle for the perception of a Black male. She always supported my creativity, or the “girl in me” as she sometimes put it.

I had just turned thirty and was very much excited about my life. I felt like I was winning at the game of life. I was in complete assurance and comfort in the course my life was heading. I was actually the MAN. All the critical stats for the Perception of Masculinity were in place; I had my car, my apartment, great career, family starting to come together, and I was sporadically performing my music. I thought to myself one bright Sunday morning, life is good, God is good, I made it. I was very much full of the false self I had presented to everyone. The Ego-based self that is centered on the things of my life rather than the relationships that make life worth living. My perception of my Masculinity and Manhood had become about what I had. I lost sight of the relationships that
create memories. So covered in my emotional scars I had become immune to emotions, besides, I am a man. I can control mine. So full of myself I was confident that I had become invincible. “The MAN indeed.” I had experienced many losses in life already. Yet, because I had economic success I overlooked those vital experiences. We may not, at times be aware of some of our loses, or we may not have realized what we experienced were actually losses. Loss is not the enemy; not facing its existence is the enemy of emotional development.

Full of my grandiose manhood I announced to my girlfriend “We are going to church! God is good, and we are blessed.” Just at that very moment I received a phone call. I recognized the number as my mother’s, so I quickly answered expecting good news on my perfect day. All I can hear were guttural screams and sobs, no words, the tears and screams the only communications her brain allowing her to give me.

The connection is lost. I sit confused, “What the fuck was that?” before I can stand my phone is ringing again, this is the voice of my eldest sister Tina. I answer, more of the screaming, no words, and only deep sobs and labored breathing. The connection is lost. At this point I am up and dressed, the “MAN” instinct I was taught is now reverting to anger and impatience. I try to call both back, but lines are busy and this feeling in my gut is eating me alive. It is a feeling I swore off in my youth, so long ago I barely remember it. For me, this means that every time I wanted to be held or to feel loved, I had to hide my tears. Or I would be ridiculed by those I adored and loved, I had to become hard and callused to be a man, right?

Yet I am not, and have never been, the cold-hearted gang banger or drug dealer the media and society have made me out to be. I am the little boy who sat with his sisters and cried because they were hurt. “He” has always been there still, but buried deep and stashed away in my heart with everything else that would make me look weak. “He” is always scratching the surface, attempting to
escape the darkness that I have imprisoned him in to be the man I am trained to be. I grew scars in my soul to become a man in my heart. The “MAN”, with no expression of emotion other than anger leaves me in a state of inquiry. I am so totally lost. I feel something, it is very real, and it is also very familiar, because it is little Ivery. The little boy in his sister’s arms in so much pain that his sister cries for him. He is crying because I will not, I cannot, we are no longer the same person. I am a man and I was taught “he” is a sissy, a punk and that is why he remains locked away.

“He” is the embarrassment of my manhood, or at least what I have been taught it means to be a man. “He” is the reminder of my weakness, which I swore would never happen again! Yet “he” is here. Now very present, and his pain is stronger than my will.

I have often been told, and it saddens me to admit that I have said, “Real men don’t cry” and as the thought of the limits that this phrase puts on a young man roam my mind. I wonder how I can be a man while honoring the boy trapped in my heart who only wants to have his sister hold him one last time before she is gone forever.

In my age and growth, I have come to express things differently than I used to. I have come to understand the true strength of masculinity is in vulnerability. The willingness to be bare and open with those I meet. Yet this too is often misunderstood. In a song I recorded entitled “When hearts turn cold” I state, “Real G’s don’t cry, but that’s a lie. Look at me G don’t you see the tears in my eyes?” This line perfectly captures the turn of my life, the direction that men in the community and on the campus where I attend college will inevitably need to travel toward.

The question I ask myself, is how can I encourage the men in my neighborhood and on campus to be men of valor and honor? How can I lead them by example while letting go of the codes of masculinity that our communities feed us. The
women in our homes, neighborhoods, and in our schools, expect from us? The answers to these questions remain unclear even now, so I use my tears to fill my pen and create poetry, lyrics and works like these.

These truths are the heart behind my conversation and the way I speak. These lessons are taught through the pain of survival. I have changed my perception of others by changing the perception of myself to me. The perception of what it is to be a MAN. From the Man of the house.

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I remember when I was 17 years old and I had just had my first child. It was March 1982, I had just moved out of my parents’ home and moved in with my sister Rose. I was young, had no mothering experience, and knew nothin’ on how to mother a child but what I had seen from my mother when she comforted me when I was sick or in pain. I knew nothin’ on how to survive in this world with a baby of my own, on my own. I was confused, full of self-doubt and selfishness. I looked around for guidance from my older sister Rose whom I lived with, but she was too busy snorting cocaine to be there for me. Rose was gone more than half of the time, and the other half she was recuperating from the night before of getting high as a kite. She was in an induced state of mind, too stoned to be there for me or to help me. Not only did it feel like my sister had abandoned me, but I also was no longer welcomed at my parents’ home since I had a child. My father had even denounced me after seeing me in the hospital with my new bundle of joy. My mom wanted me to reside with my sister and
take care of my baby. Mom was trying to teach me how to breastfeed and it was hurting. My mom wanted me to be successful and raise my baby.

Even so, I was lost in the world all on my own.

I ended up moving out of my sister’s place and was staying with a friend instead. While there, I met a young man by the name of James Brown. And no, he wasn’t the singer! He was two months older than I was, and he interested me. His smile, conversation and demeanor attracted me. He helped me look for my baby daddy who had taken my check and left town. We started talking and hanging out together on a regular basis, then we became girlfriend and boyfriend.

I met James on accident while I was searching for my babies’ daddy who had my much needed welfare check. I was 17 at the time, the check was in my sister’s name and it was all the money I had in the whole entire world. My sister Rose was not being honest about where the money was and kept it from me, so I stole it from her mailbox. I finally had my money, only to have my baby daddy Charles steal it from me. I was furious!! I didn’t know what to do with all anger. Charles had taken the money and booked a ticket to California while he was on the run from a boy’s home.

While looking for Charles I met James. I ended up movin’ in with him and his family in my home state of Milwaukee. I was livin’ with James’ mother, step father, sisters, nieces and nephews in a five-bedroom house. His family quickly became my family and that’s just how I needed it to be.

Regrettably, our relationship became dysfunctional quickly.

After only being together for only 7 to 8 months, James began to hit on me, fightin’ with me, beatin’ my ass like clockwork. At first he only hit me in private, then he started to hit me in front of his family – my then surrogate family. Once, I was getting ready to go to my parents’ house for thanksgiving and James had
come home and instantly started hollering at me telling me I wasn’t going any fucking where. When I tried to explain he started punching me like I was a man. I thought, this is just how James shows me he loves me. Little did I know it was dominance on his part, a form of control, since he was miserable with his way of life he wanted – needed - me to be miserable too. Then the kids started coming, 1, 2, 3… more black eyes and busted lips. This didn’t slow James down though. He kept coming home intoxicated and then would start in on all the hollerin’, interrogatin’, and accusin’ me about being with other men, and then hittin’ on me like I was a rag doll with no soul. When he would come through the door I would get sick to my stomach and the stress would swell in my chest. I felt like a piece of crap that was getting stepped on by the person I was in love with or who I thought I was in love with.

Then the cheating started on his part with a neighbor. I knew something was happenin’ when he would go over there when no men were home, only the women folk. I got so upset one day that I immediately went next door and called the neighbor to come outside and we started going at it. First, we were cussing each other out then the fighting started. We got into a big altercation – hittin’ and yellin’ and cussin’ at each other. As we were fighting the neighbors’ sisters and brother came out and it turned into one family against the other. It had become a fall-out, drag-out fight in the streets family affair - my new family against her family. We were in it!! That’s how we got our street name: the CHB’s. Certified Head Busters.

After that fight, I wanted to get away from James more than anything. Weeks went past with me kickin’ it at James’ friend’s house doin’ what he was doin’ – getting drunk and not caring about nothin’. But everyone knew I was James’ girl, so no one fucked with me. I was just sittin’ up there to get away from James.
I still stuck around. Even after the neighbor and I talked through what had happened and we both realized that James had been playin’ us both I still stuck around. I told myself that I was in love with James and that he truly loved me. His family was there for me and I needed them to help me with my children, especially since I was pregnant with another.

I had nowhere else to go.

I was about to have my sixth child and we had just moved out of James’ families house. We had moved into our own place – a three bedroom that consumed most of my welfare check. Through the continued abuse came the bottles and diapers, then James introduced me to crack cocaine. They say misery loves company and that statement is all so true because he was miserable with his life and he wanted my life to be miserable too, even more than he had already made it.

It was a weekday right around New Year’s when he first brought home the crack cocaine and other paraphernalia – a crack pipe, a lighter, and the foil from an aluminum scrubber. We were in our living room, the kids were in their beds tucked in for the night, and out came the crack. James put it on the glass pipe, lit it with a lighter and started pulling in the smoke then with his sweet talkin’ told me to do the same. I did what he told me to do and instantly a rush went straight to my head. I suddenly felt worry free - I had escaped reality for a moment.

James and I had gotten high for about two hours that night, and the next day I had to work. I was still high from the night before and could not function properly and was worried about whether I could work that day. True enough, I couldn’t work. At the time I was working at Koss Stereo Phones and while trying to build headphones, I started seeing double and had to go home. But, by the
following weekend I was getting high on crack again. Daily crack cocaine use became a way to escape my truth of being a full-time mother six times over with no adequate mothering skills.

It was as ‘easy’ as that. I was addicted to crack cocaine.

Then James got arrested and went to jail for at least a 6 month stretch, where in his absence I was alone with no help. At least when we lived with his family I had support. I was overwhelmed struggling all on my own. I was screaming out for help, but no one was around to hear my screams. With no other options that I could think of, I walked into the Department of Health and asked for help with my children and help to pay rent because with my addiction habits and James in jail, I couldn’t help my children.

With no one able or willin’ to help, I knew I needed to sign my children over to the state and would be seen as another Black woman involved with Child Protection Services (CPS).

My life had become unmanageable.

On a gloomy day that mimicked how I was feeling, I walked into the Department of Health and met with a staff member. I explained that I was about to be homeless and needed help with my six children, so I could get help for my addiction. I was sat down and told that my children would be taken into state custody and that I had six months to a year to get my children back. I was assigned a case-worker who would enforce that I followed the court ordered case plan laid out for me which stated that I needed to have stable housing, bedding, food, clean urine analysis (UA’s) for three to six months and that I needed to take a parenting class. Not to mention I needed to be sober.

I ended up signing my children over to the state. As I felt the gloom in my heart I erupted with tears in my eyes, knowing that I had no other choice but to
become involved with Child Protective Services. I learned that CPS was easy to get in to but hard as hell to get out of. Hard. As. Hell.

After I turned my kids over to the state I was filled with depression and a sea of doubt about what I had just done. I had more feelings than I could deal with having just given away my children, and I needed to medicate. So, I went right to the dope dealers and sold them my whole house and everything in it - a sad place to be in. I was now homeless with nowhere to go, living the street life and started prostituting for money and drugs. I was so high I was not thinking how this lifestyle was keeping me from being with my children.

It was this kind of insanity that was happening to me on the regular.

I was getting high at the time that I had a shotgun pulled to my head for getting dope from the dope man and havin’ no money to repay him. I showed the dope man a check that wasn’t even mine and gotten some dope from him tellin’ him I will pay for it when I cashed the check. My six-year-old daughter, who was living with my parents since I had moved in with James, and had been coming over to visit me on the regular was in the back seat as he pulled the shotgun up and aimed it at my head. My life flashed before my eyes as I went numb thinking if he pulled the trigger and took me out how my daughter would be fucked up for life. Thankfully, my daughter and I got away without getting hurt.

These moments kept happening. Another night I was approached by a dope man asking me did I want to get high with him. He yelled at me to get into the back of the semi-truck he was in. It was pitch black in the abandoned semi-truck that was parked in an alley way. I got in the car while saying “okay, okay, okay” with his piercing eyes staring into mine. When he wasn’t looking, I jumped out of the semi-truck onto a ground covered with glass thinking this could be the end of my life. I was bruised from my waist all the way down my leg. My life
was filled with chaos and confusion and the insanity kept going for years until I
got sick and tired of livin’ this fucked up, so-called ‘life’. While under the
influence, I cried out, “God, please help me!”, and as I was cryin’ and prayin’ I
felt a shift in my spirit that night.

I was set free from crack cocaine and didn’t even know it.

My children needed me and the only way to get them back was to get treatment
for my addiction. I went to treatment at April House in Milwaukee for 90 days
and got clean. It took almost 6 months after that before I regained custody of my
children. For almost a year I worked my way through the case-plan and after
getting my children back I wanted a clean start so I moved to Minnesota. I left
Milwaukee with no confirmed job and just enough money to get bus tickets for
my kids and I and a little bit of food, and not knowing anyone in Minnesota who
could support us. It was 2005 and I was exhausted. I no longer wanted to be
homeless, or living down the street from shootings, easy access to drugs – I
wanted a fresh start for my family.

Needing a place to stay, we ended up living in a homeless shelter in downtown
Minneapolis called People Serving People (PSP). While there, I met a woman
that had lived at PSP and we became friends. By 2007, she had reintroduced
me to crack. After doing crack for about a month it happened.

One night, about a year later, I was home in my house when I was getting high
this feeling came over me of guilt, hurt, and pain of being the person I had
become. I thought, “I don’t want to die like this. Lord, could you guide me to
where you want me to serve you?” The bible says at your weakest point that’s
when God intervenes and by His strength you are made whole.

The next day Jehovah Witnesses came to my door, and I started studying the
bible. Through bible study, I eventually broke free from my addiction without
having to go back to treatment. Since 2007 I have been clean and sober and I also broke free from the dysfunctional relationship I was in with James after 22 years. I was finally free to build myself up, so I put in an application for college, got approved, and I am now in my 5th semester of college at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (Minneapolis College).

I now had self-esteem and I had my faith in God. He blew his breathe on me and I became alive again. This faith gave me the strength to become a leader at Minneapolis College and I became vice president for the Students in African American Sisterhood program through the African American Education and Empowerment Program at Minneapolis College.

My past pushed me to want to help others move away from addiction and find their passion. My passion is helping those who have had to deal with losing their kids, those dealing with CPS, and those needing help to regain their self-esteem. I have lived this lifestyle, so I know firsthand what clients go through and I understand the hardships one must endure. I broke free and I know that other women can break free too, so I chose addiction counseling as my major. I went further in my dedication to help people and joined the board of the Addiction Counseling Club at Minneapolis College as well as taking on the role of events coordinator. Today, I am standing by the grace of God with my family as a success story.

When I was going through my addicted lifestyle, I was lost and depressed. I hated myself and my circumstances. I was in a bad way from the decisions I had made – being dirty everyday smelling like hot garbage and musty armpits, the smell was atrocious. I was in a bad state of mind and I felt like there was no way out. I lost my identity, my self-esteem, my spirituality and my sense of belonging. I had to learn to love myself for who I was, no matter my downfalls.

Today, I have new paraphernalia – books, paper, pens, and pencils.
It smells like an institution. It's a weird odor that stings my nose. It smells clean yet dirty at the same time. Almost like canned air, sadness, hopelessness, frustration and anger. And here I sit, in this odd smelling place on a small, neatly made bed, staring out the window at freedom. Across the hall I can hear two people talking in hushed whispers.

A man’s deep gravelly voice goes, “I’ve been watching her since she came yesterday. She hasn’t left her room except to eat.”

“At least she’s eating,” a women’s voice replied.

I hear the man speak again, “I reviewed her intake. I would have never thought that she has these issue if I saw her walking down the street. She looks so normal.”
I tune their conversation out and turn my attention to the brown fuzzball I’ve been watching outside my window. I am thinking about how this furry creature has no worries, no heartache or sadness. He just goes about his day in his own peaceful ignorance. He meanders without care or concern for anyone but himself. I imagine him foraging for food, resting in the warm sun when he’s tired and sleeping peacefully in his den. He is truly free in his existence. I would trade places with this creature in a heartbeat. My body is consumed with overwhelming sadness. It’s the kind of sadness that beats your soul into an inch of its being. A type of hopelessness that leaves you gripping onto a mostly deflated raft adrift in the ocean waiting for a savoir to rescue you. My furry visitor walks off. I lay down and close my eyes.

I was lost at a very young age. My mother and I immigrated here from war-torn Cambodia. I had lost my whole family in the Khmer Rouge coup before I was even conceived by my mother and a father I can barely imagine. I was born in a Thai refugee camp and was given the name Sovichet by the women that cared for me because my mother fell ill immediately following my birth. I imagine the camp being a like the desolate, grey post-apocalyptic communities you see in the movies. My mom only tells it as much worse. Not long after I was born, my mother and I would bounce from country to country in Southeast Asia on our journey to asylum in the United States. We finally arrived to the United States in the winter of 1982 when I was just turned 2 years old. After a short stay in California we flew to our new home and my new sponsor family in St. Paul, Minnesota. They had taken in other refugees, not just from other countries but other parts of their family before me and my mother, but I’m pretty sure we were the last ones to be welcomed in.

My new family was very Minnesotan. Hotdishes, warm houses and polka dances at family gatherings were the norm. My new Grandpa was a gruff old man that smelled of pipe tobacco and beer. He was a pile driver for a construction company. My new Grandma was a sweet, petite lady that always hugged me
like she hadn’t seen me in ages even if she had just seen me a few hours before. Being a stereotypical white Minnesotan family they couldn’t say my name. It was my Aunt that decided to call me Sue which morphed into what my name is now, Susie. From that day on I was never called by my real name again. I realize now, the day my Aunt called me Sue was the same day I lost a huge part of my ethnic identity. I don’t blame my identity issues on her. She didn’t mean any malice with what she did. I swear it sounds something like ceviche, but let’s be honest, I can’t properly say my real name either.

I am awoken from my sleep and I hear a flurry of activity outside my room. I cautiously move toward my doorway only to see a glimpse of a restrained middle-aged woman yelling obscenities being quickly wheeled to a room at the end of hall. That door opens into a bright, white padded room. She is put inside and the door is quickly locked behind her. I can hear the muffled rants through the heavily cushioned door. At the desk across the hall there is a lot of conversation about the newest tenant. A kind older woman, the night nurse, looks up and walks over to me asking if I’d like a sleeping pill. I politely decline and I am sent back to bed.

I awake the next morning to the sun shining in my window and the sound of voices in the common area. I walk out of my room and sit with my floormates in front a big flat screen tv that is playing some cartoon from my childhood. We are all sitting in separate chairs like the ones that are in the waiting room of a doctor’s office. The floor comes to life as the day staff comes in saying cheerful greetings to us. Some of the other patients respond accordingly, but most grumble something unintelligible or just look in their direction acknowledging their presence. Soon, food service comes up to deliver out meals. I eat a tasteless breakfast alone at the dining tables and move back into the common area to a look out the widows across the river to a college I attended in a different life. A man about my age comes over and sits next to me. He strikes up a conversation with me. I cordially answer his questions, but only because he
works here. We talk briefly and before he leaves he tells me that I get to meet with my team today. All the while I am talking to this man my mind is full of racing thoughts but at the same time I can think of nothing of substance to say to him. The nurse calls my name and I go get my meds. I soon grow tired and go back to my room to sleep.

I would talk about my childhood, but I don’t really remember things from that time in my life. Sometimes I wonder if the things I remember are just stories that people have told me. I remember living in St. Paul with my mom, my sponsor family and their dog, my protector Rusty. My mom didn’t work when we first came here because she barely spoke English. We were poor. We lived off of food stamps, government handouts and help from the local charities. I still say to this day that the best grilled cheese is the kind the government cheese that came in the boxes with the 10 gallon container of peanut butter and powdered milk. I don’t know about you all but there are days that I crave those grilled cheese sandwiches like I do the cheap ten cent ramen and the watered-down five dollar all you can drink beer from my college days.

My mother was determined not to be poor for long because she knew what it was like to be wealthy. Before the Khmer Rouge coup my family was prominent in the government. My grandfather was a judge and my mother was going to school to be a doctor. They owned farms that supplied the capital city Phnom Penh with food. They were wealthy and educated, two things that the Khmer Rouge were abhorrently against. My whole family, outside of my mother and father were part of the 1.5 million Cambodians that perished during the Khmer Rouge’s time in power.

My mother found out that she needed to learn English in order to find a job. She worked with our sponsor agency Catholic Charities and enrolled at St. Paul TVI, which is now known as St. Paul College, to learn the English language. Two years later she was fluent in English and so was I. Our first language fell by the
wayside along with my culture and traditions in order to assimilate with our new home. We were becoming American.

I am sweating. Little beads of water form on my upper lip. I can’t tell if it’s from my anxiousness, the room temp or my meds. I am sitting at one end of a u-shaped table. At the other end sits my medical team that consists of a psychiatrist, psychologist, occupational/cognitive therapist, social worker and two residential interns on their psychiatric rotation. There is the occasional shuffling of paper that breaks the silence.

After what seems like hours, the psychologist looks up at me and says “Hello Susie, can you tell us why you are here?’

I look down at my hands and quietly respond, “Cause I’m sick.”

“I see. I’m sorry that you are here. We all hope that we can help you so you can go back home to your son and family.” She says as she tilts her head. “When do you want to go home?’

“As soon as I can”, I reply quickly.

“That’s what I like to hear. We have come up with a plan for your recovery.”

The plan consisted of me attending art therapy, cognitive therapy and being admitted to their partial-hospitalization program once I’m released. I am asked to work at becoming more social with the other patients and sleeping less during the day along with starting me on medication for my depression and anxiety. At the end of my meeting I am hopeful. I haven’t felt the feeling of hope in almost a year.

I would spend the next 11 days in that institution, 6 months in outpatient mental health program and the better part of a year finding out who I was. I had spent my whole 28 years searching for a self-identity that I had only known because of people’s perception of me. That’s 28 long years conforming and assimilating to
what society considers acceptable, normal and productive. For 28 empty years I lived a life that was made for me by someone else. On day 11, I woke up and was given a second chance to write my own story and live my life the way I wanted.

Today I am moving. My mother remarried and I got a brother and a dad to call my own. We are moving out of the small double-wide trailer my family lived in for almost 3 years to a beautiful blue house with a red fence and a back yard that I can run around in. I am so excited because I will be across the street from the school I go to. I'll be closer to my classmates and out of the trailer park that everyone makes fun of. In my mind we were no longer poor. I will no longer get made fun of for the clothes my mother made for me or that were bought at garage sales because we can’t afford to buy new ones. I elated to be able to point across the street during recess and claim the blue house as mine. I was excited to be like everyone else. The problem was that I wasn’t. I wasn’t like everyone else. I was still poor. I still wore clothes my mother made me. I was still one of the handful of students in my elementary school that wasn’t white. I lived in a predominately white, middle class suburb and people assumed I was adopted. That was until they met my family only to see that I was a mini replica of my mom. Teachers would ask me questions about China or Korea when we were in social studies class even though I am Cambodian. At 8 years old I didn’t think there was anything wrong with that because I thought all people of Asian descent were basically the same. That’s basically what the Social Studies books said at my school. Now I know, how offensive so many of these things I experienced while growing up in a predominately white suburb really were.

Whoosh. The doors open and the fresh air hits my face and I am free. I am finally going home and get to hold my son in my arms. I have been given the blessing of another chance and this time I was going to do things right. As good as my intentions were I realized very quickly that I had no idea how to make my good intentions become reality. I had no idea how hard recovery would be and I had
no one that truly understood the type of care that I would need in order to recover.

I was near another hospitalization about 2 weeks after being released even though I was in partial inpatient care. The thing they don’t tell you on the ward is that once you leave there is no one there to help you. Once you leave the safety of the ward it’s you against the world all over again. With no one who understands or strong support system you are no better off than when you first walked through those doors. That is terrifying for someone that wants truly wants to live but doesn’t know how.

I’m at the bus stop. My best friend, Clara is with me. This was my first failure as an adult. I tried to buy a car and couldn’t because I lacked credit history. Clara assumed I was going to be able to buy a car, so we got a ride to the dealership. After walking some distance and taking the first bus we could find we were able to successfully navigate our way to Brookdale mall. Normally, she and I were intelligent young women, but putting us together somehow made our common sense drop about 15 points. Standing there at the bus stop Clara proceeded to strike up a conversation with a woman surrounded by laundry bags. Clara was astonished to find out that this women brought all her laundry back and forth to the laundromat every week. Once on the bus the conversation continued between Clara and the woman. The woman got off a few stops later. After a short time my best friend looked around then said, “We’re the only white people on this bus”.

I tilted my head and with a puzzled look on my face I replied, “I’m not white”. My response was followed by a brief silence until she quickly changed the subject. That one interaction in my early twenties made me question how other people view me. Did I appear white to other people? I knew that my own ethnic group didn’t exactly accept me because I no longer spoke the language or actively practiced my cultural traditions. After that, I began to shun everything of
ethnic and cultural value and clung to the only thing I knew that was just like me, my brother.

My brother and I had an age gap of 4 ½ years. As we grew into adulthood that age gap grew smaller and smaller. However, as children we fought every single day, all day long, to the point where my parents got boxing gloves for us so we wouldn’t hurt each other. My brother and I shared many experiences as young adults. We shared the same disconnect with our culture, the same issues of society’s perception of us and ultimately the same issues of our own identity.

We travelled a similar path turning to drugs and alcohol for different reasons, but the same end goal of self -medicating. My reasons were revolved around death of close friends and my inability to cope with the seismic change of my environment when I left to go to college. I wandered through my late teens and early twenties in a chemical and alcohol induced haze. The pressures from college, family, friends compounded on top of the grief of death one of my closest friends in high school, which caused me to go into a controlled spiral until finally I landed pregnant with my son. I seemingly straightened up and got my life together.

My life was being held together with school glue and duct tape as my brother’s was breaking apart. My brother was young, handsome and full of hubris. Nobody could tell him nothin’. I watched him go from being successful and full of life to moody and depressed. He found solace in drinking and drugs. I would see flashes of who my brother was before he started fighting his demons at holidays and family functions. My brother fought with his demons for about two years and then, in October of 2009 he was pulled over and charged with his second DWI. While in police custody he was sent to an area hospital for suicidal threats. He was released the same night to the custody of my parents even though I begged my parents to have him kept in the hospital. Over the next couple of days Mom and Dad finally got him to agree to see a therapist to help
him get the tools to fight the demons he was battling. He was too tired. We were too late.

My brother passed away, alone, in the early morning hours on November 5, 2009.

That day my brother’s journey ended and my journey finally began. Over the next year I would lose my beloved grandmother in June and the man I was dating at the end of August, who also succumbed to his depression and committed suicide. These two deaths in addition to my brother’s led me into a deep depression with extreme anxiety. I dealt with it the best that I could. But I was alone. My parents were still grieving my brother. My son and I had moved back home. Even though I lived in a house with my family I felt empty. The house felt empty. I lived in a life of grey because was surrounded by grief and sadness all day, every day. My son gave us all a little bit of happiness but he couldn’t pull the house out of sadness. He was too little and didn’t understand. The only time I got relief from the madness was when my son went with his dad for the weekend I could drink my feelings away. A person can only live like that for so long before they break. I broke. I was broken and I didn’t know how to fix myself. Thankfully my best friend stepped in and saved me.

“Susie Brown?” I heard my name while sitting in the quiet, dark waiting room. I turn to see the hospital worker

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Please come with me. Welcome to the Behavioral Assessment Center. I understand you came with your best friend Clara. What brings you in today?” the intake specialist asked.
“I’m sick. Well, Clara says I’m sick” I replied.

“Do you disagree with her?”

“No. I need help, but I’m not sick. I just need to rest. I just need a break.”

“I’m going to ask you some questions and at the end of the questions I’ll review them with the doctor and give you options.”

We spend what seems like five minutes together and then the intake specialist leaves. She comes back a few minutes later and I ask for my best friend. She allows it and Clara comes and sits with me on the bolted down chairs while we wait for the intake specialist.

“Well, Susie we have a couple of options for you.” The specialist says, “We can give you some meds and schedule a follow-up appointment or you can spend a few days in our mental health center and get some rest.”

After a brief silence I softly reply, “I think I should stay.”

After I say that a panic rises up in me and I instantly think of my son. He’s never been away from me except for when he goes to his dad’s. I didn’t know who was going to watch him and I didn’t know how long I would be gone. I was the only thing my son had that was constant and stable and truthfully my son was the same for me. Clara could see the panic in my eyes and assured me that she had already talked to my parents. They would make sure that my son was cared for as long I was in the mental health center and promised no one would come and take him away from me.

After my time in the mental health ward was over I would spend the next year in therapy and mental health treatment programs. I had taken leave from my job and never to return. Suffering from depression, anxiety and PTSD completely changed who I was. I couldn’t go back to work because my supervisor watched my every move, down to how long I spent in the bathroom. Just thinking about
returning to work would send me into severe panic attacks and I could only get relief from medication and sleep. I was afraid to leave my house for fear of running into someone that would ask about my bother or the man I was dating. Every time I had to talk about their suicides caused me to fall deeper into grief and despair. I would ruminate about things I could have done different. When I would ruminate it felt like I was walking around in a room surrounded by doors but I couldn’t move past what door to pick. The truth is that all the doors will lead me outside but I couldn’t get past the fretting about what would happen if I picked a certain door so I would keep walking around the room not picking any door at all. My grief and sorrow was deep that I suffered from severe depression. I can only describe the depression as being like the first time your heart was ever broken. It’s the emotional and physical feeling of emptiness. I felt like that every day for a year before I sought help.

I suffered through so much pain and heartache during that time but through all that I transformed into a stronger person. The mental health issues I was diagnosed with forced me to examine and re-evaluate who I thought I was. The anxiety forced me to figure out what I liked and what I didn’t. What I didn’t like or did like. Anything I didn’t like elicited a strong NOPE within me. It felt good to be able to say I didn’t like something without the strong worry of what someone would think about me or about my choices. I realized that I didn’t need to change who I was to please someone else or what I thought that society wanted me to be. The extreme depression forced me to acknowledge how I was self-medicating to ease the pain and find healthier ways to deal with my issues. I was healthier because I was learned to cope with my depression by exercising. The depression also helped me figure out people who were toxic to my life and learned to put up healthy boundaries. It stopped me from being a chameleon that would do anything for validation because people that truly like and love me don’t need me to change for them. The PTSD made me find ways to face my fears and tragedies head-on instead of avoiding them. I finally understood that
it’s ok to feel. Having feelings, acknowledging the feelings and validating them was important. I evolved into a person is strong, opinionated, empathetic and beautiful inside and out. I had learned how to celebrate and love me regardless of my faults. I was finally at peace.

At the end of that year I once again was faced with some challenging, life-changing decisions. I no longer was covered under my employer’s disability insurance and I needed to figure out what I wanted to do. Should I start looking for a job? I should but I didn’t really want to because I was miserable at that place. I was talking to Clara about it and she suggest I go back to college and get a degree in social work or human services. After some research and contemplation I decided to go back. I settled on Minneapolis Community and Technical studying Human Services.

The decision to go to Minneapolis Community and Technical College wasn’t exactly out of choice. It was the closest college to me that was still accepting new students for my program of study 3 weeks before the start of the fall semester. The limited choices forced me to take a leap. Turns out it was one of the best leaps I would ever take.

It smells like an institution. It’s the odor of canned, recirculated air. A cacophony of voices greets me as I walk in. The canned air slowly transforms into the pleasant smell of baked goods and freshly brewed coffee. (farts and cigarettes my own humor) I am surrounded by students hustling to make their 10 am class. Bright light streams through the floor to ceiling windows and I can see other students in the quad. I am surrounded by a sea of backpacks and hopeful faces. I am filled with thoughts of being able to become the person I have always been meant to be. My new journey begins here.
To Be Continued

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Part 4 Power
And ever has it been that love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.
- Khalil Gibran

Most Sundays in my household were met by a fatigued reluctance to rise. Often the protest being, “We wake up early five days a week, why can’t we sleep in on the weekend?” My mother would scoff and ignore our rhetorical questions. We knew the drill: breakfast, followed by a frenzy of bodies bumping into each other in the narrow corridors of our home. Jostling to and from, finding socks that too often have been left in places they don’t belong. This familiar disorder felt like home to me. We were all trying to beat the eight o’clock deadline when the madrasah’s doors would close. Most days, my mother would drive my younger brothers, sisters and me to madrasah. Some days my eldest brother Zacharia would wearily make his way in from his night shift at the women’s shelter and be met at the door by my mother. Worn herself from ironing khamises and setting out an array of scrambled eggs, toasts, tea and cereal for our selective
preferences, she would say: “Your car is still heated, take the kids before they close the doors, will you?”

Zacharia ushered us out of our home and into his pristine car, reminding us to stay out of the April mud.

There’s an unspoken reality in many communities of color, including my own, a diaspora of above 80,000 Somalis living in a not-so-tropical Minnesota — a haven they began to accept as a temporary home. Many still dream of the day their beloved nation will rise from the ashes of conflict and poverty. Returning was also what my mother and father dreamt of before they met each other in the heart of downtown Minneapolis and fell in love. Before that, my father graduated from Somali National University with a degree in French and Italian linguistics. In 1992, he was one of few early Somalis who settled for a laborious job, in a turkey-packing factory in Marshall, Minnesota. My parents were wed in the autumn of 1994 and gave birth to their first son Zacharia the following year when the leaves began to wilt and alter in hue. It was then the daunting realization that having children meant the initial interim residency in a foreign country would last longer than planned. This new land was brimming with the opportunities boasted about abroad. Soon enough, the discomfort settled in with the knowledge that this same land didn’t accept my father’s credentials as legitimate or my family’s culture or mother tongue as acceptable. My parents were preparing to bring seven babies into a vastly different world. We would inevitably grow up with a different language and custom than that of their own. And they were too occupied making sure our bellies were satiated to keep up with any of it.

When you grow up in a household of nine it becomes easy to drown out voices. I was jerked out of my stream of thought by Zacharia’s voice shouting my name.

“I called you only about ten times. What’re you thinking about, Shakespeare?”
That was his nickname for me ever since that one summer I’d obsessed over the English playwright’s works and we centered many of our conversations around the wisdom his characters had to offer. It’s been a couple of years since, but I was unfortunately stuck with this name.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said, straightening my hijab in the visor mirror, “just how you’re going to fail that online quiz.”

“Ah, wallahi I almost forgot! I’m going to do it when I get home.”

“The pages with the answers are dog-eared in my book,” I said, “it’s under my bed. You’re welcome.”

He grinned and elbowed my arm. “Good looks, Shakespeare.”

My brother was in his second year of college pursuing a degree in information technology and I had been a junior in high school taking classes at Minneapolis College. We took an interpersonal communications course together that fall semester with the hopes that he would ease me into the vastly different college atmosphere.

Usually after madrasah, we were eager to head home, but occasionally, there would be a guest speaker who I was deeply enthralled by. I’d ask my mom if she could pick us up a little later than usual, much to my sibling’s dismay. We stayed longer that Sunday. The speaker’s voice echoed from the main hall. He was reciting a verse from the Qur’an that was revealed during a tumultuous time for Prophet Muhammad and his companions: “So verily, with hardship there is relief. Verily with hardship there is ease.”

When it was finally time to go home, my mother called, tension knotting her voice. I knew something was terribly wrong, but was too afraid to ask.

“He’s gone,” she finally choked out on the other end of the receiver. “They took him.”
“Who’s gone, Hooyo?” I was met with silence. “Who?!"

She spoke, her voice quivering, “Zacharia, they took him. The police took my son.”

It was my turn to reciprocate the silence. My thoughts were muddled and I found that I couldn’t form a cohesive sentence. The Zacharia that I’d been sitting next to this morning? The one who brought us here? It couldn’t be possible.

“Bring the children outside,” my mother said, breaking my train of thought, “I’m around the corner.”

When we entered the house we were met with a chaos that reeked of violation. Boxes were strewn about, cabinets opened, and items cluttered every inch of the counters and kitchen floor. The couches were flipped over and the cushions littered the floor. In the center of what was supposedly our living room stood a crying aunt and cousin, a rattled father, and a mother who was, with every fiber of her being, recollecting the story of how they took him as she tried not to break into tears.

As the days and weeks progressed, worried neighbors, relatives, and friends swarmed our home with condolences infused with confusion, prayers, and protests, and any support or alleviation of burden they could offer. A gray cloud hovering our house welcomed them in, a non-spring-like drizzle showered them out. At the time we only knew the answers the lawyers gave of the whereabouts of the brother with whom I’d shared a womb, who was now being propagated on mainstream media as an alleged terrorist.

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A few numbing months later, I found myself sitting in the living room of a studio painted a bleak white, furnished with a minimalistic design, a gray, modern-classic loveseat, paired with an armchair too large to be balancing on the
Dreaming in Color

wooden pegs that held it up. There was a kitchen island, a large painting with a sun setting over a beach, and a washed out cream colored carpet. It looked like the home of someone who was too afraid of color to incorporate some of it in their dwelling.

There were three documentarians in the room. The first was a Chinese woman who embodied a presence larger than her otherwise petite frame. Her high pitched laughter had a way of easing the tension out of a room. The second was a tall Russian man whose perpetually inquisitive blue eyes noticed everything. He would often bring back gifts for me from the places he went to report stories, chocolates from Kazakhstan, fragrance oils from Malaysia, and a hand stitched scarf made by a woman of the Kayan tribe of Myanmar. The third was a broad shouldered Chinese man who was keen on the slightest details. He had a talent of fitting a huge camera into the tiniest crevices, capturing all the right angles. Since my brother’s arrest, they followed my family and me around asking questions and documenting our life to get a sense of what Zacharia and his family were like.

“Did your brother’s arrest alienate you?” one of the documentarians asked, cocking his head to the side.

I thought: How do you answer a question like that while dressed for the occasion to be on camera, sitting erect, and slightly angled, the air too calm, the room too quiet? Then I answered aloud: “I’m sorry, guys, but for me to give the kind of answer you’re looking for I need to be triggered. I need the emotion to wash over me as though it didn’t happen nearly two years ago.”

Their nods were followed by, “Alright, let’s try this again. Did your brother’s arrest alienate you from friends, family, maybe even colleagues? After your brother’s sentencing, is there a shift in the way you look at the world as you continue to navigate your everyday life?”
The words spewed out of my mouth before I could assess them. “I remember the days the sun shone brighter. The days I spent frolicking on the streets of my childhood home in my favorite blue shirt, chasing down the fading tune of the ice cream truck with my brothers. Or clinging on to the collar of my uncle’s shirt as I anxiously learned to ride a two-wheeled bike. I remember my mother and father sitting on the cracked cement of the steps, cooling in the shade and occasionally hollering at us to stay away from the street. There’s nothing quite like being able to enjoy the innocence of life not knowing its impending misfortunes. It is those same roads I revisit from time to time, hoping I can catch a familiar breeze of air, a whiff of our former neighbor’s West African spice mingling with sounds of children playing in the distance, the large doors of Sumner library. Anything to restore the past as it was, innocent, carefree and untainted by mishap.

Because my brother and I attended a school that was predominantly Muslim, we were let off early on Fridays so we could observe the religious prayer at noon. Many of my brother’s basketball practices were held after prayer. He’d usually wear his shorts and sneakers underneath his ankle-length white thobe. After prayer, he and his friends would rush over to the Van Cleve recreation center and do drills, or start a casual game of twenty-one before practice. After practice they would make the short walk over to Dinkytown to grab a bite, elbowing one another, and jesting about each other’s failed highlights during the game.

It was drizzling out that evening so they decided to carpool to a less crowded McDonald’s. Some of the boys had their thobes slung over their shoulders, some left it in the car, my brother had slipped his back on. They went in, ordered their usual assortment of McChicken sandwiches, double cheeseburgers, sodas and fries and sat down, dipping in each other’s ketchup. Without warning, a man walked up to where they were seated, to-go bag in hand and spat out to my brother’s table: “Go back to your country!” They sat
still, stunned. One of the boys rose and told him off. As the man walked away, shaking his head, Zacharia said “I guess I’ll just walk back into my mother’s womb at HCMC,” referencing the hospital in downtown Minneapolis. They all laughed, still unnerved, peering around at the other diners who were oblivious to the effect of the verbal aggression lingering in the air. But with nothing much else to say, they continued eating, on edge about the next person who would tell them they didn’t belong.”

“Thanks for explaining your brother’s experience. But what about you? Did you become alienated? Were you waiting for the next person who would tell you you didn’t belong?” asked another documentarian.

For a moment I was lost in thought: It’s hard being a hyphenated-American. To constantly be struggling with not embodying either identity enough. To not know what it means to be either one fully. When you grow up speaking more than one language, clear expression is a luxury. Much of language is lost in translation or lack thereof. Belonging is being seamlessly part of an environment. In school, they taught us America was a melting pot; it was a place that mixed together everyone despite their differences in race, religion, and culture. The first few years of my college experience I felt starkly contrasted to everyone else. My first college professor taught us eighth grade level grammar and mechanics. On the first of class, she went around and asked us all where were from. The vast majority of the students were from the states. When my turn came, I told her I was from Minnesota, and she stopped and stared at me for while. She might’ve been either trying to read the lie in my eyes or wedging space in the ‘melting pot’ for one more. She moved on and then came back after everyone had satisfied her first inquiry and asked me again in front of the class, “Ikraan, where are you really from?” To which I answered again, “Minnesota.” Variations of that question she was bold enough to ask have followed me around to different spaces since. Whether it was the receptionist at the doctor’s office asking if I needed an interpreter after having a full conversation with her. Or the awkwardly prolonged
stares I got from white passengers on the city bus when I picked up a call from a friend. Or the one time a pastor at an interfaith gathering told me, “I’m surprised your English is better than most.” The musing, the fingers placed at the chin, wondering how it is possible that someone so colored, so covered, could string words so unaccented.

Even though I was taught that the fundamental American value was acceptance of differences I quickly noticed the categorization. The hierarchies of race, religion, language, and culture. The fervent need to contain the disarray through assimilation. The watering down of intersectional identities to what is tolerable to the dominant group. And if ever you’re too Muslim, too Somali or too black then you’re otherized, your Americaness is questioned and attributed to exoticism. I have often observed the media’s dehumanization of minorities, a tainted narrative of inherent criminality and incivility. The ability to portray people of color as monolithic, that the action of an individual somehow becomes a communal responsibility. When my brother was arrested, the media forcibly brought out my family from the privilege of privacy into the spotlight of scrutiny without consent.

Aloud I said, “I can pinpoint when exactly things started to be different. For me, it was when they took him from us. When my brother was arrested.”

“How has your family responded to all of this?” asked the first documentarian.

“In the fall of 2015, that same year that my brother was imprisoned, sprung an effort to repossess his story alongside the young men that were incarcerated in the same case. My family and I collaborated with other affected family members, friends and community members at large who were moved by who’d been affected by this same tragedy. We organized protests, basketball games, open mics, nights of prayer, working to restore the otherwise skewed version of their narratives and bring consolidation to a torn and distraught community.
“In the winter of the following year, my brother was sentenced to 10 years in a medium security federal prison. He had just turned twenty one that August.” I paused to gather my thoughts.

Ten years is enough time for my ten year old brother to grow a beard, assuming he doesn’t inherit the genes of my mother’s side as Zacharia did. For me to graduate with a BA, then a MA, then possibly a PhD in my field of study, and for my then 14-year-old sister to turn 24, and begin leading a life of her own.

“So, it comes as no surprise, then,” I said, “that many of the mothers, including my own inconsolable mother echoed the same thing to reporters as they came in hordes to the courthouse after sentencing. These mothers would utter what they could muster between gasps and tears, a single message, in many shades of broken tongue: ‘We fled a civil war, came here seeking asylum from havoc, not knowing we were to enter the belly of yet another tragedy. But this one hurts more, because what is closer to home than the heart?’

“The reporters prodded broken people with relentless inquiries on their thoughts of the fate of their sons, their beacons of hope, their fulfillments of “The American Dream” who were violently stripped from their homes and youthful lives and condemned for decades behind wrought-iron bars and stale cement.”

And it was true, I thought. Here, we had a justice system, masquerading as an emblem of equality, unprejudiced towards color, religion, gender, and yet, we’re left to wonder if we’re really serving justice if defendants are coerced into pleading guilty. If they’re persuaded into a plea deal as they won’t win the case if they take their constitutional right to go to trial, how does the system not presume itself unfair? The government prolongs the years an individual needs to serve almost as though to compensate for the energy they exerted to find someone guilty, when the assumption should be the person is innocent until proven guilty.
The meaning of terrorism has become conflated with being Muslim. We’re portrayed that way in movies, on the 9 o’clock news, on FaceBook, and that’s apparently socially acceptable as freedom of expression. Then it’s no wonder why my brother, good-natured ol’ Zach, helpful, compassionate Zach, basketball playing, Denny’s lounging Zach, who hadn’t even a minor misdemeanor on his record must be surveilled extensively, incarcerated, humiliated and branded with the title of ‘terrorist.’

The documentarian asked, “What struck you the most about the court proceedings?”

“A new dilemma emerged,” I said, “when the US attorney approached my brother’s defense team with a deal. If he went to trial, and was found guilty he would suffer a harsher and longer sentence, a sentence that carried 60 years to life. But if he plead guilty, they offered a deal of only up to 15 years.”

Silently, I thought to myself: To decide whether coercing defendants is morally correct or not is another story altogether. In the end, my brother decided with the odds stacked against him, his race, his religion, the ways in which he was portrayed on the media, that he would take the guilty plea out. In the courtroom, both during his proceedings and as he testified, I couldn’t help but notice the judge’s strong inclination to side with the prosecution. It was as if he ultimately wanted to walk out of court with another terrorism conviction under his belt. To be known forever as a just ruler who saved America from would-be terrorists. And of course, he solidified this label in court. I often revisit the end of the transcript:

THE COURT: All right. Now, do you understand what you’ve done here today?

THE DEFENDANT: Yes, Your Honor.

THE COURT: And can you tell me what you’ve done here today.
THE DEFENDANT: I admitted my guilt to a conspiracy to provide material support to a terrorist organization.

THE COURT: And what terrorist organization was that?

THE DEFENDANT: ISIS.

THE COURT: And are you, in fact, guilty of that?

THE DEFENDANT: Yes, Your Honor.

THE COURT: All right. I'll take -- you may submit the Plea Agreement and Sentencing Stipulations to the Court.

One of the documentarians murmured something to their colleague and then turned back to me: “How’s he doing now?”

I took a deep breath: “You know, just last week I was in the visitation room of the prison waiting for him to be brought in. I’ve seen the painting of the bald eagle on the cinder block walls of that room many times, but it never occurred to me how hypocritical it was to have a symbol of freedom emblazoned on an enclosure that was otherwise. My brother recounted the experience of how it felt to be outdoors after months of wistfully peering out the chapel windows between reading breaks. His carefully detailed recollection is both painful and inducing of gratitude for overlooked blessings. He spoke fondly of the deer he witnessed during his walk, the chirping of the few remaining flocks of birds, the vastness of the sky and how gracefully it held up despite being pillarless. How peaceful it all felt amidst the chaos of the world.

“When I look at my brother in his worn, colorless uniform I grieve for the endless other people and endless other stories that have been drained of color, bleached with a singular narrative of criminality, damned to ashen trays and forced labor. I wonder how many other gray clouds loom over how many other households, waiting for justice to come knocking.”
The lights dimmed. “Cut,” the documentarian said.

Through the picture windows, I watched as the snow fell in a vertical blur, the city skyline opaque from December’s somber fog. Aside from the light tapping of flakes on the window panes, the night was still, illuminated only by the streetlights and the humming of the day as it wound down. Inside, the room returned to its bleak gray and three pairs of eyes looked on as I tried to compose myself, mounting on the face of spirited civility, the face of every other Minnesotan on the street as they hastily made their way home, bundled in colorful hats and scarves, fully immersed in living, as though nothing was ever amiss.

Just like the old times. Just like the old times.

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The Plaintiff Charges the State of Minnesota Educational System for the Murder of Marcellus Davis

by

Marcellus Davis

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The Family of Marcellus Davis Vs. The State of Minnesota Educational System

United States Court of Black Reparations

500 years of African Holocaust Circuit, 2018

500. F. 3d. 500.

Citation:

After the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, I began to think about how society thinks of violence. What violence does society pay attention to, and what
violence triggers a call to action? As a Black male, father of three, I was filled
with rage and doubt in a society that has historically reinforced the believe that
Black life has little value outside of monetary (see constitution and casual killing
act) exploitive value (see prison industrial complex) after the not guilty verdict
was determined. I found myself in a state of disbelief, not about the decision,
but that I thought that somehow this decision would be different.

As I thought about Trayvon’s life, I wondered had he already been murdered?
Has White Supremacy created a system that makes the murdering of Black
people, in particular, Black children a societal norm? I came to the conclusion
yes. It all depends on if your speaking about a physical murder or a spiritual
assassination. Plotted and carried out; My pain as a Black person is not
important as we are making America great again. Nevertheless, death is the
constant.

Throughout this piece I will share with you my eulogy, not likening my death to
the murder of Trayvon Martin to take away from his memory, rather I’m arguing
that through my educational and professional work experience, K thru doctoral
studies, K-12 administration work experience, and higher education professional
experiences in Minnesota I have been murdered not in the physical but in the in
the spiritual and soul assassination sense. Thus, for the remainder of this piece,
I will attempt to write in a way that puts the Minnesota Education system on trial
for the murder of Marcellus Davis, and I will write from the perspective of
liberated spirit recounting his educational plight. Lastly, this piece will also
include voices of other Black authors who share the same experience.

○

“Violence is Black children going to school for 12 years and receiving 6 year’s
worth of education” (Julian Bond)

Facts:
In 2018, I’m a damaged man; I’m literally dead inside. I have grown up in Minnesota my entire 40-year life, and I made the decisions that my elders, family members, and society stated would be in the best interest for the quality of life I wanted for my family.

Yet, I feel dead. I have earned degrees from multiple institutions, undergraduate, master, and doctoral degrees. I have participated in collegiate athletics. I essentially enjoyed the comforts of the White racial frame of success, yet, I feel incomplete. I live in a state, city, community that espouses to be the epicenter of educational prominence and excellence. I believe that there is much truth to this belief for White children, and I suggest one follow up with the question for whom, because it’s certainly not for students of color.

If you’re a child of color in Minnesota, in particular, American Indian, Latino, or African American, this isn’t truth. The current educational settings are an act of violence upon many of Minnesota’s most vulnerable populations. Bond states, “violence is Black children going to school for 12 years of schooling and receiving 6 years’ worth of education.” Myself and other children of color, including my own children, have been greatly violated in this educational malpractice that has created educational apartheid. To some extent, I’m a survivor of a White Supremacist educational system. I survived my educational experiences, in which the educational system’s sole purpose was to produce community members that will uphold the White supremacist master plan. Or, as stated by General Richard Richard Pratt as he described the purpose of American Indian Boarding Schools “save the man, kill the Indian.” The following linked report from the Minnesota Education Equity Partnership (https://mneep.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/SOSOCAL-Report-2016.pdf) provides additional support to my claims of educational apartheid, and it paints a dismal reality for students of American Indian, African/Black, and Latino identities. I will also include students who are English learners in this statistic. The reading and math proficiency rates (which aren’t the sole predictor of student’s brilliance) over the
five-year range shown below has been in the 25-40 percent proficient rate. This would not be tolerated at any level local, state, nor federal if this were the reality of White students.

To be absolutely clear, I’m not arguing that education is wrong, rather, I’m arguing that educating children of color to uphold White supremacy is the worst oppressive act to humankind.

For so long in my educational experience, I thought it was me. I thought that I couldn’t excel in this educational system because I wasn’t smart enough, I wasn’t disciplined enough, and I thought perhaps I was inferior to the ascendance to academic success because of my Blackness. Many years I was the talk of the family gathering for lack of academic success; metaphorically, I was the Black sheep of the family.

At that time, I did not have the higher education language, nor the understanding of the complexities of racism. Thus, I believed that my claims of racism as a youth were not heard. I do have a greater understanding now, and I have paid more than a four-bedroom, two-bath home worth’s for the language to address my White supremacist conditioning through this chapter in higher education. As a higher education professional, faculty, and trained K-12 administrator, I have and continue to experience racial battle fatigue. Racial Battle Fatigue scholarship developed by William A. Smith states:

The unsophisticated readers or researchers might misinterpret racial battle fatigue to mean simple exhaustion, frustration, or just being too tired to carry on. Certainly, all human beings become exhausted, frustrated, tired, and stressed. Additionally, many people experience collateral stress because they are highly sympathetic to another group that is being overly oppressed. This is not racial battle fatigue. In fact, people, groups, places, things, ideas, and institutions (i.e., the racial institutionalization of nouns) create and/ or perpetuate racial microaggressions. There is also an intragenerational and intergenerational
transmission of racial battle fatigue from institutionalized racist practices, customs, and policies. Furthermore, racial microaggressions are also gendered. Consequently, racial microaggressions and experienced at the macro group level, individual, and/or the gendered level. The racial/gendered level microaggressions are forms of racial misogyny and racial misandry.

Subsequently, it is the perception and interpretation of racial microaggressions and racial misogyny/misandry microaggressions in mundane, extreme, environmentally stressful conditions that causes exaggerated psychological and physiological stress response. These stress responses are influenced by at least four factors (1) constitutional, (2) sociodemographic, (3) psychological, and (4) behavioral. However, it is the development of sophisticated and often intergenerational coping strategies that mediate the stress responses. Unfortunately, exposure to prolonged stress and subsequent extensive coping can compromise overall health, sense of belonging, and satisfaction. We must understand racism as an act of violence and racial microaggressions as weapons of mass destruction of human lives.

In my K-12 learning experience, my parents didn’t have to pay for this educational homicide of my African/Black identity, but the educational homicidal violence is different in higher education. In the metamorphosis of the remnants of slavery, college athletics has served to continue the racist plantation. I played football, and I destroyed my physical body to enhance my mind. It was a trade off or a business relationship. I was ill prepared to understand that in higher education, unlike K-12, I would be literally and figuratively paying for the educational violence against my African/Black identity. It came in many ways; the coaches not playing me because it was deemed that I had a chip on my shoulder, I’m too militant because I asked questions, such as, “why are White players able to participate in speaking engagements with the children in the schools and elders in the community, while Black players are used for the labor
during community outreach efforts, for example, stocking shelves at the local grocery store.”

Similar to the experience of Dr. John Carlos and Colin Kaepernick, to call out injustices means that you will experience a harsher form of punishment by your oppressor to put you in your place; I have noticed to be a Black male fermented in your racial identity in Minnesota makes you a threat larger than any American terrorist see (Timothy McVeigh, Dylan Roof, Carolyn Bryant Donham, and the American Government).

In Minnesota, this deficit ideology created by White supremacy is masked in what is known as Minnesota Nice. Minnesota Nice is a subtle covert racism. It’s not like the Southern United State’s overt racism “we don’t want integrated schools or Niggers, get out of our schools." Rather, it’s “we champion diversity, and we don’t see color." The latter is usually referenced when a person of color is present. Minnesota Nice really means to people of color: White people accept people of color only when Black people don’t make them feel uncomfortable.

Please note that to make White people in Minnesota uncomfortable means something, it could mean the loss of a job, cops being called, or even death (see too many examples within history to list). For example, if my vocal inflection arises in a classroom or work setting, it will not be seen as passion, rather, it creates fear amongst too many of my White peers because I don’t agree with the nature of the permeating norm of Whiteness. Whiteness in the sense, I can be included to the luxuries of whiteness, but I must play by the rules and regulations of whiteness. Don’t show emotion, wear pastel colors, have nothing cultural or ethnic that’s not food, and make White people feel comfortable as Mamie in Gone with the Wind; you can be rewarded with a temporary pass into some of the comforts of Whiteness.

This in turn is killing me. It’s a form of intellectual and professional genocide of my African/Black identity. I’m not able to bring my fullness, my wholeness to the
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spaces of higher education learning, or the work space. Perhaps, this is the
evolution of the three-fifths compromise Roger Sherman and James Wilson
created in 1787.

Too many people of color ascribe to the subscribing you have to play the game. They cower to the ideology; you got to expose the game and blow it up and recreate the game. I admit that I understand why they cower. History has shown us that this doesn’t make you a popular community member. Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Ericka Huggins, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Black Panther Party for Self Defense are examples of being character and physically assassinated with government approval.

This doesn’t pay well. Higher education has been a place that tried and succeeded to assassinate my identity and to rid me of whom I am for a grade or a degree, or to be in accord with the White Supremacist plan that is supposed to allow me into a society that only includes me if I’m more Carleton Banks than Michael Evans.

—

I had to confront my fears and master my every demonic thought about
inferiority, insecurity, or the fear of being black, young, and gifted in this Western
culture." (Lauryn Hill)

Issues:

In the year 2018, Black students have predetermined roles in higher education. Some include athlete, affirmative action baby, or the articulate President Obama (the safe negro), but the Black students who look through a lens of critical race theory and are conscious of history, in particular, their historical African roots of Kings and Queens, become more dangerous/ threatening than an innocent Black boy wearing a hoodie in Florida in a gated community surveillanced by J. Edgar Hoover. Conscious Black students struggle to succeed within these racist
institutions because of their double consciousness (see Dubois). In the book titled *The Nigger Factory* written by Gil Scott-Heron (1972), he likens American Higher Educational Institutions to a factory plant that produces Niggers to uphold the normative functions of societal racism, stratification, and inferiority of black people. (For the purpose of the remainder of this chapter, I will use the term Nigger Factories instead of higher education, in particular regarding Historically Black Colleges and Universities).

Heron writes the following:

The main trouble in Nigger factories lies in the fact while the times have changed radically; educators and administrators have continued to plod along through the bureaucratic red tape that stalls so much American progress. We have once again been caught short while imitating the white boy. While knowledge accumulates at a startling pace our institutions are content to produce quasi-white folks and semi thinkers whose total response is trained rather than felt. Black students in the 1970’s will not be satisfied with Bullshit Degrees or Nigger Educations. They are aware of the hypocrisy and indoctrination and are searching for other alternatives (Heron, 1972, p.x).

Change in Nigger factories is often spoken of as a nurturing arena that will cultivate change for the world, but Nigger factories themselves have been very reluctant to change. Until the G.I. Bill in the late ‘40s helped allow access for more Americans who were not White males and financially well-to-do, Nigger factories were content on shutting their doors to the masses. It wasn’t until the late ‘70s the Title IX bill was passed to provide equal opportunities to women attending Nigger factories.

Lastly, in the late sixties and early seventies, Nigger factories were resistant to provide cultural centers, professors of color, and support for students of color.
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Black students nationwide organized and protested to be included into Nigger factories.

In 2018, my biggest issue with Nigger factories has been their inability or resistance to allow me to be Marcellus and not Arthur Chickering. Due to my thirst of knowledge of self (Black Identity), most of the Nigger Factories I attended were incapable to provide me with support as I navigated through the Nigrescence student development model. I have been told that I’m too militant, and I have to meet White people where they are. My question is, who cares about my hurt? I think these attacks are unwarranted because I don’t buy into the Eurocentric point of view, most, if not all, Nigger factories have tried to drill into me. Reverend Dr. King states, “Whenever Men and Women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can’t ride your back unless it’s bent.” I have been killed because I walk with my head up, and I’m unwilling to make myself small to make White people feel superior. Simply put, I’m too Black. I’m growing my Black consciousness; I’m striving for a liberatory education.

Basically, I don’t want to be another clone the Nigger factory produces. Nigger factories are reluctant to diversify the academy. Educators, administrators, students of color within the academy are still disproportionate. Curriculum glorifies White men and teaches students to worship and become “quasi-White folks” if they want to be successful in life.

The U.S. Court of Black Reparations issued a ruling in the defendant’s favor. The Minnesota Education System was found not guilty due their commitment to upholding a White Supremacist structure that benefits White people and subjugates people of color, and villainizes Black women, girls, men, and boys. It was also determined that the Skittles, Arizona tea, and the White (angelic and pure) hoodie wasn’t the issue, rather, the Black skin was the issue. Schools are a microcosm of society, so the same hate and disdain for Black people historically
documented in American history and the world doesn’t exclude Minnesota 
schools, rather, it employs and implores Minnesota schools to uphold White 
supremacy through curriculum, teaching, and inequitable distribution of 
resources to highly Black populated schools, and inflexible policies and 
practices that continue the vilification of Black students, in particular, Black 
males.

○

_The black rage that makes you want to strike out and smash somebody’s face 
because you know they have you by the throat, killing you by inches. You know 
you’re being singled out, discriminated against simply because the person doing 
it to you has the power to get away with it and you’re powerless to stop him. Not 
funny when it happens. But in retrospect what could be more hilarious than a 
Black American outraged because his rights are denied? Where’s he been? 
Who’s kidding whom? Hasn’t the poor soul heard what Supreme Court Chief 
Justice Roger Taney announced loud and clear as the law lodged in the heart of 
the country, a law civil rights legislation has yet to unseat: Blacks “have no rights 
which the White man was bound to respect” (Richard Wright, 19, P. 187).

Decision:

In summary, my resistance to the Nigger Factory isn’t a resistance to education; 
rather, my resistance is to what I’m taught to be a clone produced by the Nigger 
Factory that will go into the world and perform like Type Y or Type Z I want to be 
considered a limited edition, a new and improved model produced by the Nigger 
Factory that has provided me the accessories to change the Nigger Factory for 
the better, as well as, the society in which we live. It seems what Gil Scott-Heron 
stated in the sixties and seventies has transcended time. In 2012, we are still 
producing Niggers within the Nigger Factories just like in 1972. Change has to 
take place in today’s factories because the product being produced isn’t 
congruent with societies needs or demands. There’s a flaw in the design pattern,
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and it didn’t account for all Americans. Potential leaders in higher education must cultivate transformative change moving forward, or higher education will become extinct like a dinosaur.

“Hope don’t get the job done” (Roman Israel Esquire)

Reason:

Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Philando Castille, Rodney King, Eric Garner, Amadou Diallo Sean Bell, and the list can and will continue. The undeveloped list of Black children who have been killed by the Minnesota Education system for years, young, middle, and senior-aged adults is infinite as well. Yet, this crime of murder, soul assassination, and black erasure has been relatively non-prosecuted in the court of law until this trial, thus, this trial is an anomaly in the call for justice and the demand to American Black oppression. Metaphorically a biblical David (family of the deceased Marcellus Davis) versus the Goliath (State of Minnesota) court trial.

This trial is an attempt to hold a White Supremacist system (Minnesota Kindergarten thru Post-secondary) accountable for the destruction of Black lives and the reproduction of Black oppression and Black violence on people of African descent, and the continuation of the mass production of Quasi-White people with Black skin to uphold White supremacy. This trial was an attempt to address White supremacist curriculum, educational policies, hiring practices, and the role education has played in the destruction of Black civilization in the state of Minnesota.

The decision rendered by the court was not guilty. It was deemed that the plaintiff (Davis family) did not prove without reasonable doubt that Marcellus Davis was murdered by the State of Minnesota Education system. It was cited by the court that because Mr. Davis had obtained multiple degrees: B.A., M.Ed.,
Ed.D, Superintendent Licensure, Program Evaluation certificate from various Minnesota institutions of learning, that he in fact benefitted from the Minnesota Educational system. The court could not, nor would not, consider what was lost or attempted to intentionally eradicate from Marcellus in the process of obtaining this. This would be knowledge of self, Black racial identity, and the ability to be proud to be Black without deference to white acceptance. Malcolm X once stated:

When you take your case to Washington, D.C., you’re taking it to the criminal who’s responsible; it’s like running from the wolf to the fox. They’re all in cahoots together. They all work political chicanery and make you look like a chump before the eyes of the world.

Throughout this piece, I have argued that the death of Trayvon Martin had already occurred long before the physical murder of Trayvon by way of his Florida education system, and the White Racial Framing of Black people, in particular, Black males. I challenge the reader to reconsider the narrow definition of violence, murder, destruction, and assassination, and apply those definition to what’s happening to Black children/adult students in Minnesota Kindergarten thru Post-Secondary to the workforce. To the reader, I ask you to consider the effects of White Supremacy that causes epigenetic reproductive violence for generations to come. I leave you with this. We know Trayvon’s name, as you think about this piece, please also remember Marcellus Davis’s name.

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Back track

I always wanted to grow up. I couldn’t seem to do it fast enough. More than older, I wanted to be wise, to know things. From as early as I can remember I resented that knowledge had to be gained by experience, and over time. I was always in a rush. I didn’t want to wait. I pounded on the doors of the world to open to me.

By the time I was four years old I knew that letters on pages unlocked secrets my parents understood; they read to me every night before bed. I wanted access to these secrets for myself! I learned to read before kindergarten and reading became my dearest and constant love. I read avidly, voraciously, I swallowed entire shelves of the library whole. Trapped in the bubble of my young life, in books I lived! Nothing could hold me back. I fought and died by Katla’s fire alongside the Brothers Lionheart and braved the phantom tollbooth
with Milo into Dictionopolis to save the Princesses Rhyme and Reason. I solved mysteries with Encyclopedia Brown and the Hardy Boys. I agonized before going to battle with Johnny Tremain and fled from the townsfolk with the witch of Blackbird pond. I wept for Old Dan and Little Ann where the red fern grows. In terror, I hid with Anne Frank in the attic and shared the righteous anger of Cassie Logan as her land burned. I ran away to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and ate sandwiches from the automat with Claudia and her little brother. Every book fed my insatiable hunger to read more.

Learning meant everything to me. Well, learning and baseball. As an elementary school kid growing up overseas on a military base, one of my fondest memories is of my dad waking me up in the middle of the night for the ’87 and ’91 Twins World Series games, broadcast to us live in US time. My dad is from St. Paul, he and my mother met while enlisted in the Air Force and our family was stationed in Southern Italy before I started kindergarten and through sixth grade, seven years. My brother and sister were both born there. We lived off-base the first three years then moved into base housing. Both of my parents learned fluent Italian, not because they had to but because that’s the kind of people they were — intellectually curious.

Excelling in school is what I did. I participated in Math Olympiads. Standardized testing scored my reading skills at college level in fifth grade; in sixth grade I was sent to another classroom during English to practice speed reading, reading upside down, backwards, and both, and compensatory reading (where several letters are missing in the words or several words in the sentences are missing, and both). President George H.W. Bush signed the Academic Fitness Award I was given for scoring in the 99th percentile on academic assessments exclusive to the Department of Defense’s educational program. I thought I might be a paleontologist. Or a scholar. Those were my salad days: everything was fresh and crisp and delicious.
San Vito Air Base was located in the heel of the boot shaped peninsula that is Italy, across the Mediterranean Sea from the Middle East. Living there during the Persian Gulf War was a mix of exhilarating, frightening, and business as usual. Italian soldiers armed with machine guns stood guard outside the fence surrounding our base and the older girls would flirt with them and beg for cigarettes. I brought them snacks snuck from our kitchen and asked them questions about their lives as best I could. I begged for cigarettes too. Bomb-sniffing dogs inspected every vehicle entering the base; before it was only a quick badge check. More than once we were evacuated following bomb-threats on base, and the dog detectors were brought in to check our school once we had hustled to shelter. I remember crying, horrified, watching the oil fields in Kuwait burn and imagining how close to the oceans of flames I would have to be for their heat to dry my tears. I was proud to be an American, overseas and at war.

If being in (relatively) close proximity to a (relatively) short war was exhilarating and frightening, moving back to America was exciting and scary. My childhood, while naturally imperfect, took place in a sheltered, idyllic version of America far different from the real America I was soon to know. In my little America there were few single parents, every adult had a job, and a minimum and standardized mode of living was established and maintained. This resulted in an experience of economic and social equality by virtue of multicultural military participation across the US with no discriminated or exploited enlisted underclass. With just enough kids in each grade to populate two classrooms of entirely English speaking students and no tangible economic or class division, the concepts of inequality and racism seemed ridiculously arcane, banished to the dark annals of history. Dead and buried in books I unearthed. Friendships were formed on content of character and shared interest. I believed in a post-racial, progressive and humane America, promising success and individualism,
Off track

Nothing about my first year in America made any sense. I started seventh grade with a terribly unfashionable haircut. I didn’t know pop culture. It wasn’t cool to be smart/raise your hand/do your homework. I was almost beaten up for wearing black pants and a red sweatshirt- I didn’t know that was claiming gang affiliation. Puberty was thrust upon me by the radio, TV, and after-school anecdotes so explicit that even the National Lampoon’s I swiped from my parents paled in comparison to the graphic pervasiveness of sexual messaging and imagery. Intimidated and overwhelmed, feeling completely out of control, I attempted suicide. One month later I was diagnosed with manic-depression (now called bipolar disorder). I was twelve years old. The following year, panic attacks (now called anxiety attacks). Cold, clammy sweating and nausea and impending darkness settling in, the pale race to a bathroom to tear off my shirt, vomit, briefly black out. Refusing all medication, I was determined to go my own way; I stopped performing academically and blew into full-on teenage rebellion. This America just didn’t fit me right, like someone else’s shoes too broken in to borrow. Rather than seek an identity and success within the conventional systems and timelines, I sought the slings and arrows of misfortune, misfit, and struggle. I knew that these were the gritty things I sought, adventures hinted at and beckoning from books I consumed.

Long before my sixteenth birthday I knew I was going to drop out of high school. I accumulated well over 300 detentions for unexcused absences, one for each class I skipped. My tenth grade American History teacher deducted enough attendance points to fail me, though I did not miss a single test and scored an A on every one. I petitioned the principal on the grounds that I clearly mastered the
content and material of the course regardless of the teacher’s attendance policy, and won. D-. Denied entry to Advanced English 11, I again petitioned the principal on the grounds that my standardized test scores clearly displayed competence and academic promise, and won. D-. It wasn’t that I cared about the grades or the classes, or graduating even. It was the principal of the matter that mattered to my self-righteous arrogance. Simultaneously feeling outside and above the entire institution, disillusionment and hubris had me convinced that high school was not for me.

Starting high school I had a reputation as an “at-risk” kid. Cigarettes were a given, smoking weed was a daily activity, and other drugs were making their way into my circle of curiosity. Sex was not commonplace, but no longer a great mystery. Attendance and disciplinary cases with a questionable likelihood to graduate, like myself, were recommended for a Work Experience Opportunity Program, designed to provide job experience and prevent us from becoming drains on society and such. Labeling carries with it its own benefits and problems, and being labeled an “at-risk” kid, really easy and fun to be good at, reinforced that image of myself. Sometimes it seemed like a challenge to rise up to, something to prove or, less often, prove wrong. WEOP placed me at a local grocery store, bagging grocery and sweeping aisles, and the work ethic and sense of pride I gained there have stayed with me all of my days. After the school year ended I applied to a rival grocery store. Arriving at the interview with dozens of positive customer comment cards I offered to work for them, for an increase in pay of course. They hired me and I officially switched uniforms two weeks later. I was fourteen. I have held at least one job, and sometimes as many as three, from that first job freshman year until I was 35.

Dropping out of school at sixteen meant I had to move out of my parents’ house. That was their decision, they were worried about the bad example I was setting but mostly it was because I was volatile and unpredictable, self-destructive and disrespectful. Drugs were taking an increasing role in my life and
I needed more privacy and freedom to pursue them anyway so I rented a room from an adult friend’s mother. Renting that room required more money than I was making, so I quickly found my way into multiple jobs. Getting a GED at sixteen in 1997 meant a series of preliminary tests, waiting, receiving a state waiver, paying the reduced twenty dollar fee, and passing the state administered test, so I did that too. And I read. During those tumultuous and trying years I discovered literature that moved my very soul. I stole the key to the English department’s storage room and took a copy of every book assigned to every grade, course, and level. It took weeks to sneak them all out. This gave me insider access to a wide array of classical and award winning authors. Books by Toni Morrison and Herman Hesse, Jane Austen and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, John Steinbeck and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Victor Hugo and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Shakespeare, oh how I fell for his perfect turn of phrase! Pilgrimages to used book stores unveiled Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, Anais Nin and Sylvia Plath and Dylan Thomas, Tom Robbins, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Alex Haley and Oscar Wilde, Elie Wiesel, James Baldwin. The Marquis de Sade and Iceberg Slim- me staring at the pages in fascinated horror, unable to tear myself away. Among the books on my parents’ shelves I devoured Isaac Asimov, Leon Uris, Steven King, Gary Jennings, Jean M. Auel, Michael Crichton, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Joseph Wambaugh. No history, story, time period, or topic was safe from my prying eyes. I sucked it all in.

Warehouse work fit my lifestyle perfectly. Overnights meant I could sleep all day, and with the intensity and diversification of my drug use, now selling to my friends and co-workers and using in abundance for free, that was a must, and the pay was good. I graduated from my friends’ mom’s house into a shared apartment with my much older gay best friend. Picking orders and loading trucks got me into the best shape of my life and I hardly ate; the drug combinations I was taking did not induce hunger. Blacking out from drugs was nothing like the slow descent and snap out of an anxiety attack. It was more like
turning off a light and then fighting up from the darkness wherever I landed on
the floor, no grasp of time, disoriented and momentarily lost. On the way to my
eighteenth birthday, I was on top of the world.

New track

I never wanted children. Not even a good big sister, I didn’t imagine myself with
the patience, dedication, attention, or interest required for such an endeavor.
Selfish and self-absorbed, drugged out and a heavy smoker, parenting was not
an aspiration or part of my self-image. Working in warehouses with all adults,
underage but never turned down as a sexual partner because of it, my
unbeknownst future baby daddy was the first to resist my feminine persuasions.
Standing 5’3” and burning with competitive fury to his quiet, muscular 6’, he
was the only man I had ever met that was faster and better than me at work.
Between that, his adamancy that he wouldn’t risk legal repercussions, his prior
prison record, and the aura of Northside gangster danger, my curiosity,
admiraton, attraction, and sense of adventure drew me hopelessly to him. Never
mind that he had three daughters with two women and was almost ten years my
senior. Never mind that he was living with one of those women and I was in a
relationship with another female. Moth to a flame.

Finding myself pregnant at nineteen, living with him and his two year old
daughter, I did not intend to be the third woman having a fourth child with this
man. Laying on the examination table for a pre-abortion ultrasound, that’s when
my life changed for keeps. I was pregnant with twins! I left the clinic and called
my mom. She and my dad divorced within eighteen months of me moving out,
the continued dissolution of our family for which I am widely credited, and she
was living in South Minneapolis in a duplex she purchased with her second
husband. My dad retained custody of my brother and sister. While waiting to
move in to her lower level, I lost one of the twins. Maybe my constant, heavy
drug use before deciding to keep them was to blame, my tiny, 115 pound frame, or rogue biology acting out its own infinite determinations. It was early enough in my pregnancy that there was no risk to the remaining fetus and I was all in on the baby thing so I cried for the future that was lost and turned to face the future at hand.

2000. The start of a new century, the dawning of motherhood, the incorporation of my identity. The years that followed were both the best of times and the worst. Birthday parties were big events, with friends, family, and neighbors, BBQ, and a rented moonwalk for all the kids to jump around in. Holidays were splendid, I lavished what little we had on them, from gifts to costumes to rides at Fourth of July carnivals. More than anything I wanted them to have a sense of security; I never let them hear me make payment arrangements with bill collectors or see me pay for gas in change. They visited the dentist twice a year, had proper snow gear and sleds, and we read every night before bed- all of the values and skills I learned from my parents had lay dormant until I needed them. And never did I need them more, for under the surface and lurking in the shadows were decisions and disasters that would come with a heavy accounting for all. I read, but not feverishly. My life was packed full of enough experiences to keep me fully engaged. Empowered and seeking to pursue childhood dreams of higher learning, I enrolled at MCTC, now Minneapolis College. I loved everything about being back in school and managed to pull off three semesters taking care of four kids and hold a part time job before life circumstances tore me away.

On Track

More than a decade later, at 35, I was asked to step down from a General Manager position for taking an ethical and professional stand. I expected to put in my notice and then depart after training my replacement, finding an equivalent
position in another restaurant during that transition. Being out of work for the first time since I was thirteen, qualifying for unemployment pay allowed me the time and room I needed to take an accounting of my life and to come to reckoning with the failures in my parenting, my erratic behavior, drug use, and to choose the way I wanted to redefine myself. This was my chance to change everything I wanted to change and to set a new course, a Renaissance of my life. Reading rushed back into the empty space and I explored books about the housing bubble, economic crisis, and recession; post-colonial warfare and strife in African nations; polygamous Mormon sects; criminal justice in both institutional and memoir perspectives; Native American and indigenous people worldwide; American rural and urban ethnographies; I reviewed classics by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Alexandre Dumas, George Orwell, and discovered new favorites by Louise Erdrich, Paul Beatty, Zora Neale Hurston, George R. R. Martin.

Most importantly, I decided to go back to college. Returning to Minneapolis College is the best decision I could make for myself. Counseling services, professor’s mentorship, and peer support have been crucial to my success here. Terms like agency and equity inspire me. I believe that this is where I belong, this is where I start. Sometimes resilience roars, sometimes it’s a lullaby humming in your ear. Sometimes there must be silence for our difficult truths to talk. Triumph and glory play tag with regret and remorse in the playgrounds of our hearts. We go on because we must, because we find meaning, definition, and relevance in the mirrors of each other. I hold my head high and encourage everyone to raise theirs in dignity and purpose.

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Honor Lamont, a Lakota student, came into my office for her oral dialogue exam in my philosophy course. She carried an abalone shell filled with dried sage and a smooth stone from Pine Ridge Reservation. She rubbed the stone, lit the sage, and smudged my office in a circle – west, north, east, south, west; then her whole body; then mine. Then she prayed in Lakota: “Tunkasila Mitakuye Oyasin” (‘Great Spirit’ to all my relatives). “I cleansed this space because I will be talking about my uncle, Raymond Yellow Thunder, who is now in the spirit world. I have great respect for him. My uncle died a tragic death and his story needs to be told.” Honor’s ritual created a new, living moment for truth to be born.

Oral dialogues are skillful oral productions of critical thought and part of the long history of philosophy in indigenous and oral cultures, often denied by the colonial mandates of the European written word. Oral dialogues cultivate the living embodiment of ideas: in one’s skin, through our senses and with facial
gestures. It is as if the ideas are moving along with the body. For me, my white skin becomes an object in the room for critical self-reflection. *Am I perched too high up in my office chair like some damn Greek statue? Has my Mediterranean skin tanned enough this season to appear on the right side of history? When do I rearrange the fragments of my face so that I am alive but not too much?* There is often a similar experience for my students: when black students discuss the value of Kant’s ethical theory (despite its racist ideas); when white students argue that Black Consciousness is a *universal* theory of justice; when non-Muslim women discuss the liberating practice of Islamic veiling – in these and many more, for better or worse, our bodies become an essential part of the tools of philosophy and the ‘life of the mind.’

After Honor sat down, I asked her a question, not knowing where she might take it. “Honor, can you explain an injustice that you have experienced and how philosophy helps you think about that?” She sat up, looked right at me and spoke without hesitation: “I grew up on a farm outside of Gordon, Nebraska, in the early 1960s. I didn’t experience racism until we moved ‘into town.’ Gordon was extremely segregated. Indians lived on the south side of the tracks, but we got a house on the White side. Racist violence against Indians was common. My best friend, Calvin Blackcalf, myself and my uncles, including Raymond, were bullied, harassed, beaten up and humiliated every day for being Indian. It was not uncommon to discover Indians murdered by whites or police and never a charge or conviction. I remember seeing death posts lining the streets to and from Gordon and Whiteclay. When a white guy kills Indians for a game, there is no news about it. We lived in fear every day for all these ‘shits and giggles,’ and I felt like I was not human.”

“Did you ever defend yourself?” I asked, drawing out the ethical dilemma.
“No,” she said. “Except one time, my dad told me I could pick up branches and hit back. We jumped on a group of white bullies. I hit them so, so hard and shouted ‘I am so tired of running.’ They told their dads and it got worse.”

“Tell me about your uncle, Raymond,” I said.

“Raymond was a ranch hand near Gordon, Nebraska. We were very close. He would buy clothes and food for his family and sleep in the jail overnight to save money and not inconvenience anyone. One day in May 1972, a big group of white cowboys, including Mel and Les Hare (the Hare family was very rich and got away with whatever they wanted), grabbed Raymond, pulled him into the American Legion hall, stripped him naked and forced him to dance. They beat him to death that night, crushed his skull and dumped him in a junk yard. The white storeowners saw it and did nothing.” Honor wept through this part of the story, saying to herself “I could have stopped him from going out that night.”

“Did your family get justice?”

“No, they didn’t charge anyone. Well, they did charge a few but they mostly got off. I think Les Hare got a year, but that was the first time a white was charged for a crime against an Indian. As a result of Raymond’s death, the American Indian Movement (AIM) came and took over Gordon. They camped out, posted people on top of the buildings and raised AIM flags everywhere. AIM became very popular and soon after they occupied Wounded Knee. The killing of Raymond exposed the brutality against Indian people, and AIM brought it all to light. Unfortunately, thousands of FBI came along with their paid Indian militia called GOONs, which stood for Guardians of the Oglala Nation, and another ‘Indian war’ happened. I remember being threatened, and hearing about FBI picking up Indian girls on the side of the road! I lived all of this.”

“How did you respond to the murder of your uncle?”
“When I was in 9th grade, I got a job as a cashier at Shald’s Market. The Shald family was another rich white family and there in the American Legion hall when my uncle was killed. They hired me to get more Indian business, but I would give away tons of groceries for free to Indian people. One day, Les Hare came in and I threw cans at him. ‘You fucking Indian; I will get you too!’ They fired me for being a ‘bad Indian,’ but my dad said ‘good girl.’ I got a job at the S&S and did the same thing - gave away tires, parts, boots, jackets – just to get justice at the white owners.”

“How do you feel about what you did?”

“I felt helpless,” she said, “and I felt hatred inside for whites. My way to get justice was to give their stuff to Indians. You know, that town is evil and it still is today. They recently killed Carey Grass just to get his Cobell check; they killed Calvin Blackcalf; I think the FBI killed Buddie Lamont, my cousin, at Wounded Knee. Justice would be to burn the town to the ground - that is the only way to get rid of the evil.”

“Why do you think people in Gordon are like that?”

“They were taught this discrimination growing up – through stories of their own that they tell to their kids. It is like Aristotle’s idea of habits and inner dispositions. They were not born this way; they were made into this.”

“Does this influence your view of all white people?”

“Yes,” she replied categorically. “That town made me prejudiced against whites too. I didn’t have that until I moved to Gordon. Les Hare’s face is implanted in my head. I used to fight white boys and non-Indians after I left. A white woman would come to my home and ask for a cup of sugar. I would say ‘you stole the Black Hills from us’ and slam the door. Hatred will eat you alive. I have gone to healing ceremonies and know that not all people are like that, but the hatred is still there.”
“What would you tell Black and Indian people who have experienced this today?”

“I would say have compassion for the evil. It is a daily struggle to forgive.”

“Is it better in Minneapolis than in South Dakota?”

“Yes, much better. But you know, my husband was a white biker, and when I was with him, I was treated white. I get pissed off at that. I want to be a proud Lakota!”

“Have you been back to Gordon?”

“I swore I would never go back. But ten years ago, I went back. It was the same - just a new generation. I saw a bar downtown that had a sign ‘No Indians Allowed’ above the entrance. I decided to walk in. There were cowboys everywhere. You know what I did? I bought all of those cowboys a round of beers and whiskey. They were so surprised, but you know what? They accepted a drink from me!”

“You took from them once, and now you gave them something. Are both acts of justice?”

“Yes, but I did it to prove that I could walk into that bar under that sign. I wanted to prove that I could buy them a round and they would accept it. That was a place of power for me. They never accepted a drink from an Indian.”

“Is that progress?” I asked.

“Yes, but I still called them assholes.

“Two years ago I went back when my dad died. The railroad tracks are gone, and so is the sign above the bar that said ‘No Indians Allowed.’ It’s still a racist generation in Gordon NE, though. It’s not as bad as when I was a kid, but it’s still there.”
“What role can philosophy play in your struggle against injustice?”

“I am not sure. I have relatives who are lawyers. It is a fight.”

“Do you think ideas of justice, whether in poetry, songs, stories or theories, can help you in this fight?”

“Maybe. I remember when I was a young girl, I went for a hike in the Badlands. While hiking, I heard an old man singing a very old song in Lakota. It was so beautiful and echoed through the Badlands. While I stood alone listening, a badger came up to me. Badgers are really mean, vicious animals. That badger could easily have killed me. I was afraid, but I didn’t run. I stood there still, closed my eyes, prayed, and listened to that song. The badger heard it too. For that moment, the badger and I were at peace together. He didn’t kill me.”

“Is the badger white people?”

“It is possible.”

Honor concluded the oral dialogue by burning the rest of the sage, which still lingers in my office. After the semester, we both drove west to South Dakota. Honor rode her motorcycle to Sturgis, and I drove our minivan with my family to the Badlands. Before leaving, she gave me a piece of sacred red cloth and a bundle of sage. “When you get to the Badlands, go off alone with your family; burn this sage and say a prayer of gratitude for the land. Do this when you enter and when you leave.” Despite odd looks from other tourists, we followed Honor’s instructions as best we could. Just outside of the Badlands, we stayed in an off-grid homestead on the north banks of the White River, overlooking Pine Ridge Reservation on the south banks. Staring out across the river each night, I tried to imagine this river and this land without borders. “What does this river know of reservations?” I thought. When we left, we burned the rest of the sage on the banks of the north side, and I asked my daughters to write Honor a letter to thank her for allowing us to be on Lakota land.
Power

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Part 5 Pride
July 28, 1961 was the last time I saw my real father – the father that every little boy fantasizes about; the powerful giant, the empowered, prideful man who can care and protect his family, not the one that took his place and showed up in Minneapolis on a cold November day in 1963, small, broken, sagging shoulders, downcast eyes, shuffling gait, off the plane.

Or was it my new perspective, skewed through challenges to my identity – much like falling through the looking glass and then learning that I wasn’t who I thought I was? The world turning upside down and inside out. Learning that I was a no-good, shiftless, stupid, greasy spic. Years of being told to let go of the notion that I was a good person, an honest, honorable person, a smart person...
who never had to think about his race. An identity now tainted with a foreign birthplace, exotic name, dark skin, lack of English skills. Then, a rearranged identity with a name taken away, the accent exterminated. There was one problem, the color of my skin. Unfortunately, there’s nothing to be done about that – I was marked as unredeemable.

Maybe that’s what my father divined causing him to shrink, splinter, sag, shuffle his way off the plane, uncertain. Is that terror in his eyes? This is not the man that put me on the “New Grand Haven”, Queen of the Florida Havana Railroad Car Ferry Line on that July day in La Habana. He and my mother took me to the harbor, late in the morning waiting until my turn came, stood in line with me looking at all the big people shrinking in the July heat, eyes cast down in shame as the gulls squawked in the bright sunlight and the immigration officials rummaged through our portable lives.

Hey, señora, my father said, “can you keep your eye on mi hijo? He’s only 10, travelling alone and he’s got to sleep on the deck of that ferry boat – please don’t let him fall overboard. If you can see your way clear to help him make the passage, here is a little something for your trouble”. Those were my father’s words to the lady behind us in line wanting to escape to los Estados Unidos on the “New Grand Haven”.

Five Post Meridiem – that’s the hour the ship slipped out of its berth, with the sun low, a birth in reverse, from Havana Harbor, squeezing out through the narrow canal between El Morro, the colonial Spanish Fort, and the beer vendor selling “Hatuey” beer on El Malecón de la Habana and into the Florida Straits. Yes, like the “Hatuey”, the Taíno chief, who escaped in a canoe with four hundred men, women and children, to warn the native people of the Caribbean about what to expect from the Spaniards. Too bad he couldn’t paddle all the way to the Bight of Benin then down to the Gulf of Guinea – to warn about another passage, the one in the middle. A passage that took the lives and
dignity of an uncountable number of men, women and children from the African continent.

There, near the Hatuey vendor, was a man dressed in charcoal slacks and a black and white checkered shirt that I knew so well, waving. “Adios hijo” – “good-bye papi”. Thinking, Will I ever see you again? “Por favor, come soon”, I say as you get smaller and smaller in the distance. I feel something growing inside of me – a monstrous fear of what’s to come and a deep sadness that makes it hard to breathe. I don’t know how long I can hold my breath. Will I ever see you again? Please, papi, please. What will happen to me? What if I fall overboard?

Overboard, I fell, into the big White Sea – first washed up in south Florida in 1961 where I was the only brown kid in what was still-segregated schools. Then in 1963 in Minneapolis in a school district where again I was the only kid of color. I didn’t know – really. I never knew that my skin had a color and much less that the brown color meant something. Listen, greasy spic, gotta janitor job for you; I’ll let you do my lawn too. What? You can play béisbol? Well, just so long as you know your place. “College, not for you”, crowed my high school counselor, “don’t forget I got that lawn job for you and if you don’t make trouble maybe I can slip you in on the assembly line where you can make a lot of overtime”.

The conflict came - I’m no lawn, janitor, assembly line man. I walked with shoulders back and eyes up. I’ve got other plans, other than letting you get your hands on my dignity, thanks. I already saw you take la dignidad de mis padres but you’re not getting mine. Other things are waiting. Don’t know what, don’t know how, nobody here that can tell me but I hear a voice inside– “get your name back, don’t quit and don’t let other people tell you who you are”. Sí, soy un rebelde, so I make my own definitions, chase my own dreams, pero la furia me ciega, so I traveled sightlessly through a thick fog of rage.
But this isn’t just about what’s ahead; it’s also about what came before. This is about my father and mother too. The ones that put me on the New Grand Haven in La Habana. The ones that would labor on the assembly line and dream that their hijo might too, daring to dream that their mulato might do better? They wished and feared better: wanting college for me, hoping college would keep me from being the lawn, janitor, assembly line man, fearing the undertow – the pull of the Great White Sea that bleaches and blinds.

Go far, not too far – we don’t want to lose you again to the Pedro Pan man – but the Pedro Pan man said, “Dreams do come true, if only we wish hard enough. You can have anything in life if you will sacrifice everything else for it.” From the call of the eternal child, there is no coming back. No reunion in Minneapolis brokered by a Congressman, church paid and sponsored. No official way to put it back - as it was - that’s final.

Sí, los sueños y sacrificios, dream and sacrifice everything else for it - the little house en Camaguey, the dusty panel truck, sanity, identity, all they knew, my father and mother gave it all up so that we could dream. ¿y el precio? What are you willing to pay? They were just beginning to realize when they showed up in Minneapolis to collect their children – María Eugenia, who at 6 years of age flew alone to Miami in ’62 to join the Pedro Pan dream y Avelino Alberto. But who showed up?

Two dead and two wounded. My father was a shell, my mother’s feet, living an escape, didn’t reach the ground. My sister, María Eugenia, and I were Alice in Wonderland bewildered and traumatized. This little tribe began the journey, living in a little house owned by the city of St. Louis Park, a house awaiting demolition. Supported by a local church my father bagged groceries at the Red Owl part-time, my mother didn’t sleep - working the night shift at SUPervalu. Avelino Alberto, soon to be named Al Nova, drifted further into the great White Sea
mainlining Béisbol and medicating with glazed doughnuts – losing the accent, learning remedial.

Soon my mother escaped into delusions, into the hospital, to be shocked back to life. The shell of my father drifted, further away – we didn’t talk except when I disloyally disappointed putting Huey Newton on my wall, this was Revolutionary Suicide, that Panther was Black. What would you expect from a brown college student in 1969 - democratic socialism, community interconnectedness and services for the poor, including free lunch programs and urban clinics, very radical, just like Fidel. This made the price real – “¿es eso lo que aprendes en la Universidad?”

Grew out my ‘fro, found me a raft, and drifted further out to Sea. Looking for something, maybe looking for me but found little, no land in sight. Gave up Béisbol, and drifted further out to Sea. Gave up on Cuban girls, Black and Jewish girls too, no, maybe one of these White chicas could take away the pain. Nothing there for me.

The genetic memory of so many passages, bringing my ancestors from north Africa to the Iberian Peninsula, driving Novoa’s, Magadan’s, Perez’s, and Egusquiza’s across the Atlantic to the new world and finally across the Florida Straits, screamed, “LEAVE!”, I listened – drifted more, had close encounters with impostors, some sold clothes, some farming equipment, some mowed lawns and cut trees, and, yes, got well acquainted with the flim-flam man who told me stories and wrote me poems to soothe my soul while I sunk deeper and deeper into the Great, White, Sea – drowsy, disoriented, bleached to translucency to everyone but me.

Flew to the Grand Canyon carried on Omega wings – was swallowed by the Canyon while dreaming by the Colorado River, delivered to “El mar de Cortés”. Found myself at the “Bahía de los Ángeles” watching the whales, talking to Jonah, remembering who I once thought I was. Jonah reminded me of Mr.
Sjolstrom, my eighth-grade remedial English teacher who in 1964 saw something that I had forgotten and submerged after many years of being bleached by the Great White Sea. Mr. Sjolstrom exulted, “Al, you’re a scholar”, slipping me a golden amulet, a talisman that awakened in me the dream of being a teacher, having the power of provoking aspirations.

Returning from my journey I encountered a rainmaker at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Hansen, without question or judgment, took time to offer a roadmap and hope that I could breathe life into what Mr. Sjolstrom had seen in me. This encounter put me on a transformational path. A path ultimately leading to a career in counseling and higher education but, more importantly, leading to a chance meeting with Beverly Mills who became my lifelong partner.

Beverly believed in me when all I could do was to suspend my disbelief. She charmed, soothed and loved me while reawakening a voice that whispered, “get your name back, believe in yourself, and be the author of your life story”.

She taught me to love while filling my head with crazy ideas like being able to achieve my dreams. I just had to wish, believe, and work hard enough. Back came Pedro Pan’s words - . . . “You can have anything in life if you will sacrifice everything else for it.” There was the catch, the “sacrifice everything else for it” bit. I thought that I’d already done that. What was there left to sacrifice?

Sacrificing the safety of living out the false Whiteness of being and the translucence of not being, for a start. Not quite Cuban, not quite American even though I had a piece of paper that said: “Naturalized”. I started small, reclaiming my name – vacating the name given to me on this side of the passage, instead calling myself by the name passed down to me by my grandfather and father - Avelino.

I wish I could say that it was as easy as that. There was no identity to adopt or even reclaim and much in me had changed, so I learned that it was much more
about becoming and less about reclaiming. Becoming, the second sacrifice, was about exorcising the demons of internalized racism and the corresponding self-hatred. My dear Beverly’s patience and kindness kept me tethered to the world. Her acceptance and urging to be my best-self served as invitations to mindfulness, giving me space to craft an identity and build a place for myself in the world, a world that exists somewhere between Camaguey and Minneapolis.

Beverly and I have been together for over forty years. I met her after struggling with a BA, she saw me through the MA and the PhD. I learned many lessons as I earned those letters. None as important as staying and loving, especially when it’s difficult. The most important lesson learned over those forty years was about choosing. Choosing how it was that I was going to show up in the lives of those who I cared about. It was a lesson gently and patiently taught to me by my dear Beverly - a lesson that has allowed me to participate in the life of our family and to rebuild a meaningful relationship with my parents.

During the last stage of my father’s life, the journey came full-circle. In 1991, I celebrated my fortieth birthday while living in Arizona, my father was 68 and still lived in Minnesota. The phone rang in our house in Flagstaff; my father’s voice came through. I thought, “that’s odd, he never calls, it’s always my mother who makes these birthday calls.” My first thoughts were that something happened to her – no, my father said, “Todo está bien. I just wanted to wish you a happy fortieth birthday. You know, I was your age when I came from Cuba” – the story telling began. He spent 19 years telling the stories, soothing and helping me make sense of what happened to us.

The last time that I saw my father, the father every adult man wants to know, was in his last days. He eased my sorrow by telling me the story of a priest who mentored him during his youth in Cuba. The priest fell critically ill, nearing death; he consoled my father by speaking of his readiness to take his final journey. That is how my father said his final good-bye. Telling me he was tired and ready to
make his final journey. I told him that I understood and by safely shepherding his little flock that he had fulfilled his duty. We hugged, he kissed me on the cheek and we said good-bye.

Ultimately, my father’s life was one of duty, loyalty, and redemption. Duty and loyalty to his parents and wife, while seeking redemption for the biggest mistake he’d ever made. Through the telling and retelling of the stories, he came to recognize and accept that the decision to separate our family in 1961 was the biggest mistake he’d ever made. He acknowledged that his decision had devastating effects on our family and regretted not having the wisdom to keep our family together.

Throwing María Eugenia y Avelino Alberto into the Great White Sea to save them had unintended consequences. Like the Pedro Pan man said, “you can have anything in life if you will sacrifice everything else for it.” Papi, todo salió bien, todo está perdonado.

_In the end, all turned out well, all is forgiven, we found each other again._

The Last Time I Saw my Father by Avelino Mills-Novoa is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International license. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode
It was a normal school day with the teacher teaching the class and me in the back of the class playing with blox. The air was stale and it smelt like a white board marker was left opened overnight. I was waiting for the class to end, watching the clock in hopes I would have the power to speed up time. That day would be different. My mom was coming to talk to my second grade teacher.

Time passed quickly while she wrote down symbols on the board that looked so alien to me while the class seemed to read it fluently. The bell rang and right on cue there was a screaming herd of children escaping to the wild unknown and the thrill to break free from the sterile white rooms. In just a few moments, quiet with no evidence of kids. The next thing I knew my mother was charging in, like a lioness protecting her cub (my mother was mad because I couldn’t read or do simple math, in fact they were alien to me). As she talked to the teacher I sat in shock.
Dyslexia disforia

Mom: "She can’t read. She can only write her name. She can’t even add. It’s your damn job to teach my kids!"

Teacher: “She’s active in the reading groups.”

Mom: “She knows those books, she’s reading from memory. She can’t read! Why don’t you do your job!”

Teacher: “I have 20 students, I don’t have time to specially teach one.”

I switched schools after that year. I wasn’t able to read, solve simple math problems. The only thing I could do in school was write my name. I was so excited to go to a new school because I would be a third grader.

Third grade was a hard and a happy year for me. It was the year I was given an IEP (Individual Education Plan). I have a learning disability called Dyslexia. Dyslexia is when the written language gets read, then interpreted differently in the brain. I have a hard time comprehending the words that I see. During third grade I was taken out of my classroom and went to a special ed class. This was done so I could learn basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. I felt so happy, warmth filled my body, and I was overcome with relief. Now I can say “I can read.” During the rest of my elementary years it was basically the same every day except I was getting better then I was before. I was reading more books, writing more assignments and adding numbers correctly. During my academic journey I came to believe that the education is based on ableism. The system is designed to fail children with learning challenges and learning disabilities.

I believe it mocks our progress and that little to no one cares. Teachers started calling out my learning disability as if it was some sort of flaw or disease that maybe somehow contagious. I was caught. Not between limits that the label already sets for me. The teachers may not have said, “You stupid retard! Why do
you think you’re so smart?” but their actions lead me to think they did. Test were
given verbally or I had read out loud.

I had determined I could comprehend the English language, but the Label I was
given never allowed me to prove that I have a brain and I could indeed use it. I
was so naive at that time in my life that I didn’t even notice how Teachers
treated me. I think they kept me in places that they thought was best for their
budget. Making it easier to dismiss me as a learner. I caught on, but not until
seventh grade the year when history was to repeat itself. Second grade all over
again except it would be much more sinister.

○

If you look up “dyslexia” in the New Oxford English Dictionary (which yes I can
read), this is what you find: “a general term for disorders that involve difficulty in
learning to read or interpret words, letters, and other symbols, but that do not
affect general intelligence.” My dyslexia means it’s hard for me to learn to read
or interpret words, symbols, and hearing syllables. My dyslexia does not mean
I’m stupid. Because I’m not stupid.

The words you read and the words I read are the same. But in my brain, it looks
different. Words are fuzzy. Almost as if the words are dancing. And sometimes
letters will jump around and take the place of other letters and sometimes
disappear altogether. The same thing happens with my writing. So there’s not
much point in worrying about the difference between “blox” and “blocks” or “its”
and “it’s” or “caught” and “ketch” and “ketched” - because as long as you can understand
me and I can be heard, these are not differences that really matter.

○

Seventh grade, I was nervous and excited at the same time about a new school
and new people. Nothing changed. I was still reading at a third grade level as a
seventh grader, a full four grades behind all the other kids. My seventh-grade school building stood three-stories tall and was made from bricks. The floor was a metallic, shiny, medium blue, and the building felt like an old asylum. The first floor was the activity floor, despite it feeling more like a morgue. Unaware of what psychological torture I would endure that year, I was optimistic about what the year would bring.

The first day of classes were great. Except I was taken out of my favorite subject, science, by my Special Ed teacher, who I would later learn to hate. It was during the second week of school when everything started to go bad. Especially between my English teacher and Special Ed teacher. I would never suspect someone to be so hateful to someone who just wants to be better than they already are.

During the year I developed two enemies, my English teacher and my Special Ed teacher. My Special Ed class, however, was nice, there was a warm aura about the decorations on the wall. The floor was carpeted and there were books everywhere neatly stacked as if someone with OCD organized them. I saw my Special Ed teacher as having a hatred against disabled children. I believed that the woman with short brown hair, had dead eyes that pierced my soul. At first I noticed when she glanced at me when I finished my work.

Like I had cheated somehow, when no one was around but me. Asking for harder things to work on seemed like I was talking to her in a different language I thought for sure she was reassuring me that I was to stupid. By getting harder material for me to do. I thought that I needed more practice with harder things in math. As if adding two plus two was hard, but it didn’t stop there. She began to challenge me in my reading as well. I thought it was impossible for me because of my label.

I was previously only allowed to read third grade material, how could I read at a higher level? “I mispell. I have a learning disability,” I told myself. The more I
acted like I had an actual functioning human brain, the more I thought she reassured me by her behavior that I was “just a dumb retard that is nothing more than a waste of space.” I felt that she encouraged the other students to join in on her Ableism discrimination comments. As time went on the comments got worse and so did my self esteem. I started to believe her words. In my head I knew I was just a dumb Dyslexic retard and my English teacher reinforced these views about myself.

I do not blame the teachers for anything nor do I hold anything against them. Whatever happened happened and there’s nothing they or I can do about it. I did have really good teachers though, during my academic career. And some that weren’t so good, but I will only be mentioning the bad ones to tell the story as best and as short as possible.

He was as cold as she was, except more open about his discrimination. He was tall, scrawny, and looked like your average peeping tom with eyes that showed no soul. Whenever he gave the class reading material it was always to hard for me to read and everytime I tried to get help waiting in line for my turn like I always do. I asked him for help because I couldn’t read big words in the textbook I explained that to him I have dyslexia and I couldn’t read it and I ask him for help.

Me: “Eric, I’m having problems reading this. Can you help me?”
Eric: “You can’t read it?”
Me: “No.”
Eric: “Have one of the other students help you? It’s not my fault you can’t read.”
That night I told my mother what happened; she was so furious and told me to call her when I was in English class so she could talk to him. The next day I was so excited that my mom was going to talk to him because she doesn’t like anyone discriminating her baby. I waited until the middle of class to call my mom and I handed the phone to my English teacher.

I didn’t hear what my mom said to him but I heard what he said as plain as day. Eric said: “I’m teaching the class as best as I can. It’s not my fault she can’t read! I have 30 students and I don’t have time to teach her!” It was in that sentence that everything became clear to me no one gave me the chance because no one ever believed I could learn. But the ridicule from teachers and special ed case workers never stopped there. High school would prove a victory and defeat.

High school was the time I was at my lowest, and felt like I would be better off dead so I wouldn’t be a burden anymore. I started out as a third grade reading level in the Read 180 course and had a Special Ed class. Most of the looks from the teachers never changed and never did the attitude that I would never be anything except a waste of space except one, Ms. Woodward. Over the span of two years I got significantly better and even passed into a high school reading level. I was so happy that Ms. Woodward believed I could do anything. Dr. Roth believed I could too. My Special Ed teacher and school social worker seemed so surprised that I did it, and the next year I would take the reading MCA. The year I was to take the reading MCA I practised playing spiro almost non stop, (a children’s video game where you have to read to find out that was the characters are saying). It was getting closer to testing time and my Special Ed teacher wanted a meeting with me and my mom. So the next day me and my mom went to the meeting.
Ms. Z: “So I wanted to talk about Alyssamarie and the MCA.”

Mom: “Yes Ms. Z.”

Ms. Z: “We can have the IEP cover her reading MCA since she won’t pass the test there’s no need on taking it.”

Time seemed to stop and the praise “since she won’t pass the test” kept reading in my ears like if it was a broken record playing I zoned out and everything seemed to blur. My heart started to pound, and a ball swelled up in my throat. I worked so hard for this. To be put down like if the years of work I did was for nothing. I hear my mother faintly calling my name and I finally came back to reality, and a whole conversation gone just like that. “do you want to take the MCA reading? You don’t have to, you’re old enough to make your own decisions.” Mom said. I said “Yes, I want to take the MCA.” In my head, there was a roaring conversation I will take the test and finally show them that I am intelligent. The days went by fast and it felt like the next day was the test.

I took all four days eight in the morning to four in the afternoon to do it the test. I was determined to pass and I was going to pass! The following week scores were in. Walking to my reading MCA prep class butterflies were flying in my stomach, stakes were high. I got even more scared walking up to the board to find my name putting my hand on the paper time seemed to slow as I went down to find my name Alyssamarie Hanson score 62, above average. My body froze in an instant and warmth came over me tears fell down my cheek. Did it I finally I now have proof.

How naive of me to think I was now going to be treated as an equal when all they saw when they looked at me was a dyslexic retard that will never amount to anything. The school’s social worker even accused me of cheating since I had such a high score.
Two more years passed by and I began to believe them again. It came close to graduation and I applied to Minneapolis College hoping I would get in since it was the only school I could afford. I wanted to tell Mr. S that I was 50+ credits over the required amount and I wanted to get a doctorate degree so I walked to his office. I sat on his office. I sat on a couch that had soft pillows where the couch swallowed part of your body. Talking to him telling him my academic dreams he told me something I would never forget or forgive.

I said: “I’m going to go to college and I’m going to work up to get my PhD in human services so I can help people.”

Mr. S: “You will never get a doctorate degree. Only smart people can do it, and you’ll never be accepted into college. You can’t make it, but have you looked into working for mcdonalds or burgerking?”

I was angry, and stormed out of his office, “I can’t” started repeating in my head and I felt hopeless like if the grim reaper sliced my reality into an endless nightmare. The hallway seemed to get smaller, and the air got thick. Is this the end after everything I did beating the odds? The posters on the wall seemed to point and laugh mocking me as I ran down a seemingly endless hallway to nothing. I told myself I’m going to have a PhD no matter who stands in my way with tears running a race down my cheek.

In 2014 is when I started my first semester and it was awesome but scary I didn’t know what to expect one of my dreams became reality. I spent the first two years adjusting to the new environment high school never prepared me for the amount of homework I would be doing. The second year I met Dr. Jay Williams and I was struggling with my dyslexia really bad i didn’t want to accept
the accommodations because I believed if I ignored my Dyslexia that it might go away and I just wanted to be normal and succeed like the other students.

He helped me accept my disability and embrace it of course my mother helped me at this time as well. She helped me with my reading when she could.

Also during my second year I met a person and we talked about how the disabled community did not have any space they belong in so we made a plan and i set in motion. I worked with Dr. Jay to come up with a name for my near club and we came up with people with disabilities for education and equity. It took about a year and a half to get it ratified. I had a club where everyone could be with no judgments. My third year was hard and I am working towards my human services degree so I can give other people hope in themselves.

With the help of Dr. Jay Williams and my mom I learned to accept my dyslexia. When i was younger in I never thought going to a college was even possible. I truly beat the odds starting high school with a third grade reading level now I’m in the third year of college and I will not stop until i have my PhD because I’ve always been fascinated with the chemicals transmitters and the nerilogical network of the brain. when I get my PhD I want to help people and want hopfuly give them ansowrns to the questions that they're seeking. I want to give them what few people never gave me hope. If you believe in yourself you can do anything, my mother taught me that.

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My sister Tori and our friends, Debbie, Linda, and I left Bemidji High School after school and walked downtown to go the stores that sold Levi jeans for girls. I was 15 years old. As we walked, I asked my friends where I could buy Levi jeans at the cheapest price. Downtown Bemidji had several stores to choose from and they said O’Meara’s was the coolest place to go.

“Right on,” I said. We were across the street from O’Meara’s, by the Chief movie theater, when Debbie and Linda grabbed my arm and said we couldn’t go in.

“Guys, what’s wrong? Why are you stopping me?” I asked. Linda said Shinnabs aren’t allowed to go in there. I was shocked and said “What do you mean, we can’t go in there?”

They both kind of chimed in at the same time with angst, warning, fear, and apprehension in their voices:
“They think Indians are dirty so they don’t let us try on clothes.”

“They stare at us until we leave, they follow us.”

“If we go in, pick out clothes, and go to the cashier, we simply don’t get served.”

“They don’t even want our money.”

What Debbie and Linda said was a song of differing emotions pouring out of them that shook me to the bone.

I looked at my friends dumbfounded while my blood began to boil. Thoughts like *I mean, man this is 1971* ran through my head. A feeling and memory from the past bubbled up inside of me like a volcano. A feeling of being excluded and shunned because of being mixed race overwhelmed me, igniting memories from 5th grade in Elgin, Minnesota. I was eleven-years-old, new to the school, and forced to sit alone on the bus because none of the kids would let me sit by them. I endured this for five months. To make matters even more painful, this shunning behavior continued in the classroom. Standing in front of O’Meara’s, at the age of fifteen, fueled with the courage of my eleven-year-old self, I did not want to feel powerless any longer. Like an erupting volcano, I blurted out: “We are normal, smart, fabulous girls, and I have ten dollars in my pocket and nobody is going to stop us.” In a second or two I moved from dumbfounded and shocked to courageous; maybe it was dumb adrenaline or youthful can-do spirit, but something was forever changed in me in that moment. I may have courageous due to the color of my skin. I did not want to pass and recognized that if I was by myself no shopkeeper would have realized I was part native and African American.

I put my arms into their arms like an embrace of four strong indigenous girls and said, “Buds, this is 1971. Have they not heard of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?”
We are going to bust them big time.” Debbie, Tori, and Linda smiled and nodded their heads in agreement as we held on to each other for strength and stormed into O’Meara’s. We tried on so many clothes we could not afford, but it did not matter because we were integrating Bemidji.

Flash forward many years later, similar feelings and memories of rejection and shunning came my way in an unexpected turn of events. It all began with a phone call about my identity after I had done some digging into my father’s maternal line of ancestors. There I was cold calling Charles Kemper, a man I believed was the descendent of a male Kemper who owned my great-grandmother Julia Foote. His sister, my aunt Lucille, had told me names—Alexander Dudley Kemper and Julia Foote—but no details. As a history major and cultural anthropologist I knew their timeline of living would have placed them in the time of slavery. However, no details that slavery was in our family history were ever mentioned. I had asked Aunt Lucille about it and she told me the family never talked about it.

The conversation went something like this after I learned I was talking to Charles’ wife, Mary Anne, after a bit of awkward pleasantries:

"I think I am related to you through Alexander Dudley Kemper. I have a delicate topic to talk to you about. Please don’t be offended but I also think your ancestors owned my ancestors."

"It is my husband Charles' family you are talking about. There is not an Alexander Dudley Kemper that I know of in my husband’s father’s family," came Mary Anne’s words. "But his mother's family, Watts, from a nearby town, had a different Kemper line and I know this part of his family owned slaves. I am certainly not offended and who is your ancestor?"
Mary Anne's positive voice kept me going so I went deeper. "My great-great-grandfather was Alexander Dudley Kemper and I think his slave wife was Julia Foote. What do you know of Alexander, Julia and his parents Martin and Rosanna? Is Charles a direct descendent of Martin as well?"

The ice was broken and our conversation flowed. I felt uncomfortable at first but felt the rightness of the need to connect with Mary Anne far outweighed my momentary feeling of unease. Mary Anne also sounded a little nervous but she was gracious and open in talking with me. I was astounded that she was not offended or ashamed of a family history entwined in slavery. We were both grateful that despite everything we were able to talk together, and by the end of that initial phone conversation, we both agreed to keep talking. We later shared email addresses and family photos; a new family connection was forged.

Our next step meant Mary Anne had to research the Kemper records to see what she could find about Alexander and Julia. She sent me copies of pages from the family's Kemper Book put together by a local historian. It listed ancestors all the way back to Germany. The Kempers were considered an old, distinguished Virginia family who arrived from Germany before the Revolution and made their mark in the colonies. The undistinguished part, for me, is that they took up slave holding while in Virginia and brought their slaves with them to Missouri in the 1830s. This was largely left out of the story except for the names of two slave women. I could not wait to talk about this with my cousins, Charles and Mary Anne.

As promised, Mary Anne interviewed family members and dug deeper into records. What she concluded is that Alexander never married and had no children as confirmed by the Kemper Book. There was talk that he had slave children but no one knew their names or the name of the mother. It felt like the end of the story! No information of Julia, no slave stories, nothing. I was so disappointed because I had my family story, physical evidence and that was not
good enough. Again I was feeling rejected and shunned because of race, only this time on behalf of my ancestors. My blood was boiling and I felt like was 11 and 15 years old all over again. How could the names that were passed down by my Aunt Lucille not be in the Kemper family history? What was I missing?

Fast forward once more to three years later and to improvements in online genealogy search engines. In January 2007, I realized that perhaps Alexander's name was misspelled. There was another clue found by my sister, a marriage record of our great-grandmother, Elbertha (the daughter of Alexander and the enslaved woman Julia Foote) but her maiden name was listed as "Redman" and not "Foote". We found it curious that the groom's name matched that of our great-grandfather: George Lewis. In the meantime, I had found Alexander in the 1850 and 1860 slave schedules owning enslaved people, so I figured he had to be in the same township in later censuses. The problem was that his name never popped up, so armed with the new marriage document, I decided to search every name in the township. Sure enough, I GOT LUCKY! I found A.D. Kemper in the 1880 census recorded as white and living in his household was Martha Redman, mulatto, and their four children, one of which was Elbertha, my great-grandmother. I finally had my proof! This census record and the marriage document were what I needed.

I reconnected with Mary Anne and she could not believe it. I sent her a copy of the record and she cross-referenced it with pages she found that had been left out of her husband’s copy of the Kemper Book. She learned that the family historian wrongly recorded Alexander in the book and that his true name was Ambrose Dudley Kemper! There it was, clear as day on those pages from the Kemper book:

"Ambrose. Unmarried. Lived with his parents until their death. After the death of his mother an old slave, ‘Aunt Martha,’ kept house for him. He is buried in the family cemetery on his father’s place."
This was my Alex Haley moment! The moment of connecting my great-great-grandmother Martha Redman to the family that owned her and their children. I felt such jubilation and confirmation! I felt my ancestors wanted me to uncover the truth. I can only imagine how horrible it must have been for my great-grandmother to be shunned by her family and then rejected. These were similar feelings I felt when I was younger; I no longer wanted to live in that space. I was free.

Could it be that Ambrose's siblings were outraged and behaved in the custom of the day to shun the mulatto children in his household? Did people talk? Ambrose had no children, it was even written in the family history book- what the Kemper family called the canon. They even misspelled his name. Did they mean white children by a white wife which would have been the standard and the requirement of the day in which Ambrose lived? It was known he had enslaved children, and I found a document that said he lived with the Negroes. What does that mean? Children born of an enslaved mother would not have counted as children, they were property. Yet, people do talk. An elder Kemper cousin told us that she had heard stories of Ambrose and Martha as a child but was warned not to talk about them because they brought shame to the family. The family was worried that people were talking about them.

Upon reflection I wanted to know... Did Ambrose and Martha love each other? How could it be love when slavery was at the core of their relationship? There was still so much more for me to research and learn. We do not know when the story of Ambrose and Martha began. Ambrose's parents and siblings moved to Missouri in 1835. Ambrose and Martha's first child of record was born in 1858 according to the 1860 US Census Slave Schedule when Martha was 30 years old and Ambrose was 52. Ambrose died in 1883 and Martha lived to the ripe old age of 91 in 1921 according to her obituary. It would take 119 years and four
generations forward for the families to reunite in person, in May 2007 to be exact.

I asked Mary Anne if she would mind a visit. The response was "Yes, do come," and the rest is history. In May 2007, Mary Anne, Charles, and my daughter Samira and I spent a lovely two days at their 100-plus-years-old home, finding the graves of Ambrose and his parents, visiting newly discovered cousins, having courageous conversations about our shared ancestors and coming to terms with slavery in 2007. The family told me that they believe Martha was buried near Ambrose at the edge of the family gravesite under one of the many unmarked stones on the property.

Over those two days, we shared our common fears and hope for the future. They recognized a struggle slave owners' descendants feel to deal with the guilt and shame of the past. They said to me that they never personally owned slaves, it happened in the past, and they accept it as a matter of fact. However true, the present is not the same for both sides. Descendants of the enslaved mother were robbed of reaping the benefits of the father. Charles, a descendant of a white woman, was the mayor of a town near the original plantation, and the land was still held in the family. The same cannot be said of my grandparents and their parents, there was no inheritance for Ambrose and his children. Instead, they were ashamed of being associated with slavery at all. It was never discussed. However, the family names were passed down. Aunt Lucille’s middle name was Elbertha! She hated it and never knew that it came from her own grandmother. My struggle has been trying to understand the complexities of my family’s story. No one from the past felt the need to keep the story. Their story died with them and their children. Did they purposely bury the story because people will talk? I felt robbed by the slavery system, racism, and the resulting Jim Crow conditions of the country. My family story was buried with the people who lived it.
The next year brought more joy and reconciliation. Unbeknownst to me, I had a Kemper cousin who knew about Ambrose and Martha and was always asking questions about them, much to the chagrin of her family. She was always searching for their descendants and believed we existed somewhere. The problem was that she continually hit brick walls as did I. Fortunately for us, Charles and Mary Anne connected me to Judia and we had a family reunion the next year with her siblings and another cousin descended from Ambrose and Martha. Charles and Mary Anne were not concerned if people would talk. I am forever grateful to them both for not shunning me and not keeping the truth buried. Charles recently has passed away and his memory will always be dear to my heart.

I was delighted to learn that Judia and I are kindred spirits in search of the truth. Our connection inspired a white male Kemper and a black male Kemper to take Ancestry.com DNA tests. At that point, I did not need the physical proof but was curious to learn of the outcome. The DNA results confirmed we all descend from the original great-great-great-grandparents Martin and Roseanna Kemper.

How could it be that several Kemper children and their descendants, black and white, continued to live in their community and did not know they were cousins? Did people not talk? Ambrose and Martha’s daughter Elbertha died young, only six years into her marriage. After her death, her husband and children left Lincoln County forever. It was so forever that my grandmother told her children, my dad, that it was unfortunate that her birth records could never be found because the county courthouse was burnt down.

When I visited Missouri again, with my mother keeping me company, I found that same courthouse, stately in design and still standing tall as it would have been when my grandmother was born. What didn’t she want me to find in her birth certificate or her past? What didn’t she want me to know about our heritage or our family? What was she hiding? Why was the truth so hard to bear
that she didn’t even want her own children to know? These questions still haunt me today and will always be a mystery.

Recently, we found new evidence of Julia Foote. A relative found a death certificate of Martha’s niece that stated Julia was Martha’s mother not Ambrose’s wife. Only the first name was listed. This was so curious to me. I wondered about Julia and why the generations were mixed up. What did my grandmother Gussie tell Aunt Lucille about her grandmother? Maybe Gussie didn’t have any stories about her mother because she died so young or she just made a mistake. This is another mystery. I am comforted to finally learn her place in my family.

The experiences and memories of my childhood and my youth galvanized me for the future. The courage I felt, the courage we gave each other, to confront racism in a store gave me the courage later in life to confront the racism that kept my Kemper family apart. I do not think I would have had the courage to go deeper into my family history, make cold calls to strangers, or make two visits to strangers to solve a family mystery that involved race. This experience reminds me why it has been important for me to stand up for myself and not hide from the truth. I may never solve the mystery that is Ambrose, Elbertha or my grandmother, but I will not be a passive member of my own history. My children and my grandchildren, my legacy, will know their place in history, and their story is counted.

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Part 6 Perseverance
I did it.
I’m a 2018 graduate of Minneapolis College. This is my story.

Well for me I always wanted to become a lawyer, but I allowed my family and friends and the streets to make that call for me. My senior year in school my mom had gotten very sick and my siblings was too busy doing their own thing. I was the youngest of four and my dad was working; my mom was semi-retired. Taking care of my mother fell on me, so I dropped out of school with only one semester left to do. I was planning on going back the following year.

Right before school was to start back up my friends wanted me to come out and hang out for a little while because I had been in the house all summer with my
mom. I said no, but my mom wanted me to go for a little while, so I did. But when I got back home my mother wasn’t home and I was calling around and looking around outside for neighbors to check with them to see if they knew anything. To my surprise my mother was in the hospital in the ICU. The ambulance had come and picked her up. So, you could only imagine how my heart dropped and how guilty I felt all over for leaving my mother to hang out with friends.

I didn’t allow myself to feel anything for a very long time because of the guilt of leaving my mom and her ending up in the hospital. I allowed myself to get pregnant because I was unhappy with myself. I stayed out there drinking and smoking because I was unhappy. I was doing a lot of weed, and I was drinking hard liquor. I was still functional and still able to work. I realized that I needed to do better for my son, so I enrolled in Twin Cities OIC, which is Summit Academy now, for word processing. That was in the late ‘80s. I did finish with a word processing certificate. I was working for awhile. I did accounts receivable.

The guilt of leaving my mom home for that brief amount of time has had a very lasting impact on how I viewed life, and how I dealt with life. A lot of my life choices came because of the guilt from leaving my mom alone. That is an achy, stabby feeling that has never left. I ended up moving out of my parent’s house with my son, but not too far away. We lived over North and I moved over South on 31st and Aldrich. I ended up getting a job at that SuperAmerica.

So, yeah, even then I was partying hard. In pre-school and school my son was starting to get in trouble. I probably would say I was hard on him. When he would get in trouble I would be strict because I wanted him to listen and do right. My son was very active and doctors wanted to put him on Ritalin. For years I didn’t let them. They fought to put him on Ritalin. When I finally let them he ended up being unfocused and foggy. He actually took himself off Ritalin
because he couldn’t focus on his sports. I thought being hard on him like our parents was on us was what he needed.

I was so fogged up from my drinking and drugging that when he was doing kid stuff I would take it to the extreme and act like he was doing bad stuff; I was trying to make my son do what he was supposed to be doing by knowing right from wrong. I was being a smart, dumb mother while trying to be a strict mother at the same time. I would put him to sleep and then go party. That went on for a long time, and then us girls who worked at SuperAmerica, we were playing hard, drinking hard, smoking a lot of weed. When the lottery came we would play all the scratch tickets, we’d buy them. The rules came in that you can’t play the scratch-off games on duty. We had it bad, but thankfully we were all good at our jobs. Eventually they split us up. We did a lot of partying. It was just like, well, my dad was a drinker. Now, I was a drinker.

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When I was a kid I always went everywhere with him. Back then you could take a kid into the bar, so I would go bar hopping with my dad. I grew up in bars, and that’s where my drinking came from. My dad always had the ability to stop doing whatever it was he was doing without any type of treatment. I got that from him.

My dad didn’t want me to go down the same path as my sister did. She’s the kind of young adult who thinks that she was better than the next one. Still, my sister did a lot of drinking and partying. Me and my sister did not get along growing up at all. She didn’t like our dad. She and our dad never really got along, which I never really got.

Me and my dad were close, because me and my mom did not have a close relationship. My mom preferred my sister and my youngest brother rather than me. I was afraid to talk to her about anything because she was sick all through
my life. I just really thought she was fragile and I couldn’t talk to her, where I was able to talk to my dad and my brother. My dad taught me a lot of stuff.

My dad’s drinking wasn’t all fun; particularly one incident had consequences. My dad didn’t drink at home. He came in one night drunk. He thought he was getting in bed with my mom, but he got in bed with me. And yeah, I got molested by my dad. It’s part of my walk. I can honestly say the molestation it was by accident, but it still happened. It was something that happened forty-something years ago. But I can say that me and my dad still had a relationship, and it wasn’t a bad relationship, we had a close relationship. Did he feel bad? Of course he felt bad.

It was one of those things I had to forgive and forget; I had to forgive my dad for what he did. As you get older you know that some of the things that have happened to you have some impact. I didn’t realize until decades later that it was why I was out there very sexually active. I had to forgive myself as well for what I allowed people to do to me and what I put my son through. That’s what I mean by my walk.

My come to Jesus moment is all about me forgiving myself and the people in my life for doing things to me, and me allowing them to do bad things to me. It’s all about a fight within to forgive and allowing myself to move on. Because you’ve got to allow yourself to move on.

People knew about it, but it wasn’t intentionally meant. We didn’t make it as no big deal. Did we deal with it? We dealt with it. For me, it was over. Of course, people had attitudes, but for me because I knew it was an accident I took it as an accident. It wasn’t an ongoing thing in our family. We didn’t make a big deal out of it. It never stayed on the forefront.
Growing up I had a little dog Tiger; he was an American Husky mix with wolf in him. He was ours as long as I could remember. My dog was about knee high on an adult. I called him little. I claimed him as mine, but I don’t know if my dad particularly bought him for me. He was my dog. And that dog was mean. He bit everybody on the block. People threatened to put him down. We didn’t allow them to fight Tiger. Tiger was just so magical, because no matter where we locked him up, he got out. And if people weren’t there they truly didn’t believe we locked him up, because they asked us to lock him up. Then, all of a sudden he’d just appear. People would go still. We were a family of magical dogs. They would all just get out. Tiger was very protective of us, but of me especially. He was shot once with a sawed-off shotgun. He came home, and my dad pet him and when he lifted his hands he saw blood. He took him to the vet where he survived and came home the following week. I loved my dog; I loved my baby. That’s my dog, and when he bit my best friend, I didn’t go see her at first in the hospital. When I did I kinda slunk in, and she said to me “Get in here,” and she fussed about the shots she had to get. I went to make sure she was alright. I didn’t stay long because she was watching The Three Stooges.

I started thinking about a better life, because I wanted one for my son. A few years after I first worked at SA I was working at Cub’s. My roommate and I agreed to split. I bought a house because I had already been down that road of selling weed, selling dope. My son grew up in the lifestyle of the fast life, and I didn’t want him to fall. I wanted him to stay in sports. So, I made myself stop smoking, and I stopped smoking. I went back to work. I got walking pneumonia, and the doctors told me I should have died. So that was the beginning of me wanting to get my life together. Everything was going fine for awhile and then the bottom fell out. My mom got sick again. My house was right by my parent’s house. They could see all the dumb stuff going on at my house. I was working and doing crack. So, my son started getting a little bit wild. He seen me down.
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There was now a day care in the neighborhood, and that brought in new laws. One morning after my son went off to school it got real quiet in the neighborhood.

I was sitting on the front porch with a friend. As soon as he left I went inside and started separating clothes to wash. There was a big bang on my door a few minutes later. Then my house got raided. And I was just like Wow. I was just off Newton and Golden Valley, just thank God my son wasn’t there because he could have gotten taken away from me. They didn’t find anything.

Two or three months later I woke up one night. I went to sit in my living room and as I was staring out I saw the devil on my wall. I woke up my son, and we walked down to my parent’s. I put him in my old bedroom, and I crawled into bed with my parents right in the middle of them.

I told them I didn’t want my house anymore. My mom asked me why, and I told them I saw the devil on my wall, and my father said, “It’s because you’ve got all those Niggers down there doing all that dumb shit.”

I said: “Dad I’m trying not to hear that right now.”

He said: “You don’t want to hear the truth.”

The reason I’m having to hear that now from him was that I didn’t listen to him years ago. At fourteen, my dad took me to Gem’s lounge down on Seventh Street across from First Ave. He had just got out of the hospital, and he wasn’t supposed to be driving. At that time my dad had took me to Gem’s because he wanted a drink, and he wanted to talk me. He told me to get my purse off the floor, “your purse don’t belong on the floor.” As I was growing up he taught me
how to act, and some valuable women’s lessons. He continued, he said “Mae Mae,” and then he asked “when are you going to stop smoking weed? You know that smoking weed can lead to other habits.” And I said I didn’t think I was ever going to stop smoking weed. I was fourteen. So that was the purpose of that trip, was to talk to me about smoking weed, because he knew I was taking the joints out of his wallet and sitting on the front step and smoking his joints on the front stairs.

I let the house go, brand new furniture and everything. I had literally seen the devil on my wall. I never went back. That’s when I found out I had walking pneumonia and arthritis throughout my whole body, rheumatoid, which made it so bad. My son stayed in his sports.

And then my sister had come up, she was living in Rochester. She was getting on my nerves. Yeah, so she and her man were sitting at the table and they’re drinking. She said, “Well, you lost your house.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, I gave up my house,” I shouted.

She just kept nitpicking back and forth to get me more agitated and irritated. It didn’t take much then. My mom tried to get us calmed down. It didn’t work. My brother and his wife lived next door and I cussed him out as well. The youngest son - my youngest brother - came home, and he and my sister were always close and tight, and he took her side. I cussed him out as well. Our front porch windows were open; we had all the doors open as well. I cussed everyone out, including my mom. I saw a car coming, it was my dad. He came flying out of that car. I think he got out of that car before the car stopped. He said I could hear you all the way on the next block.
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My dad hated a lot of noise. He was fussing, because of course my mouth is the biggest mouth. I started telling him what was going on in my loud, loud voice. And so, after I finished cussing everyone out, my dad told me I needed a breather. So I called my friend who couldn’t come get me. I got on the 5, and was so upset I took the wrong 5, which pissed me off even more. We smoked and drank all night. In the morning my friend took me back to my mom and dad’s house, and we celebrated my son’s sixteenth birthday. The next day me and my parents sat down to talk, but I had already made up my mind that I had to leave and give me and my family a break. So that’s when I moved to Florida.

I got fed up with my sister thinking that she knew things. I just got tired of no matter what my sister did wrong she came out smelling like roses. And no matter what I did I came up smelling like shit. It took me a long time to have a good relationship with my sister. It took me a long time to forgive myself for other things like having cussed my mom out.

Did I have a great life in Florida? Well, Florida was the first time I went to jail, so yes and no. I was living with my cousin and her husband, and their daughter. My manager and I were working on the good side of town at a convenience store and gas station. They transferred us without asking us to the bad side of town where the store needed to be cleaned up. The manager was in there smoking crack and stealing after shutting down early. We had to split the shifts until we hired new people. I was on nights. I got to know all the drug dealers, all the prostitutes, and when the police came from the good side of town to be undercover they would say shhhhh, but me, being from my background of selling drugs I was telling all the drug dealers and addicts that they were cops. I quickly earned the respect of everybody in that neighborhood even though I was new.
Then I kinda slid back into the game because I got to know everybody. The cousin of my boyfriend at the time set me up and I did go to jail. I said “Don’t bail me out.” Even though I was still working I’d started back drugging. I thought going to jail was a time to take a break. The purpose of me going to Florida was not for me to get caught up in the same mess as before. When I went to court and I got out, I did not go back to my cousin’s house. I stayed out on the streets, and then I called my cousin and told her I was tired.

“Are you really tired?” she asked.

“I’m really tired.” She said I had to get to her if I was really tired of the serious backsliding I was doing. She wasn’t going to come get me. If I were serious I would have to come to her. I walked six miles to her house in the good part of town. When I arrived my boyfriend pulled up and my cousin said to him, “Don’t you step on my driveway or I’m going to call the police.” Then her husband said, “No, if you step on my driveway I’m going to shoot you.” And then they left.

When we got in the house my cousin said to me, “Child, what have you done to yourself?” He told me to eat, take a shower, and go lay down. When I woke up she took me to my probation officer and I went back to jail for a month and a half.

After I got out, Hurricane Ivan hit Florida. I ended up working through a temp service for a couple of days. The first day I was a flag person. After a couple of days the people I was working for put me up in the tower with city workers and FEMA. I was doing paperwork, making sure the measurements, the numbers, were right. It was really simple work. After a couple of days, the company wanted to hire me straight out, which the temporary agency didn’t want them to do. So, I just never returned to the agency, because I had given the bossman my number. I became the secretary. I was still in the tower, but not in the tower. I was creating meetings, and sending people to job sites. When wives of workers
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came down, I became really close with them. They would say, “Yeah, crack that whip.” The wives were funny.

One of the gentlemen was from Slidell, and I had relatives there. He would talk about places I knew. That was a great experience for me. That was something I never expected, I mean, when you work through a temporary agency and you know it’s going to be a tough job, you don’t expect to get much out of it, and I went from being a flag person, to being in the tower, to being a secretary, to getting people jobs. The only thing similar I had was being on an assembly line, and I got to telling people they were doing it wrong. In less than a week’s time I was quality assurance person, and I had no idea what a quality assurance person did. Then my sister said to me “You know Marie, I’m very proud of you. You have the ability to get any job without going to college.” That was the only thing she said good to me before our parents died.

When I returned back from Florida my brother took me to Rochester and I got the resources I needed to get back on my feet. I was able to help my sister with her children. Then I came back to the Cities to help my cousin with his children because he was getting a divorce at the time. Helping my nieces and my little cousins gave me a second chance at being a mother again, because I had abandoned my son when I went to Florida because he didn’t want to go with. I felt that because I was helping my family out I started thinking about helping myself. I cannot and will not tell people to do things that I wouldn’t do myself. So I went to get my GED. I struggled with math and science, English some, a little bit too, but especially science and math. It took me three years. And then I took the test and I passed them and immediately after passing my GED courses I enrolled in college and I’ve been here ever since trying to be an example to my son, and my grandkids. My son never finished school. He was smart enough, but he had a chip on his shoulder, because of what people thought he was going to do and be.
I went back to school to be an inspiration to my son, and to help people. With my community development degree, and my human services degree my dream is to help people get back with their families from any kind of addiction. The 80s and crack cocaine and these opioids now, it’s hard for families to know how to receive a person back into the family once they’ve been out on the street. Addiction has got people living paycheck to paycheck and pillow to post. A family member doesn’t know how to go up and say “How are you allowing this to control your life?” The person who is in addiction doesn’t know how to go back and ask for emotional support. Before I went back to school I was on the board of directors of Aeon, which dealt on affordable living and working with them gave me a passion to help people with homelessness.

Graduating college was a real milestone for me because I think that my mom wanted me to go back to school and finish a long time before she died. Graduating was a way to honor my mother and myself, and to show my son and grandchildren that you can be successful no matter where you’ve been and what you’ve been through.

My Walk: Addiction and Return to Community by Marie A. Harris is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International license. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode
Was it the restless night of sleep, an eagerness which demanded the distraction of busy hands, perhaps the inevitable nostalgia that accompanies either moving day or the hangman’s noose—were any of these adequate explanations for my early arrival to the office that morning? Only in part, but the simpler truth is that embarrassment motivated me. I would certainly need to offer the academic vice-president, himself dean of the college, a seat on such an august occasion. Yet there was no room to accommodate his dignified presence amidst the raging sea storm of cluttered stacks, loose-leaf folders, and scattered papers whose hazard had overtaken the landing of my otherwise desolate isle.

Maybe he would see past the cacophony, even respect or celebrate it. Obviously the disarray was a calculated indicator of my diligent work over years of steadfast service to the institution. Even the dust-ridden window sills and
nooks between fastened encasements of shelves were colonized by yellow legal pads or scrawled scrolls posing as holy texts, sacred documents, and scripture awaiting the blessedness of publication. A genius of a mess indeed—just push aside any assignments; step around that pile of overdue library books; pay no attention to those antiquated grade sheets, but trust my stewardship in managing an academic program, its students and budget, as your newly tenured member of the faculty. It seemed like a hard sell to me at the time, so I elected instead to spend the next one hundred and twenty minutes in preparation, indeed no small task, getting ready for his knock upon the threshold of my future.

That day I chased time as would a boy who sought to catch the wind, a vain effort in reckless futility. The reach of such a task outran the dexterity residing in my grasp, and the lost seconds squandered across sedentary weeks of careless play went unfound. In a flash, as would rapids at tide, fleet-footed—the minutes vanished; like marbling on slow smoked brisket buried comfortably in a hickory filled oven, dripping fat while condensing flavor; or melted away, like moments counting down a New Year’s ball, the finish line or starting blocks for would be lover’s choreographed kiss. I was as furnished as any of us are at the hour of the much anticipated dinner party, when a doorbell rings to announce arrival of the first unsuspecting guest. But instead of a punctual rap upon my curtained office window, or that timer alerting the meat’s readiness to be eaten, the phone mounted upon my desk rang—five whole minutes sooner than the usual cue to chime “Auld Lang Syne.”

After a hasty lift from its base to the contrived perch, squeezed between my shoulder and ear, the receiver blared unapologetically: a voice, muted in temper and hue, yet bubbling the ceremonial sterility of a debt collector’s recording for quality assurance, informed me of the dean’s need to reschedule our meeting from a morning affair to the daytime’s close. Our initial time of gathering had been elected unanimously, his being the sole vote, from options he himself set
two days prior. Strange that he would trifle with the right and privilege of our free choice; moreover, principled exactness, decisive performance, and circumspect evaluation were hallmarks of his office. What to think? Was this last minute shuffle a character glitch or some discriminating maneuver? What choice did I have but to endure the wait? Eight additional hours until the much anticipated news conference—apparently he wanted to conclude our break from work on a savory note. Why else delay delivery of a parcel so exquisite?

Was the ground cleared out from beneath my feet sturdy enough to support my weight? Was it possible to remain at ease in the seat of such uncertainty? How would I occupy those intervening hours? No amount of tidying up and straightening out could compensate, or substitute, for suitable stuffing with which to fill that cavity. Staying put, to be swallowed in the belly of a wail from mourning’s gravitational pull, was not an option. Only motion could quell the nausea mounting out of my unstable confidence in terra firma.

The earth below was faltering, inadequate beams to shore up my stand for a restful place of study. But wandering abroad might satisfy a vagabond’s desire for safe haven or minimally offer a consolation; having journeyed beyond the world’s edge, happily to discover some bedrock underneath its precipice.

Nevertheless, when the fog of despair has clouded a shoreline of hope from view, the vast chasm of time refuses sacrifice to daydream’s future. Such a cruel deity could never be pleased with fanciful visions of island getaways, when imagination’s fabric has been unwoven by the astringent dye of second-guessing’s doubt. The wayward sea is mastered by the chronometer rather than nautical miles. Yes, Kronos devours his children and washes them down with a gulp of the oceans, making moments from memory, not molecules of water, the best measure for an infinite expanse. Time invited recollection: how did I end up here; why is this happening now; where went what wrong? Helpless leaps
bounding ahead required the watch willing to peer backwards, searching out retreats hiding unheeded forecasts of warning.

Like a duration occupying the space between either card swipe and credit approval or visit to clinic and results from test; like a wedding march down the aisle to pledge fidelity upon a lover proven unworthy; like a bus terminal lobby or gated airport runway braced by reports of indefinite mechanical difficulties, those many hours passed slowly. Though the hour of my judgment had finally arrived, my sentence to tarry was not commuted. Neither a harbinger of glad tidings nor an angel of death appeared on my doorstep; while the whirring clock wastefully refused to expire, no boundary fastening the elapse of its term. My eyes darted between the frosted glass, guarding my cloistered study from the notice of hallway traffic, and the crawlspace of light, tunneling shadow as well as motion across the underside of my gate-keep. But no form or figure announced its presence. What was this tardiness meant to convey?

Overtaken by a whirlwind—turbulent torrents and vexing perturbations—tentative tenets crashed aimlessly across slumbering assurances that nighttime would be restful. Yet there was no exit from the forward surge. My temples throbbed in concert with that beating certainty, a march dominated by cool frenzy. The push, swing, tock, ticking, hum, falling, back and forth hands of time revolving—it was a bitter sound to bear; whether I were on or off, having caught or missed, the last homebound train. Waiting there felt tight; water flowing was stuck in my throat, right there between a finished start of hands that swim with thoughts that drown. Why had the dean shown up ten minutes late to the most important meeting in my career as a professional academic?

What must have lasted several minutes I remember as taking only a few seconds, a day of life reduced to the eternity of a moment. Did he commend my valiant efforts to right the narrative of my teaching? Did he bemoan the acrimony of a committee divided into cliques and factions? Whatever he said before or
after, all was lost once he uttered: I’m sorry, Charles; the news isn’t good—you were denied tenure. Was it a lightning bolt strike from Olympian summits, tearing down upstart cathedrals with the fury of a forsaken god? Was it the cleansing flood of a tidal wave, a renaissance by catastrophe, like an adversary’s forearm sweep across the investment fund of a board game? Was it the cracking rip of a slugger made in Louisville, decked fast seams homeward bound to lofts never intended by a pitch? Perhaps, but no—it was more the signature combination of a seasoned prizefighter, schooling a neophyte’s chest and chin on the jab to hook and cross from uppercut of stinging wordplay. The devastating blows landed only to upend my seat and invite my disfigured countenance to sleep atop a pillowed canvas, the mattress covering my knockout ring. Down for the count, no standing eight would save the bell.

Whether I was hovering above, projecting slides on the flat screen of my remains, or buried deep, rewinding footage through the handfuls of dirt cast upon my grave—the dream has always been the same.

*Soon after the beginning, when Logos spoke breath across the face of the deep, separating earth from sky and distinguishing land from sea—sparks of light, laughter, and longing issued from division of the void.*

*Many rose to occupy the celestial realm, like sprinkles of dancing glitter or the glory revealed by crafted pinholes beaming through dark construction paper. Some elected to surrender; yielding to the magnetic pull of downward force, they inhabited the newly formed world, igniting as well as nourishing or animating it. But one fell through the tender topsoil crust, planting an explosion of roots beneath the domain of visible geography.*

*Surging outward while resting comfortably, the tentacles grew strong from their place of hiding; so much so, they gifted above the surface—trunk, limbs, foliage,*
and fruit for saplings. This original tree stood tall, mocking the size of creatures that crawl or swim and contesting capacity of the firmament’s dome.

There, suspended beyond terrestrial concern and bodily worry, cradled in branches framing a sacred grove for ritual and devotion, she and I reside—the sole daughter of tar and caramel wedded to the male heir of cinnamon and charcoal.

These children of night lay side by side, enraptured by divine yearning to taste the sunshine fruit of dawn’s promise, found buried deep and only recovered when self is lost in other.

Descending to an elevated place, the arc of the covenant traces the line running from the nape of her neck to the base of her spine. Constant in its fluid curve, the drawn horizon—parting day from night while joining fantasy with awakening—cascades across her shapely build.

My fingers fumble to clutch at her fullness. My chest faces her shoulders. Her arm drapes over my outer thigh. My hand wraps inside her leg’s crease which holds boundless the heart of springtime. The button of my belly falls into the sink of her back.

Like puzzle pieces locked in place, the feeling of fitting together reveals our own figure and dimension. Difference melts into unison, a merger of bodies in motion finding rest. Stillness anticipates the rupturing scream of passion silent no more.

Our forms coalesce while colliding, and the delicate thunder ushers in a cadence of quiet rain—soaking the roots whose strength upholds our lofty nest and mysterious bedding.

But the license of nocturnal wonder, that mystical daydreaming tree, ends felled by a siren’s wail; a crying scream (either of harpy or authority), blaring its dizzy sickness at the light of morning. It wants instead the shadow and weight of a mourning that arrives when midnight is wakeful. How dare joy come with the
dawn? No—this alarm clock shrill, a slingshot whistle revolving peril or the spin of circles tipsy on arms outstretched, announces vengeance against fanciful slumber.

Like the mounting dread of ambulance tracks and blue tongues that lash red lights as cops fire to the scene or a song drenched in whine, spoken to the womb of my mouth from lips tasting like confections made carefully by deceit—all harbingers of doom (confusing submission for surrender)—sirens rang out in my ears.

Was it a timer signaling the end of sugarplum vision’s restful dance, or a system of motion security protecting the grounds and interior dwelling—somehow disturbed unduly by alien inhabitants? A dutiful detector of smoke was, in fact, turned on; that is to say, aroused by the careless whimsy of a molten candle (too much at home on something barely borrowed), eating its way through the vinyl paneling of a first-rate plywood countertop.

But upon me it descended as a shriek, her maelstrom flooding the chambers and emptying the drawers of my thinking. I awoke wedged between a marble tub and a porcelain toilet, sandwiched with my hostess, a tall glass of whole milk (and yet translucent, veneering blue-web tributaries that circulate life to mounds of comfort). Mounted from above, she devoured me, bewitching my taste for sense with the incessant flow of her chardonnay waters. A course drapery against the temples of my face, her weighty knotted curls swayed in rhythm to her bass dropping (archer back), bottom falling upon me, again and again.

Traveling across the national road, westward bound from the Ohio and Indiana border—we rushed through Centerville, Knightstown, Greenfield, and Cumberland, cruising to the motor speedway. Sixty-five north led us past Zionsville, Lebanon, Frankfort, and Lafayette; as we hurried to Gary, but for the sake of establishing our proximity to Joliet, Aurora, and then Elgin—under the
overpass where ninety becomes ninety-four, near Janesville and just south of Madison.

She had promised a lakeside destination. That friend of a removed relative’s neighbor owns a cabin on loan to us for the night. Until then, I had never slept in the Badger State. I was stirred from my slumbering fantasy by a lullaby. I found myself lodged, middling somewhere in Wisconsin, a fiery dart parting the seam of my lips. Spit to my mouth (drowning response in the choke of her tongue), she whispered me a delicious cruelty: *everyone has a dream, a wish upon a shooting star or quest after an intoxicating idea; and though you are not mine, I am nonetheless perfectly satisfied with you still.* Her serenade punctured concealment in costume—masking my eyes open, shattered waking illusion.

After speaking such, when interviewed later (the interstate highway from Waunakee past Tomah), she claimed sarcasm; saying that in reality it was how she perceived my true feelings toward her. (In route to Eau Claire followed by Menomonie), to feel both worthless and then immediately guilty so closely together they appear simultaneous, perhaps identical—why was I the special object of her profoundly gracious contempt? (And even farther Lake Elmo), all these exits in Wisconsin, she uttered her previous preference again: co-op canned goods stationed in the—B and D—broken and damaged aisle, like a favorite catch from the local rescue shelter. Ninety-four, to travel with her, was a tempest of the silent road.

There is an unbridgeable gulf, an insatiable gap, between the transcendental and phenomenal realms—an inseparable space distancing alleged archetype from incarnation of beloved. I had fallen to such a hole, and she was an avid dumpster diver. What becomes of a goal when purpose is supplanted by immediacy? Only illusion’s cloak—the make believe of love—could redeem our exposed nakedness, camouflage and sabotage alright to buy. What happens to resolve when nursed by indecision? She, however, left before getting here;
escaped sooner than conviction, never arriving with me. Forlorn by land in the whirl of ten thousand lakes, our last stop was the Twin Cities.

Wayside discarded, there I was (life inside folders, boxes, and wardrobes; experience in stacks of wilted papers or talks piled high of expectation), alone for all to see. Believing eyes are truly the windows, or mirrors, of a soul, how would the marble gaze of Minnesota Nice reflect the substance and shadow of my sable body? Immersing myself in the baptismal waters of the finest Nordic alabaster (a treacherous wading pool indeed), perhaps ill-suited for the specific gravity of obsidian—my search emerged to a discovery of three categories of vision.

I first encountered an impatient point of reference, a view whose troubled attention was hurried, busy with matters weightier or less cumbersome than myself. *These eyes never stay still.* They dart back and forth yet always to skew, seeing everything except what’s in their way; I directly in their path averted. This active ignorance is an intentional blindness. I go unheard by being made invisible. This gaze of disregard suggests: its time would be better spent elsewhere; what profit but peril could come from sharing an exchange with me? These aversive eyes inaudibly clamor: we would be better served by greeting that pet on a leash than to acknowledge the conspicuous presence of humanity accompanying it.

I next encountered a disarmingly unaffected smile of indifference, bemused by its own charm and guilty need for self-approval. *These eyes never stay closed.* They gain pride or purchase stature from such vigilant awareness. But these eyes require daily doses of color stimulation; like the plumage adorning a well-balanced dinner plate, the feast of a clarion messenger is needed to justify their wakefulness. Their upturned lids and corresponding twinkle of recognition, a call to comfort rather than a siren for arms, express delight at contact. However this failure to deny falls short of success at embracing my mahogany frame. Making
the penance of an invitation which hopes to go unaccepted or the winning promise of a lottery whose blueprint plans for forfeiture and bankruptcy, this gaze of welcome conceals an unmistakable sign—do not disturb. These chatty eyes speak but to hear themselves congratulated: we were enriched by that experience; allowed to prove our worth (or exorcise that stye), we have such gratitude for usefulness; assuredly the finest fellow, though we never cared to catch a name.

I lastly encountered an uncompromisingly scornful leer of indignation and disbelief; looks that attack while blocking, fielding a force of indictment through UV protective lenses, blotting out this son of night by command or retreat. These eyes never stay dry. They shower and glisten from tear ducts flowing antipathy, incendiary beams glaring revulsion for dark meat. No simple frown, but rather insecurity giftwrapped in aggression masking as contempt, such piercing distaste can be read from well-defined lines running smoothly across the billboard of a furrowed brow. Over the shoulder glances while turning around corners, as doors held open slam shut—these eyes, and their blinking lashes, lacerate deeply. Or downward stares ascending from boisterous coffee shop racket and lunchroom uproar, resuming as hushed whispers for the duration of my stay in view—these eyes, and their stigmatizing retinas, sting sharply. These toxic eyes scream for the sake of spreading their quizzical disquiet: we are sickened, allergic to a pigment so offensive; how dare this invader, contaminate our place of belonging; were the foreigner elsewhere, we would certainly feel more comfortable; and until such departure or quarantine, we are contented only to share the gift of our displeasure, so please enjoy.

The call for work did not come quickly. Many months passed before an interview was scheduled. Only after several rounds of recycling some dear John or ask Abby, message in a bottle type letter of introduction, a respondent irritated with
both a frequency and generality of my correspondence saw fit to share the recurring annoyance.

Seemingly my well-tempered rejoinder led to the invitation for this meeting—imagine a lease that can be terminated without cause, or think of it as a perpetual part-time position. We require your investment, but you can expect no dividend. It is an adjunct’s dilemma: the predicament of being a provisional or contingent member of the corporate body, permanently disposable. And yet there is an interminable need to convince the group that you’re absolutely indispensable; while never forgetting how utterly replaceable, you are (a paradox of disbelief) between the tub and the toilet—without any legitimate standing in a community but relying on its fund of accumulated trust. So what do you think; asked my soon to be next, ex-boss or almost former academic dean. Smiling wryly, I replied: sounds promising—maybe there’s a future for me as an adjunct?

Vagabond Wonders: This Life’s Chapter of Swirl and Gratitude by Charles H. Watson, III is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International license. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode
A small, round, copper coin, with the face of former President, good ole Ab determined my destiny and my destination. Heads Minnesota ... tails Wisconsin. I didn’t know where I was going to go when I got there, but I knew I had to leave where I was at. And I had to leave soon. I didn’t want to leave, but I was left with no choice. I was separated from my long-term boyfriend and had three minor children to care for. Frustrated was beyond my feelings and anger was almost an understatement. As I sat on the air mattress in the living room looking around at the cracked walls, cluttered corners, mice running around like pets, picturing the ceiling that has completely caved in where my children’s room was once. No running hot water, no electricity, no heat. Winter was here and plastic on the windows wasn’t enough. Having to sleep with extra clothes on just to stay warm.

I knew I couldn’t take living in these conditions anymore. I closed my eyes and took a leap at what my fate would be. Up went the coin, as it left the center of
my palm, as I waited for it to land on the dusty, wooden floor. In my mind that toss seemed like it took forever but my eyes soon came face to face with my reality. Heads won and Minnesota was soon to be my destination. I was home alone. My children were gone with a family friend. The reality of my life, became the scariest moment in my life. All I knew was Chicago. I never lived anywhere else. This is where most of my family and all friends are.

Questions of fear and uncertainty started to really kick in. How was I going to make it as a single mother with three children? Who would help me? Who would help us? Where are we going to live? I sat on that air mattress with my body hunched in closely and I cried. I cried for my children. I cried for my circumstances. I cried for myself. For the first time in a long time I felt alone and helpless. But through all my thoughts and fears I sucked it up. I was raised to be strong, independent, and I thank my parents and grandfather for that. I had to do something better for the lives of my children and myself.

I knew once my decision was made I was leaving in no more than a week. Crazy as it sounds, once I cleared my face and washed away my dried tears with my wet cloth. I started packing. I knew I wanted to pack light because I didn't know where I was going to end up at. So, I packed one bookbag each for my three children, myself, and a diaper bag for my baby girl. Everything else that was worth anything I prepared to sell for extra money. It took me a day to go upstairs to the second-floor apartment and tell my father my decision.

I wasn't sure how he was going to take it. When I did tell him, surprisingly he thought it was a great move for us though he had his daddy and grandpa worries. He gave me his blessings which made the transition easier to plan. I told my children later that night. My two oldest were ten and thirteen years old at the time and my youngest was six months old. Outside of friends and some family they mentioned they would miss, they were actually okay with my decision as well. Now I had the blessings of my children. I started looking into
transportation that would get us to Minnesota. In a few days, I financially hustled up more than what I felt was enough to get by in any situation. That night I bought four one-way tickets for the Megabus online.

Three days since I made my decision to finally leave Chicago with hopes for a better future. Four days left before we were to depart. It was the Thanksgiving holiday week so I bought our tickets to depart the day after Thanksgiving 2012. My children and I spent those last four days with close family and friends. There was lots of laughter, plenty of food, an abundance of pictures taken and enough tears to fill up a pool. We had fun and we left with many more memories.

Mid-evening that day, my children and I boarded the Megabus leaving from downtown Chicago heading to Minneapolis, Minnesota. An eight-hour bus ride that seemed like months. As my children slept I was cool at first, but then my brain got to rattling. I got to thinking and again became worried. It's the beginning of winter and I am on this bus to I don't know where really with three young children, four bags, a wallet full of money and no specific destination. What the hell am I doing? I wanted to turn around and go back to Chicago.

I started biting my nails because when my nerves got bad that's what I tended to do to comfort myself. I eventually calmed down and did some deep breaths. I looked at my sleeping babies and said to myself, you got this mommy. I cried myself to sleep for the rest of the ride. When we arrived in Minneapolis and unloaded our belongings. I asked to be directed to the closest hospital or police station. I was told Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC) by the driver of the bus was the closest hospital that he knew of. He instructed me on directions and off my children and I walked. I had my sleepy baby strapped on to the front of me as I carried my book bag and her diaper bag. We walked for what seemed like about six or seven blocks before we reached the hospital.
Once at HCMC we entered through the double sliding doors and walked up to a small desk where a security guard was posted at. I explained to him that my children and I are homeless and we just arrived here from Chicago on the Megabus. He directed me to an office across the way from him. I looked at the label in the wall next to the door and it read Human Services Worker. I knocked on the door and the soft voice of a woman said to enter. She spoke kindly and gently. She offered us a seat and ask how she could help us. I explained her as I did to the security guard and that my children and I were looking for safe and stable housing.

She told me that there was no shelter available for families who had other housing options and that she would have to write us a bus ticket back to Chicago. I sat in that seat stuck and numb. Then I looked at my children. My oldest children knew we could be sent back. I saw the confusion and fear in their eyes. Home wasn't home anymore and it wasn't safe were my thoughts. I looked at the woman and I pleaded with her to help us. I gave her great detail of how the home was that we left. That it was no longer livable and that we were pretty much squatters in our home. I explained to her how children are being gun downed and my children are burying more of their friends in a year than I have my entire life.

My story gave her a change of heart. She told me that if I could confirm my conditions she would find us shelter. Now in my mind I'm like, how do I do that? She continues by telling me I have to call my father right now and he has to confirm everything I said without me talking to him. If all is true she will place us in a shelter. I called my father the first time and he did not answer. I knew it was because he didn't recognize the number and my phone was dead. So, I attempted to call him a second time. Again, no answer. I got a little nervous but I called one last time and he still didn't answer. Damn it!! I screamed internally. I
just started crying because I felt hopeless again. I don't like to cry in front of my children but that really broke me at that moment. One more ring and daddy picked up. A big relief was set off my shoulders.

After speaking with my father, the worker granted us a temporary voucher for the night to stay at the family shelter in downtown Minneapolis. She gave me a checklist of the things I needed to prepare and to do once I got up and out that morning to start my journey of being successful in Minnesota. We got to the shelter and they had us sit in this room behind the security desks. After a while a lady came and guided me and the children to another room behind the main desk area. She asked a few questions about what our needs were and broke down the rules and expectations of the families and staff. They gave us hygienic supplies, blankets and the key to the room in which we would have been staying. My babies and I didn't get much sleep.

I got up early that morning, got the children dressed and we headed out to the county building to continue the process to stay in the shelter. When we got there, so many families were sitting and standing waiting to either be placed in shelter or to revoucher the shelter they were already staying in. Honestly, it was swift for us and moved along pretty smoothly. In one day, I received a voucher to stay at the shelter for 2 weeks before I needed to return and meet with the team for the shelter again. They also supplied me a list of resources available throughout the twin cities and a monthly bus card to get around since I didn’t have a vehicle. Afterwards, my children and I soon returned to the shelter. I then got my oldest two registered for school and my baby girl signed up for childcare within the shelter. Everything seemed to be going very well for us. We were settling into Minnesota and progressing in our new home state. That night we all got settled in for a good night’s sleep. The next day was officially our first beginning of everything.
After getting my two oldest to their bus stop in front of the shelter, which was very convenient and dropping off my baby girl to the daycare, I left out to seek employment. In just two days after applying around the mall I ended up getting hired for a retail job. Things just couldn't have gotten any better than they were at that point. My children were all well and taken care of. I finally grabbed a gig, with good pay too. I started to really feel like, I did it. I'm making a way out of nothing. Life handed me lemons and I seemed to have made some good lemonade from them. I eventually became acquainted with some ladies and their families in the shelter. It came in very handy as my job got more demanding with hours and their need for my presence. So, I finally had some extra help, though I really knew none of them. But how else is someone supposed to make it? I'm somewhere new and I was at a point where I started to need support to help with my children in order to keep my job.

Everything was on point by now. I was ready to look for a place to officially call home. The county signed me up with a county worker to further assist in finding a place to live and helping us with any financial assistance. I soon found a place to move into that the county approved based off my income. I couldn't believe it. I had got from Chicago to Minnesota, got my babies and myself placed in a shelter to avoid being on the street. Obtained school and childcare for my children. Gained employment and all this in three months in a place I had never been to a day in my life. Can we say I was very proud of myself? Yes, I was.

My county worker approved my employment and gave me the okay to sign my lease. To gain those keys was a great accomplishment. It started my babies and I first initial mark here. The first night we moved in, the shelter had to help us with two cabs because over the course of those three months we had gain so much from different vouchers and random freebies. We definitely had more than
Out With the Old, In With the New

those few bags we originally came here with. Life was going so good. Children stabled, I was stabled and my boyfriend and I had mended our relationship. He eventually came to join us.

After being in our new place not even a week we noticed some things that were going wrong with the apartment. We were residing on the Northside of Minneapolis. The neighborhood was very quiet and nice but I soon found out that my landlords were slumlords. Anything, and I mean anything that went wrong with the apartment was always a debate with them. They would try to fault me for things they never really tacked together correctly. Then my neighbor downstairs was just as bad. She complained about everything and anything to the landlords, which made it even more complicated living there. We held out though until the end of the lease.

Once deciding that we were not going to renew the lease and continue to reside there we started looking into other apartments to move to. My oldest two had left to Chicago for their Summer vacations. I just knew that they would return to a new home. Unfortunately, we weren't able to find anything within our budget and transportation needs. So, I was forced to go back to Chicago because I didn’t know where else to go at the time and I didn’t want to cut my children's summer trip short just to go back into the shelter. My boyfriend stayed here at a man's shelter and I returned to Chicago at the end of the Summer with my baby girl.

So, it was official I was back in Chicago. Not where I planned to be let alone stay again. I moved in for a minute with father and then eventually with my God-sister. Living with my sister was great. We get along very well and we have a balance with each other that I have with none of my other siblings. Existing in Chicago was one thing, but living and recreating a life was harder. Work wasn't of the abundance like it was in Minneapolis. Daycare seemed harder to come
across without some sort of income or government assistance because everyone I knew worked, went to school or was just too busy to dedicate time to helping. My oldest child started her first year of high school and my son was residing with his father in the further suburbs from the city. Not including being separated from boyfriend by eight hours. I started to feel lonely and like I wasn't going to get much accomplished here like I had started in Minneapolis.

I had a nice talk with my boyfriend about returning back to Minneapolis sooner than we had talked about. I was ready to give my once new home a second chance. We agreed on a date for the children and I to return back. We didn’t have much time with anyone before we left because I was just so ready to go. I love Chicago, it’s my original home, it was all I really knew as far as somewhere to live. But Minnesota had grew to be so attractive to me, I just had to go back. Once again back to the eight hours Megabus ride during the winter of November 2013. The first night we all reunited and stayed at a hotel because the children and I got in so late. The next morning we went into the county building downtown in Minneapolis and registered our family for sheltering services.

My boyfriend and I had agreed to a mutual understanding. Since he was already working, I would return back to school to finish my Associates degree in Criminal Law. I started to seek out colleges that were closest to the shelter we were staying in and Minneapolis Community and Technical College (Minneapolis College) was the closest one to us. The next business day I went to start my registration for the next incoming semester, Spring 2014. College was always a goal for me in life since I was about 9 years old when I just knew I was going to be an Architect. But as I grew up, I really wanted to study Criminal Law and Education. So I went in to register as an Education major because the Criminal Law program I had taken at my previous college wasn't the same at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (Minneapolis College).
Before I even had children, I always wanted to be an example of what a successful college graduate was. Now that I am a parent of three, I felt an even harder desire to be a successful college graduate to be an example to my own children. I’ve always wanted more and I’ve always wanted to be successful and accomplish all the great experiences and wonders of life. College was calling me once again and I jumped back on the bandwagon. I was so proud of myself, returning back to the college life, though I’m no traditional student. But to be honest, I may be part of the new generation traditional college student. It seems lately more people over 25 years old are returning to or finally signing up for college than your traditionally known 17-19 year old.

My first semester was making me nervous because I had many personal issues going on outside of my college life. I wasn’t sure if I would be able to balance life and school at first. Off campus was chaotic, but on campus was so humbling. I had wonderful professors during my first semester and I met some the most supportive people during that semester as well. It definitely helped with the completion of my first college semester at Minneapolis College. I ended my Spring semester with a 3.9 GPA, Dean’s List acknowledgement and was referred to the Learning Center to become a writing tutor for my fellow college peers. At that point in my life, I knew the impossible could be encountered and defeated. I continued my college journey up until Spring 2017. Life challenges soon became too much to handle and still manage to uphold stability in my class work. I became overwhelmed and felt that my support had somewhat decreased, though I still had many trying to be there for me and encouraging me to keep my head up.

I stopped college because of financial and personal experiences that just became too much to bear. It took me over a year to get my groove back as well as mentally and emotionally bring myself back to that woman who has always had completing college as her goal. We are now in 2018 and I’m getting back to it. I am going to and I will with certainty complete my college degree. Right now
I’m currently getting my Associates in Liberal Arts which will eventually help me to transfer into a Bachelors program and gain my degree in Forensic Psychology. Others have showed great faith in me which in turn has pushed me to have more faith in myself. Minneapolis College gave me a new home in a new state. AME, The African American Education and Empowerment was and still is a part of my on campus support. I thank all of my professors who have been understanding and giving me chances to get work completed when life wasn’t at its greatest.

The journey from Chicago to Minneapolis was one of the greatest decisions I have ever made in my life. I wouldn’t change anything about what led me here, led me back to Chicago and then back here again. Everything was an experience in its own right at the right times. Even when I didn’t agree with the times. I have grown and I’m still growing. I have learned and I am still learning. College is my journey that I’m still working on accomplishing and the day shall come that I will get there. But for now, just getting my foot back in the door is the best start.

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Part 7 Power
Over the lion’s share of the last century, the commonly held stereotypes of African Americans rather quickly transformed from images rooted in rural Southern agrarian settings to those revolving around thuggery and gangs often sketched out upon Northern urban blight. As explored in the seminal work of Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages*, these stereotypes, meanings applied to us based upon our bodies, constrict and obscure authentic presentations of self.

My personal narrative fails to venture far from this dynamic. Born in suburban Maryland, but returning to the rural Minnesota of my maternal line before maturing to the point of imprinting permanent memory, it is in Hutchinson, Minnesota, that I first begin, at too early an age, to understand the meaning of difference.

Before I could read, write, speak, or really represent myself in any fashion beyond the infantile cries of babes, the job was done for me. Jettisoning my
Maryland birth, and half of my lineage, the Hutchinson Leader ran a story with the headline Black Baby Born in Hutchinson. The accompanying photograph depicted my grandmother, who only existed herself because of the vestiges of sororate marriage amongst late 19th century Swedish émigrés, clutching me like an oversized football.

I contributed very little to what story would be told about my birth. Neither the geographic lie, nor the label of Black Baby, would prevent me from finding myself and becoming Jay, Big Jay, and finally Dr. Jay, but the story did function as an effective harbinger for what was to come. The meanings embedded in the label had little to nothing to do with the understandings of blackness my father and others imparted to me, but nonetheless remained saliently impactful across my life.

My initial decade would include stints living on the coasts but predominately played out in a growing farm town in the Upper Midwest. Being Black, a label important enough to make my birth newsworthy by local standards, would crucially impact my development and experiences.

The simplest way to explain the decade spent, before moving to the metropolitan area, is that I was a child with an asterisk. I couldn’t see it in the mirror, but it never faded, it was ever-present. It lived in the questions about me floating between adults on the edge of earshot, and in the awkward questions of other children, and seemed to be visible at about twenty paces.

Aware that explanations for my presence, if not existence, were often inquired after my physical arrival, it would not be long before I recognized that I was different. I was Black, and my presence was a concern. Many treated me better than the other children around me, seemingly inquisitive about my nature, and/or compensating for something a child yet to reach a realization of what race is in America couldn’t even guess at. Others treated me more poorly than the
Swedish, Norwegian, Irish, German, or Czech and Polish children if we drove one town over to visit friends or family (who Grandma called Bohemians).

During the junctures of life when I recognized sex but not yet race, this asterisk tended to disappear in the confines of the home, surrounded by immediate family, loved ones, and close friends.

As all childhood innocence does, this naivety would shatter, upon the pre-adolescent bite from the American Apple of Original Sin, knowledge of race. The love and laughs, doting and discipline would continue as the years passed and I played upon my grandma’s green shag carpet. She spoiled me with cookies, abundantly stuffed into coffee cans, cursive writing on the labels of masking tape atop their red plastic lids, butterscotch, chocolate chip, pecan. On occasion she would also reach to the edge of the stove, extract an oversized wooden spoon, and reinforce our family values by vigorously and repeatedly applying said spoon to my ass.

Luckily the spoons never lasted too long. Shattering against my backside, their breaking announced the end of punishment as Grandma Mable didn’t have it in her to strike me with a slivery jagged spoon handle. Grandma’s love filled most days with joy and the type of acceptance not found easily in this world, and shielded my brother and I from the socioeconomic roller coaster of our youth that emerged during our parents’ divorce, my father’s brief incarceration, and my mother’s scramble to transition from house wife to professional.

Initially, I slept next to Grandma Mabel in her double bed, my brother Justin next to us on a folding cot. Eventually we added a twin bed for me (it would later move to a long narrow sewing porch), creating a row of sleeping furniture arrayed in front of Grandma’s Zenith television set atop her dresser. A long extension cord allowed her to switch the set off after Johnny Carson’s Tonight Show ended. The nights she fell asleep before the show ended we would
awaken to the visual static on the screen as the network was on its nightly hiatus. As an early riser she permitted none to linger in bed. 

If perturbed, pithy and profane words rushed us into our clothes and to the kitchen table, a breeze compared to the middle of the night get out of bed bats are in the house drill. In Grandma’s kitchen, electric light lit the pitch black of Minnesota winter mornings and we conducted our weekday study hall. Justin and I pushed to memorize our daily scripture. Grandma rotated between the stove where she prepared multiple proteins for breakfast and the kitchen table where she assisted us through recital or math or spelling homework, occasionally sipping her egg coffee. 

Grandma Mabel’s colorful language and fiery demeanor was atypical for her family, most notably in contrast with her lifelong companion and sister Hazel who embodied the quiet stoicism and modesty typical of the Swedish stereotype, or her brothers who spoke so infrequently I have trouble attributing speech to them in my memories. My grandmother constantly urged us to be grateful and her disposition was put to genius application when motivation was needed to mow the lawn behind her one-bedroom home (two when the attic was finished), pick up sticks, or rake the yard. 

Most days after school, neighbor children like the McClure boys would come by for the cookies she baked. Her adult friends and reverend would stop to visit, chat, and dunk cookies in their egg coffee. I never remember the topic of race being directly addressed in these conversations, even when her friend from Hawaii, much darker in complexion than my brother and I, would stop in. 

Mabel would refer to my brother and I as colored until the day she died and I only remember her speaking of race twice. The first was a direct response to my question “Grandma, will there ever be a Black President?” Her response was no. Her next response to my “Why?” was that people would be afraid that they might want revenge. The second incident occurred years later on one of my
frequent visits from the cities. Back on her green plush carpet I laid listening as
the black vinyl of a Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five record spun in the
compartment of her huge record cabinet. Entering the room, halting a few feet
away she offered: “Jay McKay Williams, don’t forget you’re half white.”

While her statement may be roughly accurate regarding genes and primary
socialization, it certainly was not, neither in terms of perceptions of me nor my
relationship to people or the social order. The adage being Black in America is
like being pregnant, you is or you ain’t, you can’t be part, remains accurate in
most social settings. The defiance in my late grade school mind had no adages,
or social science to turn to in retort, but I could point out that Grandma Mabel’s
record player seemed to play as much Charlie Pride as Kenny Rogers.

She remains amongst the most important figures in my life despite being over
twenty years departed. She passed the same night a bear circled my off-trail
tent in Glacier National Park as I vacationed away from work and the urban
sprawl of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I found out the next day via pay phone
after we struck camp, leaving the mountains and park.

One of Grandma Mabel’s great gifts to me was the perspective she offered on
trauma. She didn’t explain it. I don’t know what the traumatic incident was but
when triggered she would pack a suitcase, stand by her screen door, and
announce she was leaving and never coming back. As she would pull away in
her white Ford Rambler, I knew she was coming back and that what was playing
out came from some painful experience. I wish I’d known how to support her in
returning to a self-regulated state. Later in life I learned her estranged husband,
father of my auntie Mary Ann, who lives in Australia, likely killed himself. Without
certainty, it is possible that his leaving, death, and new family produced the
roots of Grandma’s Mabel’s trauma. Plausible, but incomplete, and I will never
know.
Half a year before her death my Grandpa Rueben McKay Williams passed away, triggering the family to travel to Ohio for his funeral. While I only probably saw Grandpa Rueben thirty or forty times in my life, his story frames my life. Grandma Bessie passed when I was in grade school leaving many fewer memories, but the clearest being a motivational speech, delivered with passion and love, given to me alone on her porch in Toledo, Ohio. As young as I was, the specific words are lost to memory, but the gist remains with me: never give up, never stop trying. My earliest memories of the need to code switch, between ways of doing things or saying things are attributable to Grandma Mable’s and Grandma Bessie’s homes, and today I recognize the notion of code switching (Elkins & Hanke, 2018) is incomplete as the messages derived from each cultural group you are socialized into mixes within each person in a unique fashion.

Born in a sharecropping family outside Philadelphia, Mississippi, on land I visited, my grandpa never trusted public institutions. An Ohio reverend for all of the time we shared on this planet and more, he wore three piece suits and brimmed hats. Before becoming a reverend and moving north to Ohio, he briefly ran moonshine in Mississippi. Irrespective of the decades of financial success that followed, allowing he and Grandma Bessie to raise eleven children, my grandpa never trusted public institutions. Examples of his distrust abound, but clearest is perhaps that the thousands of dollars found hidden around his home dwarfed the small amount of money he trusted to the banks. His experiences never lent to seeing law enforcement as protection. I don’t know if it was the bodies in the trees in Mississippi or other factors, but he wore a Saturday Night Special holstered on his garter sock. In the end, he was probably right. When family viewed his body at the hospital after his passing, the gold ring he’d been unable to remove from his finger for many years was gone.

Back in Minnesota, I once received a spanking at Our Saviors Christian School, a private Lutheran school, replete with a set of quiet serious mostly German American staff. Emotively this setting was nearly the antithesis of my later
church experiences as we praised Him with a loud sound at the Shiloh Temple Apostolic Pentecostal Baptist Church in the 1980s. I made many good friends at both Our Saviors and Shiloh Temple, some of whom I am still connected to today. I remember one of my closest friends from the former baffling me with a question about my bodily functions. As a veteran of numerous slumber parties and trips to Lake Marion, he felt comfortable enough to ask me, “Do you poop white?”

Other occurrences were far less comical. Upon returning home with a report card in third grade that included a C in English, my mother marched herself with me in tow up to the school. In the principal’s office she shuffled and pointed at a stack of papers, all reflecting As, as in the letter grade, and all pertaining to English. Soon after the principal called in my English teacher and the conversation around the discrepancy concluded in her sharing her assessment, “Well that’s as well as I thought a child like him could do.”

Mother, a veteran of the discrimination one might expect a participant in an interracial marriage in the 1960s and 1970s Mid Atlantic and Midwest would face, wasted no time in pushing for clarification. “Like what, Black…?”, Mom demanded. A nod, and positive response to the question, signaled the end of her employment as a teacher at Our Savior’s Christian School, perhaps an unlikely outcome for the day and age.

It wasn’t the last time Mother, a fiscal conservative and Republican, modeled anti-discrimination behaviors. As a child she went out of her way to take my brother and I to openly gay barbers. As a financial planner in the 1980s she spent years championing a client’s rights with an insurance company until they allowed her to extend her health benefits to her same sex partner’s children. In my twenties when I flew home Mother demonstrated a truly multicultural life casting her circle of intimacy to include dynamic people from numerous ethnic, national, and racial backgrounds. Of no less importance, her life reminds me of
the cartoonish ways we often portray the political left and right in relation to diversity. Like all groupings of people and mirroring racial categories, the differences amongst each group of people are greater than the average differences between members of each group (Boas, 1931).

Returning to the night of my teacher’s firing, I remember my mother’s anger as we drove home that evening. I couldn’t quite understand what happened except that my third grade teacher would not be my teacher tomorrow. I somehow suspected the issue connected to my first grade teacher in the public school, who would quickly wield her red pen to mark every question on my worksheet wrong if I asked for help. She’d also arranged with the principal to split up the three minorities in her class, two mixed race African Americans, including myself, and a dark skinned Native American boy.

At the time, my boyish self was far from able to grasp what it means to be Black in America. Beyond that, neither I nor likely anyone else breathing, could recognize that these events occurred in the window of flux and transition between an American era of overt discrimination and today’s dominant paradigm of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Perhaps, the firing of my English teacher, as part of an aggregate of incidents nationally, served as an incubator for today’s racial context.

The building of American domestic empire is complete. Race with its deep roots in patriarchy, beauty standards, Eurasian slave trading, and later the transatlantic slave trade, (Painter, 2010) is legal and codified. We all check a box, confirming our membership in a census-recognized racial group. The maintenance of empire requires less than the building. Jim Crow, slavery, ableism, dispossession of Native and LatinX lands, alienation of the poor from the true worth of their labor, heteronormativity, and the tokenization of women and minoritized professionals do not require overt race-based and gender-based legal discrimination. Institutions adopting equity priorities is certainly progress,
but do expect the false face extolling the values of inclusion publicly while minimizing or undermining the efforts of the equity thorn pricking their sensibilities.

In the final year of grade school, in the northern suburbs, I found myself one of a handful of black children in school. For some of their parents it was important that we played together. For me, our numbers resonated with my father’s efforts to bring other black people with him when he visited us in rural Minnesota in the preceding years. During my first day in the metropolitan school, I sat down and a neighboring child in a preppy shirt (today he rides Harleys, projecting a much different image) extended me a greeting. We exchanged names and he offered a second question, “Do you speak Jive?” Not knowing exactly what he meant by speaking Jive, I would spend from ages twelve to twenty learning to speak like a Black Minnesotan and then a Black New Jerseyite. I only knew that this boy expected me to be able to speak Jive. Day one at a new school I answered “Yes”. He asked me to do so. In response I told him, “not right now”. This began my awareness of my lifelong dance with stereotype threat (Grusky, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Steele & Aronson 1995).

Unlike the preceding era, I knew why he was asking me this. My early grade school dealt swiftly with a fifth grader for calling me a nigger. The next day as the bus driver, my great-uncle, drove the bus away shortly after I disembarked, I caught a punch square on the lips from the same kid for still being a nigger. I don’t remember ever interacting with him except for these incidents, our separation in grades offered no mutual friendships. Between the incidents I often stopped walking and stood quietly when I saw him coming. Occasionally, he’d laugh, and say “what are you waiting for, for me to call you a nigger?” He was disciplined for the punch. It was all above board. Other incidents remained ambiguous, more clearly predicting the coming age. Being swept of my feet on the playground, hoisted in the air by roughly ten children, mostly older than me, surreal, all of them strangers seemingly coming out of nowhere. Listening to
multiple voices belting out “Get him!” as I traveled parallel to the ground in my bright orange snowsuit, relief came in the form of a whistle, and the tough as nails middle age woman who served as recess monitor dispersing the crowd and staying with me as we walked back into the school building. My asterisk had ended recess.

The next day my excitement for the monthly game day waned after the customary swap of homerooms. I arrived at my second game station, staffed by a volunteering mother. The other children looked on stone faced as we spent very little time playing the game and a lot of time hearing her admonish me for kicking her son. I tried to explain but was silenced. The day before, her son amidst the chaos as they were mobbing me, carried my lower right leg, hands wrapped around the top of my moonboot as I struggled to get free.

The incidents of my childhood would be unlikely to play today as they did then, particularly the firing of my third grade teacher. In this American moment, it is attribution of all personal outcomes to the effect of personal choices that masks and obscures persistent inequity. When racism is discussed it is most likely to be characterized as a conscious act of discrimination by the kind of American most would define themselves against: toothless, Southern, ineducable, and backwards.

This archetype or folk devil, the uncouth Southerner, draws deeply from the making of America, and American Whiteness as evident in the savage masculinity ascribed to them by seminal writers as prominent as Ralph Waldo Emerson. Much like the shadows cast across the minoritized, this shroud heaped upon the Southerner not only obscures the authentic but serves to create the goodness of the unmarked, Northern Whites, through negative, oppositional definition. This is in no way shape or form a statement regarding the relative levels of racism present in the Northern or Southern regions of the United States, but rather an assertion that the aspersion and constant
association of the south with racism serves to distract our national consciousness, and individual racial consciousness, by providing a scapegoat. Minnesota spared me from some of the overt forms of racism (I witnessed in Mississippi), but that hardly negates the need to critically examine race in Minnesota. By many measures our racial disparities are deeper than Mississippi’s (Magan, 2016). If we extoll our relative virtue, it is the scapegoat or folk devil, or other, that reflects back a false light, ensuring our goodness, and obscuring the real conditions of our nation and hearts.

In light of this too frequent psychological reality, the sputtering potential onset of Post-Racial America, hardly trumpets the end of race or its consequence, race-based discrimination.

The promise of post-racialism is the sundering from our national racial history, the cloaking of the practices of discrimination, and the negation of people or communities being able to address the ravages of race. In tandem, color blind racism and post racial politics render racism a phantom, as powerful as what it replaced but nearly invulnerable (Kishimoto & Education, 2018). This ethereal state is ensured by the dutiful socialization of our children not to sound racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Vittrup, 2018) through intangibility, and the bevy of ever changing code words which allow one to justify racial discrimination without uttering Black, LatinX, Native, Asian, Jewish, or their less flattering euphemisms.

The dynamic becomes evident in the 1960s shift in American political discourse in which numerous politicians began a journey away from words like nigger, spic, savage, kike and even Black, Hispanic, and such, towards terms like criminal, thug, predator, crack babies, junkies and terrorists (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). The latter terms allowing the stigmatization of domestic and foreign others, and easily lending themselves to the racialization of social problems, without overtly invoking race or its labels (Edelman & Pol'y, 2004).
One step removed racism would prove effective beyond measure.

The crown jewel of these terms, the 1980s moniker Super Predator, applied to the children of crack cocaine addicts to describe their potential roles as adults in future American society, epitomizes this process. If any at all may lay claim to innocence in America it is the babe, or as poignantly demonstrated through the Super Predator label, some people’s babies. The remainder become babies with asterisks.

Coinciding with the push and pull factors that moved African Americans from the rural south to the urban north, and today cluster LatinX and Native people in urban areas, the new language of race paints not only the residents of cities but their homes in the colors of racial stigma (Keene & Padilla, 2010). While the late 20th and early 21st centuries would see the steep national decline in violent crime, and the explosion in prison populations (Campbell, Vogel, & Williams, 2015), the reputation of American cities would shift to accommodate growing minority populations. Detroit, New Orleans, Memphis, Philadelphia and other cities hosting large black populations became synonymous not with culture, industry, and innovation, but rather with danger, litter, and crime. Even in cities like our own, with relatively lower violent crime rates, Minneapolis would be wrapped in narratives of ruin and adorned with stigmatizing labels like Murderapolis (Myers Jr & Chung, 1998).

Not family friendly, dangerous neighborhoods, and drug infested, phrases embedded at the heart of the millions of stories that in aggregate reinforce the social order, and stigmatize the minoritized and their homes, providing the obfuscating shadows, shrouding the faces and dignity of urbanites, like those this work endeavors to excavate from such distortion. Chipping away at the minorities of the American cultural imagination to reveal actual visages, authentic experiences, lives spent navigating trauma, that is indirectly said not
to exist. Denial is nearly omnipresent context for American Minorities. With simultaneous assertions of racial innocence and jabs delivered with plausible deniability, All Lives Matter, rushes to a conspiratorial intersectionality and universalism. Current trends point toward a national urban renaissance, a lifting of urban stigma, urban renewal, but largely fueled by gentrification and the exporting of the poor and minoritized (Lees, 2000).

The weight of normative solidarity in denying the racialized past and present is a constitutive element of the environment American minorities navigate. In casual chat or formal interviews the intersectional trapdoor offers yet another avenue to evade the discussion of race. Far more often than not, intersectionality is invoked not to truly consider the impact of multiple identities upon individuals (the most holistic and accurate approach), but to replace race with whatever one is more interested or comfortable discussing. The little boy who never quite understood why Mrs. X was fired, also lacked the capacity to recognize that the moment really signified a rare and vanishing moment in which race could be easily and directly addressed. Today it is likely her views and discriminatory actions would be wrapped in code words and plausible deniability, presented as anything but race.

During my high school years the expectations of my blackness throbbed in every interaction. My high school gym teacher exuded every faith in me, warm, kind, and respectful. She also asked me to teach the Vietnamese kids, most of them born here in Minnesota, in our class how to play basketball. I mentioned that I was the wrestling captain and that real basketball players were also in the class. She warmly responded, “I know, but you’re good at it, and they might learn better from you.” Trapped between others’ essentialized notions of race and my own adolescent hypermasculinity fueled need to slam dunk basketballs at every opportunity, I realized in that moment, that often even amongst those
who liked me, the Asterisk spoke louder than the Captains’ Stars for wrestling and football on my Varsity Jacket, or any other label I cared to earn or display.

Years later Cornel West, tall and angular with his wild hair and wilder grin, all projecting out of his worn signature blue suit, replete with a hole torn near the armpit, would offer, over his professorial podium or across his office desk, that the black middle class wrap themselves in achievements to compensate for the stigma of blackness despite knowing it will never quite succeed.

Beyond tripling my vocabulary as a freshman at Princeton University, he planted seeds in my consciousness, many of which would sprout only after years of maturation. In this case, he helped begin my slow but complete progression towards understanding the futility and damaging nature of respectability politics. If American history holds one central lesson for those minoritized by phenotype, it is that the game is rigged. No amount of achievement dispels stigma nor the assumptions of others. Nearly sixty years removed from sharecropping land, with innumerable achievements under belt, a lifetime of watching race vocabulary shift as outcomes remained salient, sanguine but determined, my father often offered the same advice. Hard work was etched upon his soul. He once drove me around the streets of Cleveland, Ohio, searching out so I might witness a man who could run a wheelbarrow of wet cement up a ladder. Driven by the remembrance of hunger, my father could no more easily stop working as stop breathing: “Your education is the only thing they can’t take from you man.” In his words echoed pains I knew I would never know-- segregation, sharecropping, a team mate lost to lynching, forms of colorism, a cross burning in his brother’s Ohio yard, and so few cracks in the domination of objectivist modernity to mitigate power.

Neither my father nor mother, a woman who pulled together a successful financial planning firm, beginning in the same decade as the first class action sexual harassment suit (Jenson vs. Eveleth Taconite Co.) (O’Brien, 1993), were
open to my accepting the football or wrestling scholarships offered by a number of schools, after the admittance letter from Princeton University arrived. Three weeks after arriving to Princeton, football camp would end, and I found myself among old money, new money, scholar athletes, and the well-to-do.

For many of my classmates there, money was but an abstraction. I found no evidence of resources being a limiting factor. One J-term, thrilled to have the gas money, Brownie and I prepared to leave the New Jersey winter to deer hunt in Alabama. The day before our departure we shared the plan with our hall mates to find out some were leaving to ski the Swiss Alps.

Despite being exposed to somewhat similar opulence surrounding professional football and the Hollywood figures peripheral to the team, during my rollercoaster of a childhood I tended to view the excess around me through the eyes of the kid sleeping on Grandma Mabel’s sewing porch, listening to her and Great Aunt Hazel argue about the price of onions.

The abundance didn’t hold true for most of the students of color. As one of the few students of color with a car (part of the time), a late model Buick, weekends often found it full of my classmates pooling our money to reach a step show in Boston, a house party in Philadelphia, or a concert at the Apollo, and eventually enabling the voluntary abuse across the Eastern seaboard I and my line mates endured to become members of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Within Princeton’s bubble of privilege, some of us felt well treated by most faculty and staff, while others found their time on campus deeply alienating. Frequent discussions amongst minoritized alumni describe that return trips sometimes brought experiences of surveillance or being questioned. Classmate Dana Crum’s Essay, “In Hunting Season Orange Won’t Protect You (If You’re Black)” poignantly captures the inability of either his official capacity with the
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University or the presence of administrators of color, to end racial profiling on campus (Crum, n.d.).

While enrolled each of us vacillated across a spectrum of feelings between belonging and exclusion. Many participated in both mainstream campus activities (eating clubs, P-rade, athletic teams, e.g.); and also created our own alternatives to others (Bare as You Dare as opposed to the Nude Olympics, community service organizations, affinity spaces, e.g.).

My own identity needs compelled me to be engaged in both mainstream and affinity activities. We were led through the dissonance of being minoritized people at an elite institution, and in navigating our status inconsistencies (Blau, 2017), by a bevy of amazing professors: Cornel West, Toni Morrison, Nell Painter, Gail Pemberton, and Al Raboteau, who formed a coterie of Black Faculty, together providing support, resolve, and intellectual approaches that oft resonated with our senses of self.

Mainstream professors like Barbara Browning and James McPherson who paid close attention to our cultural traditions and history, visiting Professors like David Carrasco, robust ethnic programming, and large minority populations in neighboring towns and campuses buoyed most of us above feeling marginal. Our inclusion drew comment in ways the children of old money, athletes, and legacies did not, irrespective of our comparative qualifications. We suspected the Jewish quotas for admission were in part replaced by Asian quotas. At the time of my attendance there was one Black administrator. He likely never attended an event at the Third World Center, where students of color chilled and convened. Twenty-five years later, his absence is still a topic of conversation amongst alums, demonstrating the power of community expectations directed towards higher education professionals of color.

Limitless resources didn’t extend to many of my Euro-American friends either, particularly as most of these friends were recruited athletes not from the old
money families. My immediate hall mates, and second year roommates all hailed from Alabama. Culture Shock and coaches’ whistles bonded us as we sought to make sense of a New Jersey that seemed too direct and without manners. With processing, the passing of years being immersed in that culture became a blessing (it was truly years later in Maryland that my appreciation for it settled in). With a new frame of reference, the challenges of indirect cultures, like Minnesota’s, became more evident. In indirect cultures, people often will not tell you what problems they perceive but will tell someone else when they are mad at you. So often tension is mitigated by avoiding direct communication and airing one’s displeasure through chains of intermediaries who doubtfully will bring to you a partial account of the other party’s concerns. Certainly, this spares embarrassment, tension, exposure to anger, and other unpleasantness from occurring between potential antagonists, but like the stance of neutrality, it serves to protect the status quo. Planning today’s tough conversations about equity work can be difficult. The interaction between privilege, vulnerability, and change can leave a normative vacuum in a once settled cultural space. The normative feeling made wrong and the minoritized feeling vulnerable can create an uncertain environment. Minnesota Nice complicates equity work.

Venturing off the Princeton Campus, leaving the bubble of privilege, witnessing New Jersey’s sprawl of urban poverty and suburban stability, I was moved to constant volunteerism. Persuading Princeton students to donate a meal from their prepaid meal plans I funded food for the homeless. Angered by single room hotel units becoming homeless shelters, each housing entire families with no privacy, kitchen, or space for the children to play, I began picking the youth up twice a week and arranging activities for them on campus. The combination of overbearing, crooked hotel owners and exorbitant state government expenditures (easily enough to rent each family a large house) compelled me to visit our District 16 State Senator’s office. Gracious enough to see me, the Senator projected warmth as he worked my every question back to Princeton’s
prospects of beating Yale and Harvard this football season. I left worse than I arrived, in full knowledge that people grew rich off the suffering of Trenton’s poor, and that I was more likely to capture a goblin on the way home than disrupt that scheme.

Returning to campus, I threw myself into volunteerism despite knowing I was just supporting people in coping with systems that shouldn’t be. The campus protests against South African Apartheid resonated intellectually but the suffering of Peanut, Moo Moo, Day Day, Clarita, John, the kids stuck in a motel turned homeless shelter across US Route 1 from a Dennys they couldn’t afford, seemed so much closer and more pressing. The Princeton Connection with these youth continued as they dispersed across Trenton, and their families found residences in sub-standard row houses on dilapidated streets. My works found support through the Student Volunteer Council, a mainstream student organization and in conjunction with Heddy DuCree whose program approaches were consistently rooted in culture and identity needs. My later perspectives on supporting college students sprung from this seed, planted amongst the work modeled for me through Rosalie Brown Thunder’s efforts to better support Native college students (Williams, 2013).

The majority of my adult life organized around the pursuit of higher education and then towards efforts to make it work for everyone. My pursuit of both graduate degrees on the University of Chicago Campus amidst the achievement, egotism, privilege, genius, and detachment that swirled about me each day. I rarely glimpsed a smile. Beyond my doctoral cohort, a black intellectual circle, a couple of good friends, and a handful of professors, my smiles would be found off campus.

Jumping forward decades to 2015, I stand in a Minneapolis Public School lobby waiting for a staff member in charge of addressing diversity issues to arrive and
escort me in. The entrance, guarded by a simple desk, and a no-nonsense middle-aged woman with a clipboard, badges, sign in sheets, and a visor, serves as the gatehouse for any wishing to enter this particular school.

Cross-referencing an identification card with a list, voice absent of any hint of affect, she informed a student he wasn’t supposed to be there today, his suspension wasn’t complete, and he couldn’t come in. The student, roughly 6’6” tall and maybe 240 pounds, African American, stood in front of her simultaneously respecting her authority by not moving forward beyond her or the desk, but verbally pushing back. “Come on. I just want to go to class. We got a test today.” His voice carried urgency and a touch of frustration.

His retort gained him disdain rather than entrance as admonishing words were followed with rolling of the eyes that she then cast in my direction, inviting me to be complicit in the judgment of the student. I stood stone faced, saying nothing, out of my element and ignorant to each of them, their history, the school culture, or what led to that moment, but I would neither be complicit in judging this student for wanting to be in school nor verbally intervene on either’s behalf as it was not my place as a visitor, the exchange was without physical danger.

Soon leaving as the party I’d come to meet arrived at the entrance desk, I never knew how the situation resolved, other than a passionate student faced condescension and exclusion from school rather than guidance. The incident somehow sat wrong in my gut as I reflected on the articles and discussions regarding black male graduation rates. If he had become angry and if my father observed the interaction he would’ve shook his head and said “that boy forgot he was black.” Denied a similar range of emotions or behaviors relative to their mainstream peers, black students and professionals alike most often shrink themselves for the comfort of others. Reflected through my own experiences I see it in the way my grandmother and mother insisted on my constant civility, neither ever vocalized that this was about race, or my Father’s preparatory
discussions before getting my driver’s license, e.g. mirrored this except in the overt connection to race.

The Hat

In 2006, teaching Speech as an adjunct professor at Columbia Union College, now Washington Adventist University, I added a baseball cap to my teaching attire. I taught in suits, or blazers and slacks, never with a tie, but always with a baseball cap. Initially, this served two purposes. As an overt but unmentioned class material the hat appeared as the last question of the final exam. Offering an opportunity for students to apply the smattering of Sociology and Anthropology I injected into the Speech Course, the question served as a springboard for students to discuss social distance, status inconsistency, and other theories in a real and present context. Each semester a few keen students’ analyses identified that the reduced social distance would encourage students to challenge their instructor more and thus positively impact the learning environment.

In early July 2012 I retired the baseball caps. My father’s passing, an immaculate dresser, who wore ball caps to sporting events, fishing outings, or for lawn work only, compelled me for reasons yet unclear, to retire the caps. By the following year when I first began frequenting the Minneapolis College campus, I’d moved to cabbie hats, as two of Dad’s hats, nearly new, found their way to me. Nearly useless beyond the classroom they offered little protection from cold, rain, or snow. I soon adopted brimmed fedoras and Dad’s beige cabbie hat found a home above my fireplace, holding his memory if not essence, among hide drums, wooden crosses, keepsakes from the generations before me, ceramic vases made by Minneapolis College students, sage, tobacco, Bibles, Qurans, and other material reflections of the spiritual plane and the bonds of deep human connections.
Hats continued to appear in my classrooms and Sociology final exams after returning to Minnesota and teaching at various professional colleges as I finished my doctorate. In the context of higher education, my hopes are that the black hat both reduces social distance with students and signals my presence in the halls and campus paths so students might see me and seek assistance. I never really imagined how well it would work or that it would spill over into the streets of South Minneapolis.

On another plane it is very much a symbolic challenge to norms. If I am not strong enough to violate the norm of professionals not wearing fedoras during the work days and meetings, not able to offer answer to the many questions regarding this, I would never be strong enough to push back on the mountain of normative power necessary if we seek to better prepare our college to serve the students we attract. Equity work challenges norms, uncomfortable work for all as it pierces the taboo of what is acceptable social conversation. There is no shame in bias. Bias often plays a needed role in our lives. I prefer to keep my bias regarding peas fresh out of Grandma’s garden in buttermilk being great. The rest of the peas can go to hell. Bias provides us needed short cuts in life, and protects us from continual unpleasant relearning. Bias creates damage if allowed to guide the meanings we attach to bodies with particular phenotypes, accents, orientations, ability statuses, or fashion styles; it squanders irreplaceable potential for community. Stigma applied oft lingers in the psyche of the disparaged.

Seeing our biases is one of the keys to better serving all students. Preparing our systems to better serve all communities is the heart of equity work. The opportunity gaps, particularly when considered relatively between states or institutions, really measure one thing: how well our institutions serve particular populations.
Students with Asterisks

I’ve not shared all the levels to my game with the hat, but I’ll share one more I am no reverend, I’m not exclusively Christian, but one reverend, Grandpa Rueben saw far harsher trials than I, and in my hat, my ancestor walks with me.

Superbowl Sunday 1997, I picked myself up off the wall-to-wall carpet in a Sacramento apartment without furniture. Recently I’d moved from urban Philadelphia to the Southside of Chicago but this weekend found me in suburban Sacramento spending time with my Brown Thunder brothers. I spent most of the three years leading up to this time in Newark, Camden, Philadelphia, Wilmington, New York, and numerous cities speckled across the New Jersey map. Technically a regional manager, I was primarily tasked as a go between, connecting urban school districts with the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation staff and the federal grant projects they administered. Translation in both directions ranged from comical to frustrating. I found myself predominately in black professional circles that mostly turned Native during my Chicago years, and shifted again during my stint in Maryland to an intercultural network.

A moment lost to the fog of passing time, perhaps the day before the game, I answered my flip phone and wandered into an equally unfurnished bedroom to conduct the call. John Kelly, the anthropologist who supervised my junior independent work at Princeton University and who I initially went to speak with when Rosalie Brown Thunder asked me to change my major away from Sociology as there was a need for allies in Anthropology, was on the line returning an earlier call of mine.

I’d applied to an interdisciplinary master’s degree program at the University of Chicago, full of rigorous but socially desolate programs…a school where undergraduates wore T-shirts proclaiming “U C Where Fun Goes To Die.” The school mascot, the maroon, spoke to the island of privilege amongst miles of working class and underclass African Americans. Fear of this setting grasped the campus culture. My orientation week was filled with warnings not to go to
63rd street or beyond, something I made a multiple times per week habit once I found Daley’s Soul Food dinner under the elevated train tracks.

I felt gratitude as Professor Kelly and I spoke on the telephone. He explained the opportunities at the University of Chicago. Of more value, he began to share with me perspectives offered to him by African American students. “Don’t be surprised if you spend a bit of unscheduled time with campus security or have to answer a few questions for a Chicago Police Officer. Expect to be stopped.” I listened, initially confused but ultimately empowered. In an act of proactive validation Dr. Kelly prepared me for how my asterisk would function at the University of Chicago.

Over the years that followed, I rarely saw Dr. Kelly, but his words stayed with me as I was stopped by campus security, Chicago Police, and community watch groups. In an attempt to cope or minimize the impacts of these stops I began to carry my graduate school papers with me which I would pull out of my school bag and read to my accosters. Often this ended the interaction, and often it did not. Years later on the Minneapolis College Campus, Connie Rhodes, a professional assisting the African American Education Empowerment Program membership to deal with trauma in a healthy way, and I, would discover we came to the same independent invention. She, too, as a University of Chicago undergraduate student, read papers to shorten the time waylaid by officials and quasi-officials.

Dr. Kelly’s gift, was that in addition to having my minoritized peers on campus to process with, I also knew that some among the normative were paying careful attention to the experiences of students of color, and chose to break racial solidarity in calling out wrong treatment. That validation helped me add a chuckle and perseverance to my reactions and emotional processing of being trapped by a building engineer on those Chicago fire escape steps, or even in the instance of ethnic misidentification. (Shortly after 9-11, an anxiety-laden
Students with Asterisks

resident phoned the Chicago Police that a giant Arab terrorist was on the corner of 59th and Woodlawn with tools in his pockets--powwow drums). Wrong Asterisk, and not for the first time.

Unlike the years following my departure from Princeton University where I endured over eighty auto stops by various types of New Jersey and Pennsylvania law enforcement officers (driving with an asterisk), the campus incidents smacked of an even more personal devaluation than the earlier incidents of epistemic violence. I was left wondering how to safely get from point A to point B, as well as self-reflecting on what about me warrants such treatment. None of these experiences would be forgotten as I became a higher education professional.

Certainly these encounters shaped my sensitivities. They helped me to identify ways to deal with the racial dynamics of employment when I listened to the descriptions of feeling unwelcome and unwanted during the Minneapolis College Student Letter 2015 process (see appendix). Midwestern, megalopolis, cosmopolitan, Chicago vacillated between the indirectness of the upper Midwest and directness of the Eastern seaboard. The experiences we shared help bolster us against the frequent micro-aggressions of the work place. Incidentally, I agree with both the Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Alan Page that not every micro-aggression is a federal case, and also with their common description as death through a thousand cuts.

As a graduate student my experiences informed my crafting a new term paper. The protective term paper would become a simple, direct question. In the 1960s NAACP President Roy Wilkins would often include in his speeches a phrase like “thank God I am from Minnesota”. At the time it made sense. Minnesota had its discrimination, the brown box in real estate or racial housing covenants, for examples. But a black man could walk into the Dinkytown McDonalds and order food to go or eat there, unlike, for example, Memphis where neither was
possible. After describing these different situations, I would point out our worst or second worst racial disparity gap amongst the states of our nation, depending on the year. Then I’d mention that you don’t really hear the “thank God I’m from Minnesota” in minoritized communities much anymore. I would then present a simple question. What happened in Minnesota between the 1960s and now for such a radical shift to occur in racial equity?

In the dozens of times I’ve employed this strategy I’ve laughed and even marveled at the intelligence offered. Discussions of measures, and generationally compounded impacts, often filtered through the respondent’s professional activity would ensue. Many of the answers were brilliant and engaged the mind, but I also listened on another level for one particular factor. At anytime in the answer is the perspectives of those experiencing the downside of these gaps referenced? If so, how important to the answer is that voice or perspective?

Predominately, these answers failed to reference any voice from the communities impacted by the gaps. I never treated these absences as litmus tests, but more perhaps as radar pings, indicating, fairly reliably if I was likely to find partnership or paternalism in addressing these gaps with this particular individual. I’ve never crafted my personal circle of trust and intimacy at home or at work to be racially homogenous. The framing of liberal and conservative politics in relation to race is similar to the distortions around the American North and South. In my partnerships, knowledge of political affiliation or racial group membership is no basis on its own for extending trust. Had I drawn my circles in such a manner, neither this book project nor the Minneapolis College Strategic Inclusion Plan 2016-2020 could succeed. When vying with the enormity of normative power all trustworthy hands are needed. It is no accident Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to the moral leaders of
the mainstream (Perkins et al., 2014), not only to African American community leaders.

I need to know if the person with whom I’m interacting values the experiences and perspectives of those we serve as an integral part of their approach to that service.

This proposition can create difficulty for the higher education professional. Whether planning student programs or decentering your own voice as a pedagogical strategy, listening and partnership trade efficiency for efficacy. An unfortunate but telling incident occurring during my first job after college searing the necessity for deep partnership with those marginalized in my psyche.

In Newark, New Jersey, the Summer of 1993 found me a paid volunteer in the Summer of Service program. Established by Subtitle G of Title I of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, the Summer of Service Program assembled corps of paid volunteers from twenty some American communities. Most teams were located in major cities like Atlanta, Oakland, and Los Angeles, a few in smaller communities like the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians. The program functioned as test legislation, paving the way for Americorps, a program envisioned as a domestic Peace Corps, launched under the Clinton administration and expanded under the George W. Bush’s tenure.

Provided a small living stipend and a dormitory room at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, I would walk each morning to roll call, where two hundred corps members would stand in formation for announcements before splitting into teams for training or heading to their service sites. The majority of the corps were Black and Puerto Rican women, many of them mothers, hailing from the City of Newark itself. The leadership team looked a bit different. Including graduates of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford University, the team was comprised of 5 or 6 Euro-American males who were smart, passionate, and caring. There were also two junior members who functioned largely as go
betweens with the corps teams, one a queer woman, the other an African American graduate of Rutgers who grew up in neighboring East Orange.

At that time Newark’s Central District still lacked a grocery store or movie theater as many businesses were never replaced after the 1967 race riots (Bergesen, 1982). The city’s sinister reputation across the region dwarfed the stigma carried by Minneapolis’s unfortunate moniker of a few years later, Murderapolis. Humid, hot, littered with abandoned buildings, the city reverberated with the Wu-Tang Clan’s first radio single, which seemed to pour from car radios without pause.

Sporadically the entire corps would convene for a local service project. Most seminal of these projects was a plan to clean and clear a field next to the 8th Avenue Projects so a community garden might improve Newark’s food desert. Most corps members viewed the project with trepidation. In their vacancy the 8th Avenue Projects served as a theater for narcotics distribution, a place most of the corps preferred to avoid. Dozens of corps members shared their reservations with the liaisons to leadership and in our morning formations the mention of the upcoming project would trigger murmurs and explicit objections.

Ultimately the project occurred on the first day of the month likely coinciding with peak drug trafficking fueled by social subsidy payments. My team was not the first to arrive to the service site but heard the earliest arriving teams faced verbal altercations and a bit of shoving with drug dealers.

Upon my arrival only the Summer of Service Corps was present. Most stood or milled about while a very small number, including myself, knelt in the grass pulling out rubbish, glass, and such. Roughly thirty minutes after we began to clear the field of one of the abandoned project buildings, a tower unit began to billow volumes of black and dirty yellow/gray smoke into the air. Directly down wind from the flaming unit the service site itself filled with smoke. The day was done. Had the community members in the corps been consulted we likely would
have found ourselves supporting home grown efforts of value to local residents, rather than standing in a smoky field realizing our imported models implode on arrival.

The first step in removing the asterisks that impede academic success is validation. Color blind repression of lived experiences trigger and deepen relationships of resistance. For many minoritized people being told “Oh, I don’t see color” to indicate the expectation of fair treatment, the statement not only carries another message more powerfully, it produces dissonance. The message is also “I am unable or unwilling to see or support your authentic experiences.” Allyship requires full color vision and a sensitive understanding of specific identity needs. Many mainstream or minoritized professionals might claim color blind identity or ideology. Many of us are proud of being color blind, perhaps we were taught to be so by our parents as an answer to the ugly overt discrimination of earlier eras. The stance is antithetical to serving our minoritized students. Color blind perspectives are also largely discrimination blind and thus profoundly incompatible with anti-racist stances or even understanding many of our students’ experiences (Kishimoto & Education, 2018).

Geneva Gay, a leader in the field of equity focused pedagogy, describes culturally responsive caring as requisite to this approach. In her words, “teachers in an ethical, emotional, and academic partnership with ethnically diverse students, a partnership that is anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the possibility of transcendence” (Gay, 2002).

If we are unable to provide allies, allies like Dr. Kelly, or employees in the institution hailing from the neighborhoods we draw students from, we become but another public institution likely to be judged as dangerous, unhealthy, or not for us, by many of our students. Even moving in the best of intentions, aware of our own bias, and acting from true listening, the transpersonal contexts leave us
much to overcome in gaining the trust and supporting the success of students from marginalized communities.

As powerful an ally as Dr. Kelly proved to be, he and I rarely interacted during the time of my doctoral studies. I found similar validation in the unwavering support and tough love provided by Sociologist Richard Taub, and Anthropologists Raymond Fogelson and Terry Ann Straus, who all served on my doctoral committee. Their nuanced ability to address me and my work through a critical engagement with my identity became fuel. They avoided thrusting me into ambassador roles calling for me to represent an imagined black monolith and astutely discussed how my life intersected with power and patterns. They offered partnership in unpacking the internal and external dissonance of being a Black student at an elite college, and complicated by being largely embedded in the Native community of Chicago. This opened a space for me to operate more authentically and comfortably as I navigated the classes, lectures, alcohol-laden job talks, socials, and relocated classes, and libraries scattered amongst the gothic castles that lined the edge of Chicago’s Midway. Like many minoritized college students, cognitive dissonance regarding my identity, enrollment, extent of inclusion, and being a student with an asterisk, flared as incidents with police, members of the community watch group, peers, staff, or faculty confronted me. In-group racial pressures added to the mix.

Roughly 420 miles northwest of Chicago and a decade later I seek to refine my own approach to serving students. In countless meetings, arranged around tables, sliding my glasses on and off with the rhythm of my thoughts, I constantly refer to validating students and avoiding relationships of resistance. My record is far from perfect in this regard, and it represents only the simplest surface portion of the approach I seek. What I envision may not be completely realizable. In short it is a pedagogy of liberation. We are partnering in crafting
strategies for success with our students, the experts on their own lived conditions.

Using this framework, we avoid both the assimilationist lie and the separatist lie. These opposing forces and the internal and external social impacts and consequences of choosing either path will never resolve. Rather than choosing a lie to sell in assimilation or separationism, become a partner in strategizing for success in social context as it actually is. For the minoritized in America neither perspective reflects anything an individual might achieve. With the exception of some forms of celebrity, minorities will not in our lifetimes succeed in becoming accepted equally as other Americans on a consistent basis, nor in separating off into homogenous racial community. Neither is possible. Both are a lie. Neither is what we should offer our students.

It is often at this point in the discussion that people retreat, justifying the move with a return to the objectivist modernist narrative that seeks to establish one reality, the reality power prefers to promote (individualism, e.g.), or into the dismissal of equity work as too abstract, not concrete enough or actionable. At worst we blame the conversation itself. Isn’t it time to just stop talking about all this? In the words of anti-racist ally Tim Wise, when people blame the conversation itself for the dissonance it is akin to blaming a speeding ticket on a functioning odometer (Wise, 2016).

Increasingly the Minnesota State System of Colleges and Universities provides development resources for those wishing to become involved in equity work and offer thoughtful partnership with our minoritized students. Many institutions across the system identify equity as amongst their highest priorities. Localized opportunities for growth like Saint Cloud State University’s Anti-Racist Pedagogy Across the Curriculum (ARPAC) and Century College’s Institute for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (ICRP) provide opportunity to increasingly root what we do in the perspectives of those we serve. Here at Minneapolis College
Lisa Bergin, Philosophy Faculty, spends her sabbatical project preparing a roughly forty-four hour applied culturally responsive teaching training, focused on classroom application. Another powerful model for offering our minoritized students thoughtful partnership at Minneapolis College can be found in the chapter following mine, “Decolonizing the Classroom: Step 1”, by English Faculty member and ARPAC graduate Michael Seward.

Exploring our collective of higher education institutions in the system, brilliance, innovation, and passion, are evident in the equity approaches you find. Together, they are not yet enough to ensure equitable outcomes for our students. Each approach to this work has its own art to application: facilitated conversations, implicit bias, intercultural assessment, countering historical erasure, microaggressions, decentering the instructional voice, culturally relevant pedagogy and service, and a plethora of additional methods. Some may find particular theories and their potential applications complex, abstract, or elusive, but the core proposition is simple.

Validate our students by demonstrating their perspectives are important, that we know and care about the conditions of their lives, and that our teaching and service marks their worlds as significant. Ultimately educational settings should build student self- esteem (Pickett, Smith, & Felton III, 2017), supporting them in the quest for self-actualization. As the demographics of the Minnesota State System of Colleges and Universities’ student body shift, our overall success will increasingly be measured by how we serve students from marginalized communities.

Forging an inclusive multicultural campus requires building trust with those outside the protective balm of normative power. When the trust born of consistent validation and affirmation replaces distrust wrought of painful interactions with the representatives of public institutions, and validation replaces erasure or tokenization, opportunity for healing arrives. Ideally this
healing is bolstered by a trauma responsive workforce able to support students back to self-regulation, avoiding escalation, more adverse consequences, and additional barriers to academic success. If college campuses can create the safety requisite for personal healing, spaces where epistemic violence is studied rather than experienced, and offer courses of study sufficient to equip students to face historical trauma with critical thinking, the value offered will draw students from the membership of communities least likely to attend college.

“You can tell just by how they look at you”. LaTanya Robinson, Seasonal OAS-I, Minneapolis College.

For those offended, you are not outside my love. I apologize for your discomfort, as I was taught to do, and dare to hope you come to prefer the moment of discomfort to the repression of authentic experiences, the dissonance of truths bumping into truths. I offer my ear and welcome the telling of your story. That kind of partnership removes asterisks.

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As an English faculty member at Minneapolis College, I am concerned with the legacy of pervasive and lasting pain and inequity left by colonization: across the globe, within the US, within schools, and in my own classroom. Colonization’s legacy is about power: who has it, and who is denied it? Power has to do with material existence and lived experience: access to and use of resources (money, housing, transportation, energy, healthy food, clean water), knowledge, influence, self-determination and economic potential and clout. Power is political. In a world profoundly shaped by colonization, because, globally, power has been divided along racial lines, politics become inherently racial—even in the classroom.

For the classroom is a political space: power is exerted, resisted and yielded to in every classroom; every classroom is situated within an institution, state, and nation—all locations in which resources, knowledge, and access must be
negotiated. Justin Simien, director of *Dear White People*, reminds us that “[r]acism is systemic: It’s oppression that’s built into the laws, legislation, into the way neighborhoods are policed, and into job opportunities and health care and education” (emphasis added). Thus, those interested in decolonizing the classroom must take a first, crucial step: a personal commitment to political change. Not to acknowledge the racial nature of politics (and power)—both inside of and surrounding the classroom—is to perpetuate the inequities created by colonization.

In an attempt to decolonize the classroom, one can make many changes:

- diversify materials and content;
- teach to learning outcomes that address power and social justice;
- design assessments that allow diverse students to demonstrate mastery in diverse ways;
- involve students in the creation of knowledge, content, and curriculum;
- embrace diverse language usage in interactions, writing and tests;
- involve oneself at the institutional, local, state and national levels to advocate for equity.

Yet the first change must be to become politically conscious. In order to speak truth to power, one must first enable oneself to see the truth, the truth of the profoundly damaging legacy of colonization.

Anyone who teaches English outside of England is part of the colonial project, particularly if the teaching takes place within a sanctioned institution and if the English being taught is a standardized, “official” English. One need only to contemplate the role of language and schooling in European colonization of the
Decolonizing the Classroom: Step 1

Americas, Africa, Australia, and Asia to grasp the central function of teaching (particularly teaching English) in colonization. A politically conscious teacher acknowledges that one cannot claim to be purely (and innocently) against racism while acting as a functionary for a colonial and racist system (especially when benefitting materially while doing so (i.e., receiving a paycheck)). To build on Napoleon’s observation, “among those who dislike oppression are many who” enjoy the privileges the oppressive system offers.

I have been teaching for over 30 years; I have yet to encounter a teacher who openly espouses racism. Everyone claims to be against racism. Everyone wants to empower students. Yet to begin to ameliorate the deep damage caused by colonization and racism (systems of power) means to be actively and overtly political. To decolonize the classroom, one must examine oneself and one’s beliefs:

- Let go of the disingenuous notion of objectivity in the classroom, of maintaining political neutrality, of seeing all sides and positions as having equal impact on marginalized groups.
- Learn to live in the discomfort of having to take a stand.
- Acknowledge that your role as teacher has been historically problematic: that by teaching English you are inherently complicit with forces that damage marginalized students.
- See and address the trauma that colonization, poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of oppression can and do cause for marginalized students.
- Stop seeing yourself as the “good guy,” fighting the good fight.
- Stop perpetuating the myth of boot-strapping and the belief that by helping individual students you are effecting social change.
Understand that by promoting notions of a standard, correct and preferred language, you are perpetuating colonization, ensuring that future students will suffer the same marginalization.

Act to effect systemic changes that address the forces that damage groups of students, those groups that have been historically traumatized by colonization and racism.

Along with delivering required content, understand your job as providing students with the means of grasping that their difficulties and struggles stem from an inherently inequitable system and culture, as well as ways of resisting and subverting such systems.

See yourself, your curriculum, your content and your classroom as existing within a historical context of racism, subjugation, and control.

Challenge systemic oppression and acknowledge the collective experiences of marginalized groups.

Even those who are made uncomfortable by the status quo may be unwilling to take on the system, for global colonialization has traditionally wrapped itself in the mantles of religion and patriotism, and, as Luis Bunuel reminds us, “God and Country are an unbeatable team; they break all records for oppression” (170). What English teacher wants to take on God and country? And, really, what need is there to challenge the system, when one can still envision oneself as doing good without having to take the risk of being targeted for calling attention to the fact that the pain and suffering of marginalized groups are inherent to and necessary for the functioning of the system.

Florynce Kennedy notes, “When a system of oppression has become institutionalized it is unnecessary for individuals to be oppressive” (439). Thus, teachers are taught in their training to envision themselves as doing good, even as they enforce and perpetuate the colonization and racism that damage
students. Like missionaries, foreign aid, and global capitalism, English teachers are part of the “[c]olonialism [that] subdues in many dulcet guises. It conquered under the pretext of spreading Christianity, civilization, law and order, to make the world safe for democracy” (F. Sionil Jose). Instead of seeing themselves as generous and helpful, politically conscious teachers must perpetually struggle with the problematic nature of their role. Leila Janah warns us of the dangers of helpfulness:

“[P]art of the problem with charity is that it tends to make us view people as helpless victims. I think in the future, we'll look back on charity in the same way that we look back on colonialism today: as a very paternalistic system that doesn't fully recognise the full spectrum of humanity.”

Instead of envisioning students as individuals in need of the tools required for self-improvement (as the teacher, I am the one who, by providing you the benefits of the curriculum, helps you succeed), politically conscious teachers understand that the suffering of marginalized students is a result of an inequitable system. Politically conscious teachers shift the focus away from the individual as needing change to the system as needing change, a shift that is made very difficult within the American context with its cult of individualism. Ayaan Hirsi Ali says, “The liberal psyche wants to protect minorities, to apologize for imperialism, colonialism, slavery, and the appalling treatment of black people during the civil rights movement. At the same time, they want to continue to defend the rights of individuals.” By focusing our energies on individuals, we avoid dismantling systems of power that privilege some while damaging many others.

To empower students (or anyone) on the margins means much more than guiding individuals to a sanctioned academic success; individuals are empowered when systems are altered to shift power toward the groups to which they belong. To empower people from marginalized groups means to disrupt the
current balance of power, something the powerful invariably resist. Politically conscious teachers prepare themselves and their students to confront, resist and withstand such a backlash.

In addition to works by those quoted in this essay, interested educators might find works by the following authors helpful:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (whose TED talk students have found helpful);

Gloria Anzaldúa (in particular *Borderlands/Le Frontera: the New Mestiza*);

James Baldwin (in particular “A Talk to Teachers”);

Joshua Block (in particular “Educate to Liberate: Build an Anti-Racist Classroom”)

Noam Chomsky;

Lisa Delpit (both “No Kinda Sense” (from *The Skin that We Speak*) and *Other People’s Children*);

Robin DiAngelo (esp. *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*);

Paolo Freire;

bell hooks (in particular *Teaching to Transgress*);

Kyoko Kishimoto (in particular “Decolonizing Teaching” written with Darlene St. Clair);

Audre Lorde;

E. Wayne Ross;

Amy Tan (in particular “Mother Tongue”).
I’d like to close with the full quotation from Ariel Dorfman: “You want to free the world, free humanity, from oppression? Look inside, look sideways, look at the hidden violence of language. Never forget that language is where the other, parallel violence, the cruelty exercised on the body, originates.”

Works Cited


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Decolonizing the Classroom: Step 1 by Michael Seward is licensed under a Creative Commons license.
Throughout my entire life I’ve been arrested multiple times. Each time the outcome differed. I’ve been arrested and let go. I’ve been arrested and charged with a crime and the charges got dismissed and I’ve also been arrested and charged with a crime and convicted of that crime. I’ve committed many crimes and some of which I haven’t been convicted of. Crimes I haven’t been convicted of range from assaults to robberies. Ninety percent of my crimes were committed to get more drugs and also committed under the influence of drugs. And almost all were due to my gang-related activities.

I have dealt with emotions in treatment by writing about them, but I have not expressed them.
When I was fifteen I was arrested and charged with fifth degree assault and I eventually got sent to a residential treatment center for nine to twelve months.

My first two weeks I was in the orientation group. From like 10am to 12pm we had to cut a huge piece of wood. It was a big log. It took four people even to get it on a platform. Someone would sit on the wood and the other four would be sawing. It was summer so it was hot. I was sweaty so sawdust would get in my eyes and stick to my skin. We used a large saw and we got blisters. People would get dehydrated. From noon until 3pm we would take care of these barn animals. Llamas, ducks, pigs, sheep. We would change out their bedding. And then we would refill big feeders with feed. I think the worst job was picking up the manure. Nobody ever wanted to do that. We would scoop it into a barrel and take it to a compost pile.

After dinner there was programming in groups. It was pretty much like telling on each other. If John stole a piece of cake, someone would say he stole a piece of cake, and went against the rules. Then the group would give feedback. Then I got moved to another group. They had like five different groups for the boys and two for the girls. My group was easier because all we did was go to the school most of the day and at night we’d have groups. In the evenings we wouldn’t tell on each other, it was working on ourselves. They also had trouble, code green is everything’s okay. Code yellow is there’s about to be trouble.

The whole time in treatment. I tried to have my parents bring in weed or liquor when they came to see me cause I wanted to get high or drunk, but they never did. I would always think about getting high or drunk. I was in for about nine months altogether. I turned sixteen there and ran away at the end of winter. It was a Sunday. Visiting hours were Sunday from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. I pretty much planned it out with another individual in my group. I asked him to distract the staff on duty. I ran out of the building. When I walked out to the left there was a stairwell and then a door to the back of the building. When I was running down
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the hill I ran into my mom and little sister. Then we jumped on the bus. A friend met us at the bus stop. Then we went to Minneapolis for a couple months. A few months later I got caught. I had to do ninety days in another treatment program. After I did the ninety days in that program I was off probation.

Five years earlier, I started school at Heart of the Earth. This is a Native American school in southeast Minneapolis. I was in seventh grade. I started to smoke two or three blunts every other day. My parents even started smoking weed with me. I was staying out all night and not going home. I started getting arrested and spending weekends in the Juvenile Detention Center (JDC). I was going to school at Stadium View, which is the school inside of JDC. I met the principal. Her name was Carol. I forget how we started talking. I’d see her every time I was there. I would always get locked up on Friday and get out on Monday when I had court. The judges would always let me out. When I was locked up I would think about getting out and getting high. I’d think: *I wish I was out partying right now because it’s the weekend.*

Two years after I got out of the treatment programs, one night I got drunk. I woke up the next day at about 9am still drunk so I got up and started smoking. I called for a ride to a relative’s house to get money so I could go shopping for clothes and buy more liquor to party. That’s when I committed the crime I got sent to prison for. I seen someone I had a beef with over an argument on Facebook. I physically assaulted him, and took property from him.

After this happened my drug use continued. I was still smoking, getting high, and drinking, getting drunk, way into the summer. In July, I was at my house. My sister came and woke me up and said some people are here for you. I didn’t
know who it was so I got up, put on my shoes and a muscle shirt. I went to the backdoor. They asked what my name was and I told them.

They asked if I could step outside and talk to them. They told me they were detectives investigating a robbery. My heart dropped. I already knew what they were there for, so I kept my mouth shut. They asked me questions and I didn’t answer. They read me my rights and arrested me and took me to JDC in downtown Minneapolis. I was charged with two counts of first degree aggravated robbery and second degree assault. I was released a few days later, and placed on house arrest. I went back to my house. They gave me the conditions of house arrest. They told me I had to follow them until my next court date, which was a few months later. One of the conditions of house arrest was to abstain from using any mood altering substances. What do I do the first day? I smoke and get high. I spent my eighteenth birthday on house arrest. School was about to start and it was my senior year, so I decided to sign up for school.

When I turned eighteen I received a check from my reservation. I ran through $20,000 on clothes, drugs, and alcohol going to strip clubs and taking trips. Then I didn’t have nothing so I turned myself in to the JDC. During this time I took a guilty plea bargain for thirty-six months for first degree aggravated robbery. I went to court and was certified as an adult. I was transferred to Hennepin County. I was sentenced and transferred to MCF- St. Cloud. My criminal activity continued in prison. I assaulted another inmate. I was eventually given an additional fifteen months for the assault. That was served after I served the time for the original crime.

When I was in JDC before I was certified as an adult I knew in my mind that I was going to eventually go to prison. I was telling Carol, the principal at the school there, “Yeah, I’m gonna go to prison.”

“I will come visit you and send you books,” Carol said. She did. She was sending me books from a bookstore, but I didn’t get none of them cause they
got to be sent from a certain place or something. It’s like a process. She was coming to visit me, she even rode a bike from south Minneapolis to Stillwater to come visit me. Eventually I met her husband. I feel like growing up I didn’t really have a support system. She seen me then and she knows me now. She seen me in there. When she came to visit I told her what is going on in the unit like people just got done fighting or the whole unit is drunk and they just got locked down. You know, I remember her coming to visit and she would ask me is that a new tattoo?

When I first got to Stillwater I was getting into trouble. It’d be for like fighting or tattooing or getting drunk. The first time I got in trouble I flooded the cell. I clogged the toilet up with a shirt, and kept flushing the toilet. I think I got 45 days in seg, which is a unit for discipline, sometimes called solitary confinement, and I ended up doing like 15 of them before being moved to B West, in-house seg. They give you your clothes and possessions like a hot pot, a tv. I’d get LOP, which is loss of privileges, that was for breaking petty rules. Which was like don’t throw stuff up to another cell. I’d be out of my cell during LOP, which was breaking the rules, so I’d get more LOP. Sometimes I would even end up in seg over that. I was still fighting, trying to make hooch, and that went on for awhile. It was seg to B-West, seg to B-West, seg to B-West.

I was sitting in seg one day and thinking about how many people there are in the world, and how at that day at that time I was the one sitting in this cell. I got to thinking about everything I’d done in my life, and I realized I wanted better. I realized going to school was the best thing I could do at that time in my life. I ended up staying out of trouble for thirty days so I could get classes.

At first they gave you a half a day so you could prove yourself. I ended up being able to go a full day. I did that for three months and I graduated. The same month I graduated I went to a treatment program. I was in there for ten months. The whole time was intensive treatment. It was even more intense in there
because of the way the program is ran, and you’re getting feedback from people. If you talked about something in group they’d say something like I think you have a control issue, and then challenge you to change that behavior. During my time in treatment I addressed personal issues, family issues, my behavior and the way I think.

I did this by having treatment plans with assignments and I completed the assignments. They were intense assignments. I also went to weekly NA and AA meetings. We would have mentors who were other inmates who would be involved in your treatment more than other peers. He would know what my treatment plan was, what my assignments were, and when they were due. A mentor was someone you could talk to, someone you could trust. Being a mentor would mean you were a senior peer. Eventually I started after care, which is planning your release. They had you do a twenty-four-hour after release plan, a week after release plan, a month after release plan. We’d meet once a week for a few hours. We had the privilege of getting coffee with creamer. I came up with a release plan, a place to go to. I got to meet my parole officer.

During that time I was thinking I should get out and go to college.

And I did.

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At six years of age, I woke up to the most exciting Christmas gift someone my age can have: the birth of my baby brother. Unfortunately, this excitement was short lived when Noel died that evening in my arms. This was a devastating experience that took me way into my adult life to overcome, especially since prior to that, I had lost my dad at age two. There is no mechanism in our cultures designed to support children or adults on how to grieve. It was only in my adult life that I began to address my trauma and grief while recognizing how it is linked to the many changes and losses I experienced in my life.

Even though I don’t have a clear recollection of how I was supported, the trauma impacted me. I became afraid of the dark and of death. My mother was very concerned about this and was determined to help me address this crippling experience the best way she knew how. So late one evening, she and two of my brothers worked up a scheme. My mother was to be completely robed from
head to feet in a white sheet. She was to come to the outside door closest to my bedroom and knock with the hope that they could get me to open it.

So the saga began, I heard the door rattling. I was scared, and called out to my brothers for help. They ignored my call for help and instead insisted that since the door was closest to my bedroom I should go and open it and not be such a wimp.

I crawled, shaking, to the door and opened it quickly. I started to run back to my room. I looked back and I saw the white sheet. I screamed and dropped to the ground, and I don’t know if I fainted. All I remember was my mother threw the sheet over her head, picked me up, shook me frantically and said, “I never want you ever to be afraid of the dead; I want you to be afraid of the living because that is who can harm you.”

Far forward in my life I had an opportunity to teach Death and Dying as a health instructor at Minneapolis College and to consult on change and loss while working in the corporate setting. I eventually changed my college course to Grief, Loss, and Change. This insight has proven to be invaluable as I work with students and clients. I recognize and understand the trauma that loss and grief play in our lives. This impacts the way we accept change and grow, a critical part of leadership and success.

Once again, leadership could not escape me, or I could not escape it as a child. I was fourteen years old when my mother left for Wales to study, and my youngest brother was two months old. A large part of my responsibility was to care for him and my other two younger siblings. This entailed getting my mother’s paycheck, and helping my grandmother manage the household budget. My grandmother was eager to turn over the responsibility of running the house and taking care of my siblings. She was a very controlling person, the eldest of ten children, a very independent woman who owned her own business.
I could see where my mother got her independence from, and I often wondered why either of these two influential women in my life ever had children.

Even before my mother left for her studies, I played a major role in our household. I always loved organizing, planning the family meals, cooking, shopping, making up menus, and setting up the table in fancy ways. None of these tasks appealed to my mother. She told us that when she was growing up she was always in her room curled up with a book. She loved to read and loved to study. She was a proverbial student and had no interest in homemaking, and this continued through my teenage years. This was why I became the homemaker.

Again, I wondered, why did she ever have children? My grandmother who was not very far away in a her belief, similar to my Mom’s, felt that doing household chores was a bother and took her away from her clothing and sewing business. I would often hear her complaining “you can’t expect me to cook and sew with the same hands,” so we always had someone to cook our meals. So both my mother and grandmother were willing to have me take over this responsibility by trial and error. I used some of these skills to have a little business on the side by baking and decorating cakes. It was no wonder that when my mother left she had the confidence to leave me to run the household.

Caring for my siblings while trying to study and trying to be a teenager was extremely difficult. I still have an image of me going on dates at the waterfront with my two younger siblings hand in hand, a memory my sister still has.

I was never able to keep up successfully with my classwork, causing me to fail high school. During that period in the Caribbean you were required to pass a final high school exam called GCE, which was mailed and graded in London, England. In order to be accepted into university you must pass five subjects. I only passed one subject. I passed History with distinction.
The following year I was sent to a vocational program where I learned typing and shorthand because my mother was concerned that I needed some skills in order to make a living. By then, she had determined that I did not have what it took to go to university. I am so glad I became efficient at typing and shorthand because when I did come abroad and did, in fact, have an opportunity to go to college, when my friends worked at McDonald’s, these skills gave me the edge. I was a secretary at the World Bank and typed my own Master’s Thesis.

Little did I know at the time this huge responsibility of parenting my siblings that robbed me of some of my teen years was yet another way of preparing me for leadership. I actually tell my students that my high school years were not successful because I was too busy taking care of my siblings.

This experience has taught me to be empathetic to the lives of many of our Minneapolis College students who can relate to these challenges based on their own personal experiences.

Following high school, I attended a predominantly white residential community college in Canada where I was one of two black female and two black male students on a campus of 250 students. I was the only black female student in my graduating class.

Following my Canadian experience, my educational career took me on a scenic route to Puerto Rico, then Howard University, and finally the University of Michigan, where I became a registered dietitian. Upon graduation I received a position as chief clinical dietitian, my first professional job, and the hospital administrator’s feedback was “the leadership responsibility you had as a child prepared you.” I was chief clinical dietitian, and two years later I became Director of Dietetics for the next ten years. This position tested my skills as a leader and gave me insight into self care.
My career shifted when the hospital closed twelve years after I started and I lost my job. I was now seeking to address the next phase of my life. I chose to take a year off from my health care career and dance. As a youngster growing up in St. Kitts, one of the Caribbean islands, dancing was always one of my passions. Because the stress of taking care of my siblings was so intense dance became my outlet. It healed me and made me alive. My body was less inhibited than my head, I danced and I wasn’t angry.

Here I was again at another stressful point in my life and I went back to dance to center myself. Fortunately for me, I met another dance enthusiast, who was named Maria, and joined her in dancing. She was my dance teacher and taught me African dance and I taught dance classes with her. This time off gave me perspective on how I lead and how I lead under pressure because dancing is a metaphor for self-discovery, giving and receiving feedback while creating a safe environment for everyone involved.

I always loved to dance and the type of dance I loved was our cultural dancing which involved swaying of the hips and moving my body in positions that were not acceptable in my grandparent’s religion and in our family home. My grandparents were lay ministers and church was held in their home in the country.

However, that did not stop me from enjoying dancing. My mother said that she used to look outside the window and see me dancing with the trees and wished she had taken pictures of me. Instead, to quell my desire for dancing she signed me up in square dancing, maypole dancing, ballet, cha-cha-cha and anything that did not give me the opportunity to wiggle my butt and sway my hips, which was my preference.

One of our neighbors who was my grandmother’s age felt very sorry for me, and said that looking at me dancing in the backyard was like looking at a caged bird. She invited me to buy some pants. I did not own a pair of pants. I was to put the
pants in her house, jump over her fence, put them on, and go dancing in the streets for carnival. A caged bird no more I became free. From this experience I got in major trouble with my parents. However, from my mother and her lesson of the white sheet I had the courage not to be afraid as I reminded her of her message to me when she dressed up as a ghost. My life was never the same after that.

In my new life in Minnesota, I taught dance for over twenty-five years and was featured in an aerobics video. Dancing, for me, is a metaphor for leadership. I recognize the importance of movement without fear, the steps one needs to lead, the choreography or systems needed to put a project in place, the feedback needed to ensure the steps and movement are well choreographed. This is the leadership I learned from dance.

My career shifted again when I joined corporate America to teach wellness and eventually became a corporate trainer and diversity advocate. During this experience I traveled to over thirty states and Canada, where I had the opportunity to support employees in times of change. My love of teaching prompted a parallel career. Eventually I left the corporate world and I came to teaching on a full-time basis. While in my teaching role I was invited to become Special Assistant to the President for Diversity at what is now Minneapolis College.

It is in this role that my relationship with the founding of Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) began. One of the first responsibilities the President tasked me with in my new role was to lead a team of administrators, faculty, and staff in selecting a program that would improve the graduation rates and support success of African American males.

We hold the distinction of being the first SAAB chapter in the state of Minnesota. We had the vision then and now of being dedicated to the success of African American males and SAAB’s mission aligned with the college’s mission. A
committed team executed by three co-chairs and twelve core committee members representing faculty, administration, staff, and students chose this model. SAAB is recognized as a national and international culturally sensitive organization whose members represent African Americans, Africans, Caribbeans, and Latinos. We wanted to convey SAAB’s motto “Saving Lives and Salvaging Dreams,” an attractive fit for our community because of our goal to increase the number of certificates, AAs and transfer students in this population. It was one of my greatest pleasures to be a part of launching this very important work, and to observe how Dr. Jesse Mason, Dr. Jay Williams, Mother Andrea Hill, dedicated faculty, staff, students and Minneapolis College’s leadership have demonstrated a commitment to this work.

Speaking of relating to our student population as a fellow immigrant many of their stories remind me of my own. While I was in community college in Canada my family was exiled from our island because of the politics of a dictator. Therefore, returning to my island was not an option after graduation. Years later, after I graduated from the University of Michigan, I accepted a position in Minnesota where I joined my husband-to-be.

My husband and I had been both recruited to professional jobs in Minnesota. We proceeded to file the necessary papers to obtain our landed immigrant status, similar to today’s permanent residence status. It was taking a while and we had no idea what the hold up was until we both received deportation papers. We had to strategize what steps we needed to take. One of the first steps we took was to get a lawyer. He recommended we live our lives as normal, which we did. We purchased our first house and waited for the immigration results. He said we had very good chances of obtaining our papers, and he was right. Years later we even received our citizenship. Remember the childhood experience my mother gave me that taught me how not to fear? Well, it came in handy.
Many years later as I spread my mother’s ashes in the ocean, on the Atlantic side, the very rough and windy side of the island where people drown in the waves. A gust of wind occurred at the same time and sent the ashes back to my face and covered my face like a veil. My life had come full circle as I recalled my mother clothed in the white sheet, trying to scare my fear of death out. I was now covered in her body and no longer afraid. I had embraced fear.

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Part 8 Pride
Evolution of a Jewel

by

Jewlene Bellamy

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It was when I was 16 and I just gave birth to my baby boy Julius that I felt everything in my life shift. As I stood in a cold dreary room in St. John’s hospital in Far Rockaway, New York staring out a small, dingy and wired window, I realized that I wanted to provide more for my child Julius, than what I had when I was a little girl. I didn’t want my first born son Julius to experience the impoverished moments of standing outside in lines with strangers waiting for any food that the food shelf would give and fighting over second hand clothes. I did not want my child to start selling drugs for money or get involved with any scams conning people to get by.

I knew I was a poor, uneducated woman, yet I felt like a new woman. I stood, for what seemed like days, wishing that I did not have to bring him to the roach infested, piss in the hallways and elevator, drug addicts and dealers roaming, one bedroom with three adults living in an apartment, home. For instance when I was living in the projects I could hear police and ambulance sirens, next door
neighbors’ wife crying and being beat on, while the kids are screaming: “MOMMY,” and the cops never coming to rescue her, no matter who called them. But for every bad, there was good. Every culture blasting their own type of music, children playing in the hallways, smells of different foods filling up the hallway and neighbors stepping out feeling dope in their flyest fashions.

After 5 years of unfulfilling jobs and unhealthy relationships I decided to sacrifice everything to be a better person, mother, and get rid of my own demons. I gravitated towards my faith in God and joined my Christian family that taught me to trust God and walk by faith and not by sight. My faith in God helped me make the hard decision to become celibate, and focus on my education while sacrificing gettin’ that quick dollar.

As the sun was rising, I was laying in the bed with my 4-year-old son sleeping until there was a knock on the door and my grandmother called me by my nickname. “Dee-Dee someone is at the door for you!” I got up and walked towards the door and saw a police officer waiting for me with papers in her hand. So I asked “What’s going on?” The police officer said “You have an order of protection against you from your grandmother - you have to go.” I said “What? Why? For what”? I turned to my grandmother and I asked her “What’s going on? She replied, “You’re just like your mother.” I responded “If you wanted me to move out all you had to do is tell me!!” She could not look me in my eyes. Having no choice but to leave, I was escorted out by the police.

What kind of grandmother and grandfather just kicks their family out for making a decision to apply for college and not work for McDonald’s? My grandmother was a teenage mother who had a middle school education and taught me by any means necessary to “get that money.” I always felt pressured to work,
scheme or con men out of money to appease my grandparents and keep a roof over my head.

One night I heard my grandparents whispering about me while I was trying to sleep on their couch. I overheard them say, “We can’t afford to take care of her, so how are we going to pass her on to her mother who is out there on the streets, doing drugs, whoring and worthless?” This crushed me to hear these pillow talks about how negative my mother’s life was and how negative they thought my life was going to turnout.

They loved me in the bright light of day, but loathed me in the dark deep of night.

My grandmother had a history of unhealthy relationships while being influenced by her mentally ill, drug addicted common-law husband. Her history was now a part of her mindset and that history was clouding her judgement and being pushed onto me. My grandmother told me, while I was gathering some of my clothing, “If you leave that church alone then you could stay here.” I looked her in her eyes shook my head and said no and continued packing when she walked away. I felt ruined and like a failure, wondering what I did so terrible to deserve this treatment, while emotionally breaking down and crying into my pile of clothing.

I was homeless. Again. I made the toughest decision of my life to give my son over to his father so that he would not suffer from homelessness like me. I felt like less than a mother, less than a woman, when I placed my child in his father’s home. I walked through the rest of the day in a blur. The only way I was able to take of myself was by working as a Personal Care Assistant in the day, and going to church in the evening.

Unfortunately, plans for employment, and housing in New York City did not work out well for me. The rent was so ridiculously high that I could barely afford it.
while trying to pay child support. I didn’t know how I was going to survive while paying for child support. When I was renting a room and eating ramen noodles and stealing peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from my roommate. I was faced with decisions like, “Do I use this money to pay my transportation to work or should I use it to buy me something to eat?” All the good paying jobs I wanted required some level of a college degree. After many hours working to gather all the necessary info, I finally was accepted to Metropolitan Community College in New York. Even with my dreams of college, I could not stay because of all the turmoil that I was going through in the single women’s shelter.

I was dealing with women who were very aggressive to me, some of them made me feel scared but I never showed it. I bottled it all up and kept to myself. Especially waking up in the morning, having to share a bathroom with multiple women, and always having to be on guard because fights would break out at any giving moment. It was hard as hell to keep up with court dates and I was constantly fighting to keep my visitation rights while being evaluated by a psychologist. I was fighting lies weekly to prove that I was not crazy and an unfit mother. All while trying to keep a job working as a Personal Care Attendant - being paid minimum wage. I kept my spirits up by listening to Gospel music, dressing myself in beautiful clothing, going to free music and movie events at Bryant Park, going on dates with my man. Anything to help me forget the shit I was dealing with on the daily.

On and off for seven years I was homeless, trying to find my way to a place of peace, security, and love. I ended up moving back to Minnesota in April 2010, a place I had previously called home after my mother was married there in 1993, as cost of living was cheaper and to gain peace of mind, while getting my life in order and developing a deeper relationship with God. I tried to reconcile and live with my mother, but once again there was discord between my mother and me. She would scoff at how different I was and say I was acting like a white girl
because I enjoyed listening to different kinds of music, wearing different kinds of clothes and I enjoyed studying the dictionary as learning was important to me.

My mother was jealous that I would willingly walk a mile to the bus stop to catch the bus in search of work and professional training. I felt like she was threatened by my ambition. It was discouraging how she would respond to me when I walked in the house and say hello to her after a long day. She would look at me with disgust in her eyes and a grimace on her face. My mother’s attitude towards me led us to arguing and she told me to leave. I left and entered the Salvation Army shelter, Harbor Lights, in downtown Minneapolis. I felt I had no other choice and 3 months later, I was accepted in a housing program.

I felt like I was getting a second chance at life all over again. I mean the sun was always shining in my eyes, when actually the sun was not always shining in Minnesota. I committed myself to therapy to confront my past demons and gain a better perspective on life.

I started to dream again.

I wanted to be more than what the world said I would become statistically. While I was volunteering in food shelves, ministry and community service, I began to show interest in furthering my education. I was afraid to attend college again because I had failed a few times in the past. Yet, physically and mentally I knew that I was in a better space in life to finish college successfully. I had love to keep me stable, even while I had to keep court appointments in Minnesota and New York to fight for the rights of my oldest son, work temporary jobs for minimum wage pay, and pay to travel back and forth to check on him. I was exhausted physically and financially, but mentally growing stronger.

I became pregnant – it was 2011. It had been 12 years since I gave birth to a baby. In the fall of 2011 my baby was born. I named him Emanuel after a boy I
Evolution of a Jewel

used to counsel in a group home 9 years earlier. The name Emanuel means: God is with us. On the darkest of days speaking his name created light in my life. There are not enough words to express the joy I felt for my new son Emanuel. I fell in love all over again. From that day on I was motivated to give him and his oldest brother Julius a chance at greatness.

The most important thing I needed to do was to finish getting my degree. I survived domestic violence from both baby daddies and even avoided another hazardous relationship that was leading to marriage. My ex-fiancé wanted me to quit school and continue to work and support him financially, spiritually, and emotionally. But in order to truly take care of my family, I could no longer put other people’s needs before mines. So I bowed out of the relationship gracefully.

My son and I moved back in with my mother the summer of 2015. I believed this was the perfect opportunity to restore what we had lost as a mother and daughter and I hoped to finish obtaining my associates degree in Business Management at Minneapolis College.

For a year and a half it seemed like my dreams were coming true. I was working towards creating a music label and had just spent the weekend with my brother and just completed my first song. Upon my return home, I learned that my mother started doing crack and drinking again. That day I had to call the cops on my mother two times just hoping that they could get her to calm down so that my son Emanuel and I would feel safe. The next morning after the hellish night, she woke up and began to taunt me again. This vulgar behavior provoked me into feeling that old ruthless female I used to be when I was living in Brooklyn and Far Rockaway Queens.

I had to make a decision. Do I revert back to my old negative ways and risk losing my education and everything I worked for, or step out on faith? I decided to search out a family shelter, and focus on positivity and growth. My decision pushed me to become a first generation college graduate. I graduated from
Minneapolis College on May 16, 2017 with job offers! I was hired from a company that is number 35 on the Fortune 500 list. I will never stop fighting for what I need. I have always worked when no one was watching, and I became more than what they said I am.

The evolutions of a jewel will always be multifaceted but never tarnished.

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I was surrounded by black people. More specifically, by multiple black men. They had just introduced themselves to me, and I was extremely shy around new people. I was trying to make a good impression to these men who were now my coworkers, and I had already forgotten their names. The only thing I could recall was the long “G” sound of one of their first names and that another of my coworkers was a self-professed Pepsi addict who was into drinking 2 liter bottles of Pepsi frozen for the perfect amount of time.

If they were white, I wouldn’t have thought about their physical strength relative to mine or noticed how most of them towered over me, I would have simply been in their presence. However, these were black men. The type of people I didn’t interact with, if not downright avoided, despite my father being one.

Seeing the mug shots of dark male faces on the news, watching them congregate in large rambunctious groups downtown and hearing about baby
mama drama on court shows was enough exposure for me! I knew I wasn’t in danger in the presence of these black men, but I knew it was only a matter of time before one of them would make a pass at me. That was another experience I was too familiar with in my white-washed world. It was seemingly only black men that hit on me at work or while walking down the street. As one black man told me while I worked the service desk at Target, my former job, “A sister like you needs a ‘man,’ not a ‘boyfriend’ when he asked me if I was in a relationship. I sat there taking these black men’s compliments about my Afro and how they appreciated I was “down for the cause”. I wasn’t entirely sure what cause or what I was down for. I just knew that I would be working at the African American Education and Empowerment Program (AME) at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (Minneapolis College). I never considered looking for employment at AME because I knew I wasn’t black and only black people worked at those kinds of places. Rather, my former Anthropology professor and then coordinator of AME, Jay Williams, PhD, hired me because he liked my work ethic and thought I would benefit from an opportunity to develop my ethnic identity. Jay Williams, who we affectionately call Dr. Jay, told me when he interviewed me for the job that “it’s better to work through these issues now because it will be much harder as you get older.”

Ten minutes later I was hired to work at AME, an initiative of Minneapolis College designed to increase the graduation and retention rates of African American students. After my interview, I walked out of his office with a bitter sense of irony because I harbored a secret disdain for Black people. But, if I wanted to quit the monotony that is working at Target and gain experience in my field of study, I had to find a way and deal with it. In other words, I had to put up and shut up. I was cognizant enough to know that my disdain most likely stemmed from my childhood. As a little nappy headed girl, I was faintly aware that my father, who is black, had a family. I only saw them once every couple of years when they
needed something or when someone was ill. My fate was sealed for me over forty years ago when my father was a child. My grandfather had extramarital affairs and used my dad as the scapegoat to avoid taking responsibility for the strife this and other behaviors caused. In addition, my grandfather manipulated my dad’s three other siblings and pitted them against him. His family then interfered in my father’s first marriage, and turned his two kids against him. In my make believe world, white families like my mother’s didn’t have those levels of dysfunctionality.

Once, when I was in 2nd grade, we were learning to write complete sentences by writing about our families. I was full of pride when I connected the dots that I did indeed have two sisters and that I wasn’t alone when so many of my other classmates had siblings. My enthusiasm was intensified because I was heavily into “girl power” and finding solidarity with other females simply because they are women too.

I tried to find this “girl power” in one of my sisters who used to visit my parents and I about once every two years. Every visit, she would call me “sis” and my childhood nickname “boo”. Before leaving, she would talk about seeing me again soon which made me feel excited and loved, but “soon” never happened. My mother’s predominately white family never left me hanging like that; I could always depend on seeing them for holidays and birthday parties.

Abandonment and disappointment began to take on a black face, even despite my father’s love and constant presence in my life. I hated my dad’s family for not taking the effort to be a part of my growing up. No holidays together, fussing over my hair, hooting and hollering at my high school graduation, nothing.

“Hey Sarah, do you have anything you want to share?” Dr. Jay would ask me when AME held book club discussions Fridays during the summer. The answer to me seemed cripplingly obvious. He tended to ask me this after 40 minutes of me sitting there in silence while I furiously scribbled notes so that I could
memorize the topics that members of AME talked about. Anything I didn’t experience directly I could memorize and pass it off as my own knowledge. With time, I hoped I could pass for Black, because nothing felt Black about me, only my nappy hair and my ability to sing songs from Black music artists like Stevie Wonder or the O’Jays. The more they talked at book club meetings or during impromptu discussions in the AME space, the more my resentment grew.

Like any ‘good’ white person should, I romanticized the creation of the United States and thought of the founding fathers as being morally outstanding and legendary. My peers at AME didn’t see it the same way I did for a variety of reasons I didn’t understand, but I hated feeling ignorant. This increased my self-doubt which fed my resentment. They talked about issues I’ve only read about or seen on TV. Issues such as what it is like to have kids with more than one father or the current effects of historical and institutionalized racism. I lived with both of my parents in the same, albeit structurally unsound, house for 18 years and never went without. The feeling of being a naïve and spoiled brat further fueled my self-doubt and resentment for them people. I take great pride in having a wide knowledge base about all types of music being a musician like my father, but they could sing R&B songs and rap lyrics from the 80s, 90s, and 2000s that I couldn’t. It was unbearable. It was like they were extraterrestrials from another planet.

However, I was the extraterrestrial because I was the one in unfamiliar ground, yet, they treated me as if I belonged. They accepted me. That confused and scared me because I believed that my commonalities with my coworkers started and ended with Minneapolis College. I didn’t want to let them down if they tried to get to know me as a friend outside of work.

One of my first exercises in belonging and acceptance unwittingly came my first month into the job when Dr. Jay and I went to meet with the leaders of a summer school program that instills the value of going to college in inner-city
youths. When we arrived, he began the process of introducing us to the room full of people because I was too afraid to branch off on my own and network with people. Growing tired of smiling and nodding my head in an attempt to look competent to whomever Dr. Jay talked to, I ventured off by myself to grab a seat before the start of the meeting.

“You are my cousin,” a young black man with short dreadlocks said to me. It took a moment to understand what he said to me as the words took shape in my mind. When it clicked, I thought he was being a smart ass, hitting on me, or that he was speaking some type of slang.

“Yeah”. I said laughing nervously.

“I am your cousin. Your dad is --” I was happy someone pronounced it right, before it dawned on me. Then I reeled at the mention of my dad’s name.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Your nephew.” I couldn’t remember the last time I seen him. I had to be no older than nine or ten which would have made him a toddler. In the short amount of time we had, we exchanged a little bit of small talk about our jobs, but we had little in common to reference except us being related by blood. I couldn’t feel anything for this young black man as he looked more like someone I would see in the news having shot someone or having died from a gunshot wound than a relative. I couldn’t imagine being related to him, I was lost at the mention of him living on the Northside of Minneapolis. At the time, I didn’t know anything about North except for the stereotypes that nothing good comes out of there.

I was thankful for the beginning of the meeting and the chance to reunite with Dr. Jay. I sat far apart from my nephew, and didn’t so much as glance in his direction. I wanted to stare at him the entire meeting studying him: the way he dressed, his mannerisms, if I could see any of my father in his features. To see my father in his face would mean I was related to this young black man which
would make it hard to deny I have sisters, two half-sisters who are both black, a
father who is black, an entire family who is black and…

… myself…

I got another one-two-punch when talking to Dr. Jay about how I couldn’t shake
the pervasive feeling that I was ethnically white, lower case. I shared with him
how I felt like I didn’t belong and that I couldn’t relate to their life experiences.
The world I grew up in was the white world. He listened patiently to me talk on
and on, but when it was his time to speak he told me about myself.

“Sarah,” he told me, “you might identify as White but when you apply for a job,
do you think they would view you that way?” I don’t remember what I said to
him, but my mind was racing with so many possibilities. I could straighten my
Angela Davis afro or don a wig. I could then pass as a tanned white person by
staying out of the sun just as my mother's mother had done to hide her
Portuguese heritage. I could also stubbornly cling to the fantasy that people
discriminate against me only because I am bisexual and genderqueer as my
queer identity was much stronger at that time.

“When you go for a job interview, people will identify you as being black despite
how you identify yourself,” Dr. Jay told me that I could be offered lower wages
because of my race and gender. “Employers might also exploit how you
distance yourself from ethnic issues and use you for it,” he said. I stifled the
need to strike out against him or cry and instead averted my gaze until we were
done talking. The message was loud and clear: as long as the fallacy of race is
still prevalent in our society, I will never be viewed as an equal to White people
with a capital ‘W,’ no matter how much I desire it.

Six months into my employment at AME, I finally imploded within the confines of
Dr. Jay’s office. I was angry and greatly frustrated with the lack of progress I
perceived AME to be making. I had come to care a lot about the members of
AME having spent many weekdays bonding with them over work and our studies. I wanted AME to work for them – for us - just as much as I cared about how it would affect my professional reputation.

“Dr. Jay, these people are messing around when we could be doing much more with this organization.” As I talked, the vile hatred was rising to my throat. I held it in for so long. Before I came to AME, when my exposure to black people was severely limited, I used to hear the word “nigger.” It was used to slam black people who were fulfilling the stereotypes of being lazy, promiscuous, stupid, uneducated, violent, or self-defeating. Even if white people acted in these same ways, I never heard them cursed with the weight of their entire ethnic group.

“Dr. Jay, we’re acting like a bunch of house niggers here!” It was a relief to spill that familiar hatred.

“Do you even know, what the term house nigger means?” Dr. Jay said as even and calm as ever. I could answer him based off what I memorized from the discussions in AME but it would take the venom out of what I said.

“Well…” I rambled off some mess in hopes it would go away. When I was done, he explained to me that a house nigger is a term for a slave who works in their master’s home and has an arguably better life than slaves who toil away in the fields. He then asked me what I could do to help my perceived problems with AME before opening his office door and sending me back out into the AME space to finish my work. I couldn’t win. I couldn’t maintain my sense of racial superiority and work at AME. I liked the people at AME and the environment too much to quit.

Unlike when I left Dr. Jay’s office after I got hired, I left Dr. Jay’s office with a different sense of irony. If a given person walked past the AME space and looked through the glass panes on the door, they would view me as a so-called “house nigger” too. Prejudice doesn’t discriminate, no matter how much I tried
to separate myself from it. I was Black, undeniably black. Sure, I am queer, I am female, I am a student, I am a musician amongst so many other things, but my blackness took on a sort of master status. Any prejudiced person who uses their misconceptions of what is Black as a lens to view my thoughts, my feelings, my life, my choices and my shortcomings could never appreciate my intricacies. I would only be another black person to them.

My time with AME has been a blessing in disguise to me. While it took me a long time to grasp the perspectives of many people in the AME space, I quickly felt a sense of family and belonging in that space that my dad’s side of the family never granted me. My ideas of blackness went from solely being about abandonment, disappointment, and a confused sense of hatred to acceptance and appreciation. While I have different experiences than my brothers and sisters at AME have went through, I appreciate that this is okay and that I have unique experiences in my own right. I thank many of my brothers and sisters in AME for accepting me as I was and letting me grow at my own pace. Also, I dedicate this piece to Dr. Jay and my father.

I dedicate this piece to Dr. Jay for taking a chance on me the summer of 2015 by hiring me. He was the catalyst that sparked this stage in my personal growth by helping me to appreciate my blackness and the liminal, the state of existing in between socially defined categories. I learned this concept in Dr. Jay’s Anthropology class and embraced it as its own social category because of my experiences with being in between gay and straight, male and female identified, white and black. In many ways, I am the liminal.

Finally, this piece is dedicated to my father for being the first black man in my life. Because of my experiences at AME, I have come to appreciate his blackness instead of viewing him in a colorblind fashion as that was easier for me to cope with. This journey has brought my father and I even closer because I have become empowered to discuss with him his past and what it means for
him to be a black man. To see his blackness is to finally appreciate the blackness that has been coursing through me all along.

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Part 9 Perseverance
I grew up in Minneapolis amidst provocative language, teen pregnancy, drugs, fights, shootings—norms, to a child of the North. Fortunately, my parents worked hard to shield me, worked hard to keep me close to God and become a force for good. Fast-forward to the present, and our Northside still suffers social ills at rates higher than our metro’s other parts, yet we’re told that “all lives matter.” Having now matured and emerged from my childhood innocence, I question whether Northsiders matter—at least, I question whether Northsiders matter equally to the outsiders known to enter.

When I was about eight I became an outsider myself, temporarily leaving Minneapolis for New Hope, a small suburb where I felt completely out of my norm, unwilling to believe my mom had moved us into a one-bedroom apartment, leaving behind our beloved two-bedroom. In New Hope, I slept on the floor with my brother while my older sisters scrunched together atop an antique couch. On the bright side, we grew tighter than ever in that cramped
place, but that didn’t stop us from wanting to return home—to our true home—in North Minneapolis.

And so it happened: my mom remarried, eventually building a house in the Northside across the street from where my mom’s new husband, Ricky, was raised. Upon the house’s completion Ricky was happy. I was happy for him and my mom, and I was joyed to sleep on a bed after doing all that hard time on the floor. It was like our version of a Cinderella story: we now had a park up the street, North Commons Park, a water park, Snow Foods, a corner store with deli, and the 4th precinct police station was just a walk away.

Our move entailed sharing a street with my cousins, which meant summers playing at the park, creating dances, running lemonade stands, and doing Double Dutch on the block while Mario rolled by in his ice cream truck. In my new neighborhood, I felt safe, secure; I knew everyone, and everyone knew me.

I’ll never forget one summer night sitting with my cousin outside her house, just stargazing and slurping red Kool-Aid. We thought we were something—the something—but it was late and beyond our curfew. We planned to rush inside her house if we saw the police, who would fine us for breaking curfew. We were thirteen and fifteen, out way after midnight, but because we were in front of my cousin’s house, we assumed we were safe.

We soon realized we weren’t exactly safe, but not for reasons you might suspect.

Prowling our way came a police car, driven by those from outside our Northside. My cousin and I dashed not into the house but, instead, behind bushes—privacy plants, really—guarding the front of my aunt’s. In a startling turn, the police parked their car and pulled their pistols, amplifying our senses, rendering us quivering behind bushes, beholding the voice of police, bellowing:

“Slowly come from the bushes!”
At the time, we had been fearing getting in trouble with parents, not getting shot by police. By the grace of God, our neighbors had been watching from their porch before jumping to our defense.

“No! Don’t shoot! They’re just kids! Kids!”

We slowly emerged from the bushes, revealing to the police our identities: kids. We dodged curfew trouble that night, and at the time, I didn’t know which blessing was greater: avoiding curfew tickets that would kill our summer fun—or just avoiding getting killed.

During this era, my family united nightly for dinner at a place most sacred: the kitchen table. One evening, our home-cooked feast featured corn, fried chicken, and mashed potatoes. As we conversed and consumed, our window revealed uninvited lights, red and blue. Since we had family members who lived on our street, we bolted out to see what was up on the block, then noticed my cousin’s house crawling with cops accompanied by dogs. I stayed on the porch with my brother. Ricky, however, walked down the street and approached the officers.

“Hey, officers. This is my family’s house, and I was wondering what’s the matter.”

An officer spoke: “Get out of here … not your concern.”

My mom urged Ricky to return home. On the inside I wanted the same, so Ricky returned to our house but then, soon after, left for the store. Alongside my mother and brother, we camped the porch until Ricky’s return, and when he arrived and exited his white Chevy, closing the door behind him, two police ran up on him and restrained him. Mom yelled to us kids to “Stay here! Don’t move!”, so we stood still. When Mom approached the police about their actions, they began walking Ricky down to my cousin’s house, which the other police were raiding. My mom’s ferocity with the police increased as time passed,
questioning what the other officers were doing with Ricky—and to Ricky—in that house. I asked my mom, “Why don’t you just call some different police?”

“Those are the police, baby; the others aren’t any different.”

I had been under the impression that police were sworn to protect, sworn to serve, but looking back, I felt diserved, disempowered … just dismissed.

Eventually, the police released Ricky, who came home and scaled our stairs, and as he did, I stopped, looked, listened, then spotted something: rear of Ricky’s ear sat a knot leaking blood. Noticing this injury, my mom panicked and ordered us kids to bed. I complied, but because I wanted to know why Ricky’s blood dripped I laid awake in bed, head sunk into pillow, ears listening to parents talking, mind wondering what wrong Ricky did—or didn’t do. Most of all, I thought if a police officer’s duty was to maintain a peaceful, non-violent environment, then why was Ricky bloody?

As I grew older, I began analyzing police procedures—always observing and evaluating police action and reaction. I noted the demographics of those pulled over and what kinds of cars were pulled over; I also noted the demographics of those doing the pulling over. When someone in my family called the police, I timed the responses … often slow, despite the 4th precinct being just a walk away. When the police—residents of elsewhere—drove down my street on a given day, what were their priorities? Would they lurk, asking questions like “Is that an open bottle of liquor on the sidewalk?” when we’re sitting on stairs connected to our homes? Or would they treat us with dignity, championing our privacy, our presumed innocence? The poet Maya Angelou once put a point on it: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

And I will never forget how I felt when Minneapolis police shot Jamar Clark.
On November 15th, 2015, one day after my little brother’s eighteenth birthday, I was home in bed, thinking. As I looked out my window, I saw the familiar lights, red and blue. I closed my eyes for a few moments, wishing the lights would die, but when my eyes opened, the lights lived, still strobing. Hearing chattering and yelling, I left my bed to see what was happening. While leaving my room, I saw my parents exiting theirs as well. We gathered on the porch to watch the drama down the block by what we call The Elk’s, where the whole block was on the block, looking. My aunt, who lives across the street, was departing the commotion when she broke the news: “The police shot somebody in the head, y’all!”

You might think we’d be shocked or that we’d ask why, but where we live, it seemed the outsiders didn’t much need the “why” once inside.

I returned to my room and escaped under covers, swimming—drowning—in schools of thought. I was curious. Who was this man? What was his name? Was he a father? Was he a student? Why, out of all places on his body, was he shot in the head? Was he resisting arrest? My curiosity haunted me. I wanted to know more, so I followed the Jamar Clark story from its genesis all the way through Mike Freeman’s revelation that no charges would be filed against the two officers responsible. Freeman’s decision left me disappointed, then disgusted, then disillusioned.

Now, our summer shines again, and just like when I was young, I peer out my window and see kids dancing Double Dutch, soaking up sun. I ponder the summers they’ll see, hoping their lives matter equally, and I pray that I’m right—that blue outsiders won’t spill red yet again, in the dead of the night, awakening us with their Northern Lights.

But the block knows they just might.

__________________________
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With no government established yet in South Vietnam, I did not know what to do. I had no job and little money. At 33 years old, my family of four included my husband, a three-year-old daughter and a one-year-old son.

After the first war in Vietnam ended in 1954, the Geneva Conference divided my country. North Vietnam was controlled by Vietnamese Communists and the South belonged to the Republic. The fighting between the two groups was ongoing with the American armies helping the South. My husband was originally from the North and could not live under the Communist regime; so, that year he left his parents and traveled South for freedom.

However, when the American Troops suddenly left Vietnam in 1975, the Vietnamese Communists took over South Vietnam in a big fight causing a lot of damage to our country in the South. It affected many people who were out of jobs, who now struggled in day-to-day living, including us.
Although this idea was new to me, I decided to use some money to make something to sell to earn a living. I wanted to prepare a traditional Vietnamese breakfast to sell, and I bought all of the ingredients to make “pork rice soup.” This was my first time trying something new, even though I only knew the basics of making the soup I would try to make it work. First, I cooked a big pot of white rice after seasoning ground pork with garlic and green onions; I stir-fried the ingredients, then, poured them into the pot of soup and mixed them well. I added more salt, a little sugar and some fish sauce; I made sure it tasted very good before taking it out to the market. The next day, in the early morning, when I brought the soup to the market to sell, it seemed I was a new kid on the block. Before, I worked in an office. I had to forget I was an office worker to fit into my new situation.

Many people bought soup. The currency was so worthless because the value kept changing due to new government trying to make its own people poorer, I still could not meet the needs of our small family. I was very frustrated!

Our good and comfortable life was becoming a nightmare. On April 30th, 1975 South Vietnam was taken over. This brought darkness into the South, and caused everything to change completely.

My husband and I were still looking to find some other things that we could do besides making breakfast, thankfully my friend from our church showed us how to bake bread. Despite it taking a few days of practice to make buns, we figured it out. The ingredients included wheat flour, eggs, sugar, salt, coconut oil, and yeast. First, I whisked the ingredients together for 5 minutes, mixed the flour in then added 2 cups of water and kneaded. After kneading, my husband covered the dough with a damp cloth, set it aside and let it rest for 20 minutes. To ready the dough, my husband continually kneaded the dough, than he rolled out the dough and cut it into pieces and shaped them like golf balls on two baking sheets. Setting the oven at 350 degrees, we baked those for 45 minutes. We
knew the bread baked through when the whole house filled with the smell of fresh sweet baking buns. I experienced making bread the first time in my life. My husband, my two children, and I, we enjoyed eating them first hand. It tasted so good when the buns were still warm. Therefore, we decided to sell them to our neighborhood in the evening time. After finishing dinner, I put all the buns into a big bamboo basket, covered them with a thick towel to keep them warm, and I was very excited to take on one more task to support my family as if it was needed.

Then my little boy got sick, and was in the hospital for four days. Unfortunately, he did not make it because of the shortage of doctors and the medication. When I watched, him struggling on his hospital bed, it was hard to control my tears as they wet my face. Holding my son’s hands while shaking her head, the nurse said, “Your son won’t make it.” It seemed like a thick, dark cloud fell over my face. That gripped my heart. I grieved deeply for him and felt so sorry. He had just become part of our family and we only have to love him for a little over two years. I never forgot those days. He was a happy, smart little boy who knew what to do every time my husband came home. He would have untied his daddy’s shoes or brought some trays for his dad to bake bread.

How could I describe in words that a piece of my heart was broken away? I thought if I had more money to pay for the medications on the black market that might be a hope for my son.

That sad event forced us to keep looking harder for an opportunity to escape Vietnam for a better life; it was scary to think another child might go through the same experience. I often heard that America was the land of freedom, a place where my hopes and dreams could come true. However, I had to carry on making breakfast and bread everyday with my three-year-old daughter and my husband to stay alive.
Four years went by, then one day my cousin told us, “There is a boat that will come soon, do you want to participate to get out of here?” Without hesitation, I said, “Yes, and I want to bring my mom too.” My cousin, the one who was a part of the group arranging the boat trip, agreed to let my mom go for free. After negotiating the cost, I told her that she could take my house, and all of the valuable things I had left. However, the cost for escaping by boat is ten ounces of gold per family which we didn’t have. As we prayed and put our total trust in our heavenly Father for a miracle; we remembered the Bible verse which says, “With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” We kept our focus more on God daily with an expectation that if it was in God’s will something supernatural might happen. A week went by; one of my husband’s relatives brought some gold to us and asked us to hide for her because she got one extra box of gold that she could not keep in her house. It was not a big surprise for us, we knew, for sure, that it was from the Lord who had heard our prayers. He made a way for us. Praise the Lord! With our thankful hearts, we borrowed that box of exactly ten ounces of gold, which we needed to pay for the trip. This money helped to save our lives, however it took us 10 years to pay it back!

Two weeks later, we completed the preparation for the departure. No one knew that we were leaving, and we had to keep this secret for two weeks.

Then came the time to leave on May 30, 1979. My whole family including my mom got into the big van, left the city during the evening, and went on a long ride for the whole night to get to a village near to the ocean. We were in the van filled with people that we could not move or talk on the way escaping because the time was so intent.

I was five months pregnant when I joined the trip to escape. After hiding in stranger’s houses for a week while waiting for a safe time to take off, anxious people started complaining to no avail. Finally, the time arrived to leave. Family
The Struggle to Get to My American Dream

helped each other get into the boat; there were about ninety people including children filling up a small boat. Sitting side by side, as sardines in a box, but no one felt that way because they were focused on the better place down the road. To me, there was such a cool breeze of freshness, which surround our boat. I prayed for a safe trip across the ocean.

Our voyage went smoothly for the first three hours, all of the fear of being chased after by the Communist Patrol was gone. Everyone now felt safer - we all had a feeling of relief. I could hear the noise of talking and laughing. Then, a loud voice broke the silence. “There is a big boat running towards us. It must be pirates!” Immediately, I felt very scared because I never thought about pirates attacking.

Then another voice loudly shouted,” Stop...Stop!” Right away, the captain slowed down and stopped. The pirates were at the front of our boat. People were trembling because the pirates were coming. We all stood up and tried to hide our jewelry but the pirates were faster than we were. They knew how to get our belongings quickly with their strong hands. They commanded us and made us obey them like robots without thinking. While the pirates were active, I quickly took out my wedding ring and I threw it to the side of the boat to avoid getting hurt. A few pirates who were chasing girls up and down the boat created some chaos, but thankfully, no one got hurt because the pirates had no weapons.

Suddenly, the running noise stopped. I heard, “Let’s go!” They jumped back to their boat and took off. My husband’s wedding ring was stolen, also both of our watches. We had nothing left to worry about! On the other hand, so we thought...

Looking at each other, not one of us could hide our sadness mixed with anger and hatred that words could not describe. The pirates had gone victoriously while we were left with our feelings of helplessness.
Perseverance

Getting back some inner strength, the captain and the crew of our boat continued the voyage, no one talked about the emotional pain he or she felt. The second day, the ocean was so calm. Everyone focused on different things. I noticed a couple of dots from afar as I overheard a conversation among a few people at the back, “We cannot find another way to avoid pirates. They are travelling up and down on the ocean. Hey, look over there, another boat is coming toward us.”

He was right! I looked out and saw something like a boat moving fast. I turned from my fear to my faith praying to Jesus for strength because the captain told us to never fight back or disobey them, or else we might get killed or be pushed into the water.

Therefore, for the second time, we were robbed and some beaten because the pirates could not find any more jewelry. The kids were crying when they saw the violent acts of the pirates, one pirate tore out some bags of clothes. He hoped to find some gold, but there was nothing. He became furious! He threw the bag in the corner of the boat and quickly left.

After the fifth day on the ocean, we were very hungry because we had not eaten anything substantial since we left shore. Everyone was so tired and hungry! We hoped that someone would come to rescue us. I heard the captain talking to his assistant, “It’s a fishing boat following us from behind.” Then, five fishermen stood on top of their boat making signals for us to stop our boat.

The captain did what they said. A few minutes’ later their big boat came beside ours. They asked, “Do you need food?” Without hesitation all answered, “Yes!” They made us get into their boat. They gave us food to eat. We all enjoyed their soup and felt such relief. We thanked them for their kindness, then, we went back to our boat.
Upon returning, we saw four pirates were searching for more of what they wanted in our belongings. A group of pirates living on the fishing boat had given us food. They became very angry and bitter because they could not find any of our valuables. Finally, two strong pirates went to the back of the boat and found an iron stick. They wanted to destroy the boat, but the captain begged them not to. They damaged one small engine instead. They quickly ran back to their fishing boat and they went away in anger and rage. We felt totally defeated under the power of such wicked men!

When I was in Vietnam, I thought a pirate was an imaginary person just appeared in movies. However, facing real pirates for the first time in my life, I was shocked. Dealing with them along the way on the boat in the ocean was an eye opening for me to know more about them. Pirates are very real human beings living on earth and the group of pirates who we met were from Thailand. They lived by fishing on the ocean and robbing boat people who escaped the communist country to find freedom. Pirates’ actions reflected their anger and hatred. They had no laws to obey nor love or concern about others.

Now our boat could not run as fast, but the captain kept our boat sailing hoping to get to a safe port. When our boat was almost to land, a group of Malaysian soldiers with guns pointed towards us shouted, “Stop, stop, you cannot land here.” Many of the people on board begged them in tears, “We cannot go any further!” They said, “It’s illegal to dock here unless you destroy the boat.”

Through the use of body language, the Malaysian soldiers commanded the boat to sink. Immediately, the captain and the crew ran to the front of the boat, with the big iron stick making holes so it would sink. All of the men jumped out to help children and women to the shore. Both my husband and I did not know how to swim so we were both scared. Thankfully, we were in shallow water and made it to shore safely. I praise the Lord for His protection of us during this
perilous journey, even though so many times we were in danger, the Lord ALWAYS was there to help us through.

The next day, after spending the night on a temporary Malaysian army base, the group of Malaysian soldiers used their big ship to take us to the Malaysian island, named Boulo Bidon, a “Refugee Camp,” where we got help from the US Red Cross. At the camp, we lived in a temporary dwelling - we used a tent for roof cover. We got water and food, like rice and canned foods once a week. Day by day, my husband and I went up to the dry hill to collect sticks for making a fire to cook our food. We were so thankful because all the fear and threats of those days on the ocean were just gone.

Still, at the refugee camp I learned to deal with new challenges. After four months living in the camp, my due date arrived. With the help of a Vietnamese doctor and her assistants at the refugee camp, I gave birth to my second baby boy. There were no baby clothes so my mother collected used cloth. She cut them out and made them smaller to fit my son. With a new baby, the Red Cross also gave us some dry milk to feed him because I did not have enough milk to nurse him. At this time, my mother was a big help to my family and me. She helped us in any way she could. What a blessing!

A missionary from Grace Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota came to Vietnam before the Communists took over the South. He met and mentored my husband Do then. When we were in the refugee camp in Malaysia Grace Church sponsored us to come to Minnesota. Finally, we could leave the camp and come to Minneapolis.

The challenges of the camp could not compare with the hardships and dangers from that life – threatening journey. The American Dream for me was how to get to America to find freedom and to worship the Lord. This was not easy in my country! I longed for peace of mind, as I didn’t want to be controlled by the Communist regime any longer. Through all of my struggles, great and small, my
learning is to thank God who allows adversities in my life, not to break me, but to make me a much better person.

On December 30, 2008, I retired from twenty-five years of work outside the house to support my family. Looking back, I can say my English barrier is the greatest challenge for my new life in the U.S. Therefore, my decision at age 71 in going to Minneapolis Community and Technical College is to learn more English and to get further education. Even though I had never gone to college before, I didn’t want to give up on my dream of learning. I believe God allowed many good things to me. I am thankful to be living in the United States. For the way God has provided for me by my faith in Christ Jesus and by my rescue from Vietnam, I cannot thank Him enough!

I want to live my life for His glory, and to encourage others who are without the hope that He provides.

The Bible says, “Trust the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.” Through all my rough journeys, especially escaping by boat and living in a refugee camp, my spiritual life has grown stronger every day by drawing near to the living God. He always strengthens me; He encourages me as a loving Father. I have a hope for my future. I do not mind to study, to work hard in school, and to set an example for my children.
I am a descendant of peoples brought together unwillingly by kidnapping, pillage, plunder, rape, and genocide. I am one generation removed from the reservation, but don’t have any acknowledgement from the tribe, despite having inherited all of the issues and generational curses that come from the Indian Removal Act. My family are members and descendants of the largest reservation in terms of enrollment numbers in Minnesota.

I am one of nine children. The four youngest of us were placed in a foster home with a Native family due to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), which requires Native children be placed within their own communities. They, a married couple with their own children, were raising us in traditional ways in a loving home. The “system” did not like this foster family because the family was trying to work with my mom. At times they extended an invitation to my mom to come to our house in the evening so we could have a supervised visit. Because the Native community is close their objective wasn’t severing family ties. At some point,
some bureaucrat decided our Mother’s tribal enrollment and blood quantum were not enough for us to be under the jurisdiction of ICWA. If my siblings and I had been covered by ICWA we would have been protected from much of our childhood trauma. Instead we fell through the cracks.

Four of my siblings and I moved in with a prominent family in a suburb ten minutes away from St. Paul. As we walked inside our beaded earrings and necklaces were immediately taken away. Our earrings and necklaces were Ojibwe jewelry given to us as a gift by our social worker, who was never to be seen again. Our foster mother hated us. We left a loving home in 1989. Our 18-year-old cousin stayed behind and our foster parents seemed to be as devastated as we were.

In our new home the word Mom was not to be uttered. No expressions of Native identity were allowed there. And when our social worker, an indigenous Hawaiian, dropped us off that was the last protection of ICWA in our lives. Our new foster mom would yell “You better not tell that Chinese bitch anything.”

Our foster mother would call my sister and I heifers, and if we spoke of our mom or family we were severely punished. Punishment was running up and down a staircase and jumping to the bottom for hours. In addition, we were made to stand on our tiptoes, arms outstretched with phone books sitting on our forearms. I have vivid memories of our foster mom a.k.a. the Devil going to White Castle and buying the biggest thing of burgers, fries, and drinks. My siblings and I were only allowed one burger, always going to sleep hungry or even getting a breakfast of cereal with only an ounce of milk in it. I would often steal a slice of bread and then run down the stairs and eat it just to stop the hunger pangs. On the weekends in the morning I used to eat toothpaste I was so hungry. It would make my stomach hurt.

My memories of that volatile foster care placement are mostly of being hungry and wishing someone would love us like their “real” kids. And what would that
have felt like? There were horrendous things that I will never speak of at the hands of that so-called mother. Our daily prison had a power and abuse dynamic. I always have memories of her luxury van, Infinity car, and boat. All of which, we were rarely, if ever, allowed to be in. Her floor-length mink coats and matching hats were locked away in a room-sized closet full of fancy things for special occasions. Memories are starting to fade, but there were always at least six foster kids in her care. The state of Minnesota made her life of luxury possible and never questioned her intentions.

Foster children know they are lucky that anyone wants them, especially since their bio family didn’t do what it takes to keep them in their bio family’s home.

The foster mom would frequently comment “If you complain to your social worker they’re going to take one of you away, split ya up” and “I will put you out of my house if you don’t follow the rules.” I’ve always figured that when most people think of Kindergarten to second grade they remember playing dolls, skipping rope, or chalking the sidewalk. All I remember is trying to protect my brothers and sisters. Each day was an effort to avoid her wrath.

My older sister caught the most hell, with her light skin and golden complexion. My younger brother and sister were too young to really understand what was going on. My sister was one-year-old and was never allowed to come out of her crib, ever. She would cry day and night, and we were forced to ignore her or else be punished.

We were ordered to run up those 17 stairs, jump to the bottom and repeat the process, again and again, for hours. My older sister and I would slip on our sweat, sometimes even pass out. Invariably this led to a strong arm with ring-bearing knuckles digging into our chests. We were hoisted into the air and pressed against the staircase wall, her rings cutting into our skin.
I always knew that I was black, but I didn’t know there were degrees of my blackness. I always looked at my dad and thought he’s so gorgeous, he’s so handsome, and he’s so black, and so am I. My sister and I had never heard the term high yellow before, but living in this scary house it was survival of the smartest. What was high yellow and why did the foster mother always comment this? My older sister and I had wondered aloud, is this why she hated us? At this young age I was introduced to colorism. Willie Lynch theory calls this the modern day manifestation of a plantation mentality.

“You think you’re cute, huh!” she would say. This was an accusation in this home, not an endearment. We knew that something was different about us than our foster parents, and the foster kids that lived there already. We were mixed. And this mixture of ethnicities for our foster mother was a source of contempt. People at her church commented on our looks all the time. Upon hearing this her eyes of fire daggers would shoot in our directions. Then her fake smiles and gracious thanks came from this walking contradiction of a human. I escaped out of her house in 3rd grade because I cried out for help and my teachers couldn’t help but see. I was brave. My brothers and sisters still resent me for leaving and tell me that I left them.

Growing up with a family that had values and morals and love did not pass me by. It became my reality at age 11. I moved in with a new foster family. This was my 5th foster home. I was given a home and hugs. I was around a family that cared greatly for each other and were truly the black elite of Saint Paul. Innovators, yes, blue collar workers, yes. Small business owners, yes. All in all I was in about 15 foster homes and group homes for teens. I speak about this family in particular because this is where I learned what family meant outside of blood. The potency of the love they shared with me was a shawl that warmed my back and reminded me I had to keep going. Failure was not an option. In this family were peace officers, teachers, outreach workers, lawyers, social workers,
military service members, bakers, and chocolate-coffee icing makers. These people showed me acceptance and extraordinary empathy.

The first time my new mom took me shopping she asked what my favorite curse word was. I told her it was fuck. I was 11-years-old. She asked me if I was sure. I asked her if she wanted to hear the others, and she declined. She wanted to know ahead of time, so she wouldn’t be offended if she heard me say it. That’s when I knew she was real.

These attributes are the ingredients of a recipe for success. This family is the archetype of what role models should be. These are my role models. Neil Degrasse Tyson “assembled his role models a la carte.” I feel him on this. No one has it all figured out. My foster mother in this home was and still is my mother. She mothered me and instilled in me education, grit, and persistence. Out of all the foster homes I was in they were the only ones to ask where I was going to college as if there had to be an answer.

The English language has always been an art form to me, used as a way to connect urban, rural, and elite communities into a circle of understanding by sharing their stories and speaking their truth out from the shadows. From a young age I started to realize the power words had. My favorite book was The Secret Garden. I had twenty editions of it and a key necklace. National Geographic magazines and Encyclopedia Britannica volumes were all over this house and I would read them. Books were my escape to another world. As a child, kids would comment on my speech, they would call me a “White girl,” which was really confusing to me. When I learned to express myself I would say things such as ‘Why give Caucasian people all the credit?’

Educated Black women inspired my speech. Native women gave me pride and attachment to the Earth. White women who loved me listened to me. These women had their degrees; they valued family over everything. Their expertise at making a way in the world out of no way, in the state of Minnesota Nice, even.
They are who I wanted to be when I grew up. Their support and direction gave me confidence. The unity between these women and their common goal to not let me slip through the cracks is the reason I’ve survived. Because of them I knew my voice had power, and could change the direction of my life. It was my quick thinking that got me out of that foster home. Because of these women I’m confident in my position on this planet.

I would attend an after school program in North Minneapolis for Black kids to teach us about our history. During these after school hours we were fed snacks of food and given jewels for our souls. We learned about Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. DuBois, and Madam C.J. Walker. This is not what is taught during a normal public or private school day. Something is missing in most curricula including the minorities whose contributions built this country. Everyday we were educated and inspired. Black history did not begin with enslavement, rather it was interrupted by slavery.

Our sense of our future was widened. We learned we have predecessors who set a high bar for us. And they are always watching.

My family doesn’t know generational wealth. My great-great-great grandmother was coerced into selling her land before the age of 21, which was illegal at the time. Eventually she was in a lawsuit with the federal government. I received a check for my grandmother’s land. I didn’t cash the check. My great-great-great grandma didn’t get to see that money. She was affected by boarding schools, she was hungry. The Catholics came trying to impose Catholicism. They cut their hair. They treated them with incivility. They tried to erase their culture, and demonized their language. They said this was God’s will. She was from a generation forever impacted. On both sides of my family they didn’t know generational wealth because people who consider themselves White came dishonoring treaties and exploiting the land and natural resources.
My tribe refuses to include mixed race descendants no matter how much their lives are affected by the issues that are still prevalent in all of the Native communities and in the neighborhood concrete jungle. I definitely feel connected, but I don’t feel the love. I called to talk about scholarships, because they were saying they were going to change the law to allow descendants of enrolled members access. The person I called about scholarships said tribal members were not currently in favor of that change to the tribal constitution. The tribal chair lost her job because members weren’t happy. They apparently didn’t want mixed race descendants being given rights, assuming they lacked commitment to or future vision for the tribe, because they were presumed to not be closely connected with the tribe. But they don’t know me. This divide between Native people granted recognition by tribal governments, as was imposed by the federal government, and their family members who are non enrollee descendants stems from the colonizer’s attempts at genocide.

My foster experience made me who I am and who I am not. Life has taught me that while it may be animal’s nature to nurture other animals as young, in humans it is not necessarily innate. If the child in question is not the bio child that child is not guaranteed to be accepted in the pack or family. These topics are not discussed, but this is definitely sensed by the children and people who may encounter the family in public and private spaces. I realized that as an adult I would be sensitive to the fact of how non-bio children are treated in a family setting, and their place in the family dynamic. Too many foster parents and adoptive parents care for children solely for income. Others care for the children because their moral standing and higher power have called them to service in this way. The worst are simply predators.

My nurturing foster mom in all actuality wasn’t a foster mom, she has been a true parent to me. She always remembers her parents lovingly and tells me how much they spoiled her “with love and understanding.” And this love that she was a conduit of impressed upon me a feeling of wholeness. Before she came into
my life I felt empty and alone. Her love and understanding is what life’s riches really are. The unconditional love she shared with me changed my life. Her commitment brings me back into the circle and helps to heal a generation’s disconnection and pain.

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One part of the context of this anthology is that of the African American Education Empowerment Program (AME). When I first opened the glass door between AME and the white tiled hallway separating the program from the classroom opposite, Michael Elliot was there to greet me. He shared a large infectious smile and enacted the demeanor of an uncle inviting you out of the elements and into his home. A reverse transfer student from the University of Minnesota, Michael, raised on the Northside of Minneapolis with a cluster of kin, made sure that everyone who entered the space felt welcomed and valued. Quick to start a conversation or elaborate his take on the Black condition, Michael set the tone for the space. He eventually would train in the cohort of student leaders who defined the era in which I would officially serve as coordinator.

At that time, the space was rarely empty but rarely full. Spirited conversation, event planning, sports and pop culture debates, silent heads bobbing in front of
computer screens, dining off paper plates, brown bags, or white cardboard baskets, the activity in AME was constant and varied. It smacked of holism, a place on campus where people could be their full selves amongst others who also needed the space to breathe and be themselves. Intuitively I recognized that it was both the Third World Center (TWC) at Princeton University, crucial in my own survival in college, but also clearly not the Third World Center.

What the spaces share is that each provided a home in a foreign land for the minoritized to more fully be themselves. It is the population they served that differed so much. Unlike the largely prep school spawned Black and Latin TWC population, the students involved in AME came from a variety of situations. For many food, transportation, textbooks, job tips, or service to others formed the inter-connective tissue of community in which black voices were raised to vie with an institution that often could not comprehend their native tongue. Voices honed in awareness that they would be blamed for their own pain. Voices honed in the awareness that cries would be seen as threats, or weakness.

It was perhaps the nadir of the AME program’s life. Regular membership consisted of roughly five men and one woman. Each day these students would arrive on campus expecting to find the space locked up, the lights out, and the program discontinued. I credit their persistence as much as anything with saving the program and winning the possibility of future eras of service. In the coming years membership would swell, the numbers served would hit unprecedented highs, and dip again, but the solidarity and cohesion of that era’s membership has yet to exist again.

The AME program formed in response to caustic media critique of low graduation rates at the college in 2010, then college President Phil Davis commissioned then professor and now provost at North Hennepin Community College, Jesse Mason to plan a program to improve African American graduation rates at the school.
Dr. Mason remains the measure AME students and alumni judge current student support efforts against. Along with previously existing efforts like those of Jonathan Lofgren and Yvette Trotman around the Student African American Brotherhood, as well as establishing services for African American Students of LGBTQIA, Disabled, or Ex-Offender Status. Beyond pushing the support of black students to be more in tune with intersectional factors, the establishment of AME began the slow turning of our institution towards a practice of considering the particular identity needs of those we serve and awareness of how those needs impact academic performance. With a substantial budget assigned, the AME approach argues higher education needs to pursue equity among students rather than equality if we expect to see students succeed.

Those drawn to the AME space did not always see an uptick in g.p.a. Data demonstrates that both the course success rate and graduation rate of AME participants increases relative to non-participants otherwise like them. The demands of servicing other students, planning programs, handling the logistics of the frequent program events, and the never ceasing factional politics require time. Time that might have been spent studying is lost to the inescapable, shifting nature of the AME space. That inescapable nature is also the gel that sees students persist in school or return despite trauma, loss, lack of resources, and the demand to support oneself and/or children in a state with deep labor disparities.

Two years removed from a daily presence in AME I often think of it as a lodestone. The space calls those either experiencing trauma or seeking to recover from trauma. The program offers, though contested and changing, an institutional face to match their own. Few institutions in Minnesota have educational workforces primarily of color, including most prominently not the Minneapolis Public School District’s teaching workforce.
During its better eras the reputation for solving student problems or helping folks get back in school draws traffic. Volunteers of all sorts are drawn to the space. Staff and faculty of color often feel an obligation to be sporadically present. This need or expectation that one contribute to their racial demographic beyond the particulars of their position description is not unique to Minneapolis College but a frequently referenced and rarely rewarded reality of being a higher education professional from an underrepresented population. Even approaching three decades of remove, I and a number of my fellow alums, still wonder why the one Black dean at Princeton University during our era never came to the Organization of Black Unity events, or established meaningful connections with members of the community.

More numerous than the volunteers of color are the mainstream staff and faculty who come to the space. Many of them have ties that run longer than mine to the space and community, and have proven either a gritty consistency in their support of the space or the willingness to go above and beyond when circumstances call for it. Advisors and faculty alike conduct their office hours in the space, many offer their services as tutors, and perhaps most importantly, they offer support as needs arise.

Of the many opportunities Minneapolis College offers me for deep engagement, none surpass the AME Book Club. During the heyday of the AME Book Club, students, faculty, and staff tore up the works of Cornel West, Eric Michael Dyson, bell hooks and other African American theorists, measuring their every word against Black life in Minneapolis. One student shared he could count on the book club being the best part of his week and some would even skype in when they couldn’t make it to campus, unwilling to miss out.

As we read *Black Star, Crescent Moon*, a stirring book exploring the relationship between Islam and African American Identity, Islam and Hip Hop, and the Black Arts Movement, our explorations culminated in the author Sohail Daulatzi,
travelling to Minneapolis and participating in the Malcolm X Justice and Peace lecture series, a brilliant day of related events, designed by philosophy Professor Matt Palombo and the Muslim Students Association membership, voices with a message the population of Minneapolis needs to hear as it struggles to incorporate new arrivals from East Africa.

Among the AME Book Club participants, Kirk Washington, Jr., a local spoken word artist finishing his last year of a Community Development Associates Degree, often led the way, in animated fashion, as we identified the connections in the reading to our own lives and neighborhoods. Tall, not quite brown skinned nor light skinned, thin, angular, and nearly always wearing dreadlocks and a tri-color, circle knit tam hat that invoked Jamaica and the diaspora, Kirk pushed us to think globally. As we chewed the food for thought begat of disparity, marginalization, discrimination, identity politics, and the articles and studies seeking to describe such things, Kirk thought and spoke with both an unbowed honesty and love for all. Somehow his time living abroad in the United Kingdom returned him to us as a champion of community, and first voice, having shed most of the shackles of identity politics.

His home, like his life, demonstrated an openness and dedication to community and connection. Radicals, hip hop heads, musicians, scholars, African businessmen, African American wage laborers and professors, scholars of national repute, Norwegian artists, Native American social service professionals, professors, 1980s rappers emerged as djembe players in the 2010s, Hmong scholars, Puerto Rican singers, mixed raced hipsters, middle age athletes seeking new roles in life, neo-soul poets, citizens of other nations, and countless others convened daily in his home. United by a desire for a world that looked better than that offered us by the current social order, the cast of guests, shifted each night, unpredictable in composition but not quality or depth of discourse. Kirk’s home was the Twin Cities community I knew, but concentrated together, a post-modern Walt Whitman poem, not smacking of station. The content of
community interactions in Kirk’s home, like in the AME discussions, was more akin to Rodlolfo “Corky Gonzales” I Am Joaquin, poetic musings on tradition, discrimination, assimilation and separation pressures. Aster, his wife, often provided delicious Ethiopian food and wise council, or Kirk tended goat roasting over the coals. Within his home you felt that you were inhabiting a critical space within the African diaspora, but fixed within the promise of multicultural cooperation in shaping a smarter and kinder world less beholden to the stifling weight of normative power.

Within this multicultural convergence Kirk simultaneously defied the in-group and out-group pressures regarding who or what a Black man should be, and embraced his Northside Heritage, as often as not answering to his neighborhood moniker, Bro Sun. Without triggering the suspicions often placed upon mixed race people, Kirk frequently invoked his white grandmother’s critical role in his understanding of his black male identity. Her frequent cautions to Kirk, “never forget you are a black man,” cemented in him the certainty that he would always be treated differently and need live with that expectation, or suffer constant shock and disappointment. Somehow her words helped Kirk to both frame his reality and identity and define just the challenges he would take on.

Kirk found ways to be fully human despite normative expectations. His code switching was subtle, barely noticeable at times. A touch of the scholar (before passing over he established a study in the basement of his home with wrap around bookshelves and determined to pursue an eventual PhD) might ease out during those sidewalk conversations, and a bit of the Northside always came to class with Kirk. He pushed every discussion regarding the condition of the minoritized in America, no matter how local, to also be global in scope.

Kirk’s collectivist commitment never wavered. His telling and retelling of a nearly ritualistic story regarding a homeless man stopping him and asking him for shoes, and his response, making a gift of one of his shoes, joining the man on his walking journey, each wearing one of Kirk’s shoes, and exclaiming “Now we
got shoes man. Where are we going?” Whether the events actually occurred the way described is meaningless. Whether it happened or not it is true. It is a true authentic representation of how Kirk chose to navigate this world, in connection with others.

Kirk and Aster created community not only in their home, but by hosting the breakfast club, a community discussion and potluck meal, aimed only at promoting discussion between those from various walks of life. Kirk’s collective approach to life showed in all he did. When I asked him to work with me to plan and host Spirit and Soul, in partnership with the Basilica of Saint Mary, he required me to share dinner with his family, vetting me though the others his choice would impact. In fact, when I returned to Minneapolis/St. Paul, it was Kirk, then a student in a Sociology course I taught who knew where most of my friends from the 1980s were and what they were doing. He often insisted I break bread with other scholars, without an agenda.

After one of these Kirk assigned lunch connections, he asked what I thought and my response fell flat for him. “Not the ideas, the man” he responded, determined to shift my focus to connection rather than work. When he spoke of those who inspired him most on campus, Lena Jones, Sid Bean, Shannon Gibney, Charles H. Watson, III, he cross-pollinated our knowledge and drove us towards connection. When he spoke of this cast, he most often grinned, looked away, or shook his head, and shared “that cat is bending light”. Equally pithy and insightful, Kirk would most often finish conversations regarding disparity with a “It’s really their problem anyway,” that offered cathartic release, recognition that the minoritized alone can not end their own marginalization, and a recognition that all of us are caught in webs of power and interconnection.

Of all Kirk offered through poetry and conversation, it was two similar sayings of his, ‘control the narrative or it will control you’ (of which he credited Sid Beane)
and ‘all we really have is our stories’ that inspired Out From the Shadows of Minneapolis.

The loss of Kirk still roils the gut, invoking sadness for all the gifts the world will miss from him, and we hope in some small way this anthology works to continue his tradition of replacing the minorities of the American collective imagination with authentic life narratives and tells a more accurate and inclusive mosaic story of Minneapolis; a story where the shadows of stigma, and stereotype fail to obscure the dignified brows of the women and men of Minneapolis who are so often left out of the story of who we are in Minneapolis, or Minnesota, or signified only through distortion and stereotype.

I never knew how his nickname Bro Sun came to be, but I would argue it is fitting. It is Bro Sun’s brilliant truthful radiance that inspired this project and his legacy will continue to cast light on the shadows of Minneapolis, melting away caricature to reveal the agency and dignity of real people.

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Editor's Note

by

Alison Bergblom Johnson

To be an editor is to be entrusted with the responsibility of the handling of words and their meanings on behalf of others. To be an editor of an anthology such as this is to be entrusted with stories, specifically stories by people whose experiences have often been disbelieved and turned away from. To be an editor means trusting that how a story is told is as important as that it is told. To be an editor is to be careful, detailed, and intentional. To be an editor of an anthology such as this means making a commitment to be much more an organizer than to be one wielding a red pen. To be an editor of this anthology means trusting these writers.

The novelist Sapphire was on book tour in Minneapolis in 2011; I went to her reading at Magers and Quinn with a few friends. I had seen the movie Precious, based on Sapphire’s first novel *Push*, when it first came out in 2009. In my own writing I was deeply concerned with trauma and its representation. *Push* is a
story about the transformative power of education for a young woman who at the beginning of the novel has become pregnant as a result of incest. Someone in the audience that night at Magers and Quinn asked Sapphire a question with two parts. “Was the book *Push* inspired by your own life? Why and how did you change your name to Sapphire?”

“A sapphire is a precious gemstone…” Sapphire began in an obviously rehearsed, near-monotone answer that ignored the first question. She went on to tell us about the hardness of sapphires, how they are formed, how they are evaluated by jewelers. What I loved the most about this answer was exactly that. Sapphire had no intention of answering the question, and therefore she educated us all about gems until her boundary became obvious.

I’ve come to embrace working publicly in accountability to community. Messiness does not by its essence demand privacy. Editing in spaces committed to equity and inclusion has come to look so different than I ever imagined editing could stretch. It’s about so much more than proofing with a blue or green pen instead of a red one in the belief that red causes undue anxiety. It’s, instead, about putting the writer first, in a holistic way.

While all the stories could stand alone, in this grouping I hope you look for:

- each writer’s vernacular, their cadence, their rhythm, their own way of being in the English language.
- the strategic use of silence and subtext.
the moves writers make to challenge arbitrary rules regarding what is comprehensible.

the places where identity itself is on contested ground.

the choices writers make in terms of what they will and will not include.

the multitudinous ways in which classic story structure bent and reformed to accommodate these stories.

the ways in which the authors may disagree with each other.

the ways in which these voices may show how policy or law may be changed to make outcomes more equitable.

My co-editor, Jay Williams, has said many times that equity work moves at the speed of trust. So does editing.
Acknowledgements

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project. Their efforts were instrumental to *Out from the Shadows of Minneapolis:
Power, Pride, and Perseverance at a Northern Community College.*

As always, any errors are our own.

Jay M. Williams

Alison Bergblom Johnson
Dr. Jay Williams believes academic achievement is possible for all and finds his work as Chief Diversity Officer at Minneapolis College to be a rewarding blend of scholarship, social support, validation, and advocacy for better serving those societally marginalized. After earning his bachelor’s degree in Anthropology with honors at Princeton University, he completed his master’s and doctoral work at the University of Chicago. During his undergraduate years he began to build systems to leave no one hungry, and continued work in this vein in the national service programs that became Americorps. As a fourth generation Minnesotan, he is constantly reminded that we serve members of communities in which trust for public institutions is low, and that a first step to radical inclusion is equitable higher education. In his personal life Jay constantly reads, travels, and listens to music as he seeks to expand the sliver of the vast cultural differences in the world that can become personally meaningful. He sings on a number of Southern Powwow drums, gets out on the county and state highways at least twice a month, and is a foodie. Despite his busy schedule he continues to teach twice a year, not only for the joy of it, but to keep current regarding student concerns.

Alison Bergblom Johnson’s essays have been published by Flock, Minnesota Public Radio, and others. She has been an artist-in-residence, including at an art center in rural Minnesota while writing creative nonfiction and working with 5th
graders to write stories about elders in their families. She earned a Women’s Studies certificate from Minneapolis College. During her time at Minneapolis College, she was Editor-in-Chief of City College News, which was then recognized as the best two-year college paper in the Midwest by the Associated Collegiate Press in 2015. In other spheres of her life she is an artist, values relationships and the stories she is entrusted with, and she fosters connections through community gatherings. The Minneapolis Star Tribune and MinnPost have written about her artwork focused on the manic side of bipolar disorder.

Contributing Faculty

A native of Baltimore, Maryland, Dr. Charles H. Watson graduated from Columbia University. He then pursued doctoral studies in philosophy at Stanford University and later worked there as a post-doctoral teaching fellow. For seven years he held an interdisciplinary chair in the humanities, as a member of the teaching faculty at Earlham College. Since the fall of 2012, Dr. Watson has been an adjunct instructor at Minneapolis College in the Department of Philosophy.

Assistant Editor

Esther Callahan graduated from Minneapolis College and the University of Minnesota with a focus in Gender Studies and Leadership. Esther worked on Minneapolis College’s City College News as the Opinions Editor and has been published in THERE Journal of Design. As a Fellow at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts community collaboration is key to her work in supporting authentic voices. Esther is an advocate for adoptee rights and mixed race identities with local organization Midwest Mixed.
Contributors

**Ikraan Abdurahman** is studying at Metropolitan State University where she is double majoring in English Literature and Ethnic Studies, and is hoping to go to law school. For leisure, she attends open mics, hikes, and travels. She absorbs a country’s cultures through its people, food, and historical sites.

○

**Ivery Lue Baynham** is a full-time father pursuing AS degrees in Addiction Counseling, Women’s Studies, and Psychology. An active member of Repurposed; a writing group focused on felons develop cognitive skills through writing. Member of Green Dot, AME, Phi Theta Kappa, and other campus organizations. The passions for community, support, and healing inspires his writing.

○

**Jewlene Bellamy**, a graduate of Minneapolis College, has a Business Degree and was the 2017 student commencement speaker. She enjoys having fun with her son and fiancé. She plans to write an autobiography and create a music EP.

○

**Susie Brown** lives in the Twin Cities. She graduated from Minneapolis College with degrees in Human Services and Liberal Arts. In her free time, she enjoys exploring museums, watching movies and spending time her fiancé and their three boys. She also prefers Minneapolis to St. Paul and has a love for dogs.

○

**Marcellus Davis** is a program developer with an emphasis on racial equity. He has a background in curriculum development, program evaluation, and racial
equity facilitation. He is a student of Critical Race Theory (CRT), in particular CRT in education. He specializes in student development, in particular racial identity formations. He is a father and husband, Black Liberation practitioner and an anti-White Supremacist superhero.

○

**Michael Elliott** is interested in social science, politics and economics, but believes there’s a moral dollar, despite what economists say. He’s working towards a B.A. at Metro State and may aim for a master’s degree. Friendship, loyalty, and authenticity are requisite for his relationships.

○

**Robert Gundy** is a human services major at Minneapolis College. He works with highly-mobile, at-risk youth and is a veteran of the Air Force.

○

**Marie A. Harris** is a graduate of Minneapolis College with a degree in community development. She’s going for her second degree in human services. She’s a grandmother and is a student over 50 years of age.

○

**Alyssamarie Hanson** is person who’s always had her disability put before who she is. She is a cheerful, happy person who would help anyone. She wanted to express her struggles in this essay, but also didn’t want to blame anyone. She likes to play video games and to do weight training.

○
**Marcallina James** worked at Minneapolis College as the Veterans Upward Bound Advisor and is now the Coordinator of Veteran and Military Student Services at University of Memphis. Marcallina believes that any restrictions we perceive are illusions and that we are limited only to our imaginations.

○

**Teresa Kontney** is studying addiction counseling and will graduate December 2018. She does praise dance and teaches her kids praise dances. She finds motivation in the words of Booker T. Washington: “I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has had to overcome while trying to succeed.”

○

**Honor Lamont** graduated with an Associate’s Degree in Human Services from Minneapolis College. She enjoys being a grandmother and loves riding motorcycles, being that free spirit.

○

**M.** is a LatinX woman who goes under this name and she attends a different university. She graduated from Minneapolis College in Spring 2018. She grew up in St. Paul and has moved into the suburbs due to increasing crime in her own LatinX community.

○

**Marc Martin** is a student who has been released from prison. This is not his real name.

○
Avelino Mills-Novoa, Ph.D. served as a higher education professional for over 30 years. His final and most fulfilling assignment was Interim President of Minneapolis Community and Technical College. Dr. Mills-Novoa came to the U.S. as a refugee and became the first member of his family to attend college. Despite learning English as a teen, he attended the University of Minnesota earning a B.A., M.A. and Ph.D.

○

Nanette Missaghi, Director of Equity and Inclusion at Minneapolis College, is an author, consultant, and trainer on racial equity leadership, cultural competence, and eliminating racism. She holds an MA in anthropology (University of Minnesota) and a BA in history with minors in anthropology and American Indian Studies (Bemidji State University). Missaghi is a licensed Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) coach.

○

After retirement Thi Nguyen studied English reading and writing at Minneapolis College. She enjoys helping new Christians grow in Christ and assisting people to increase their income. She is from South Vietnam.

○

Matthew Palombo is a faculty member in Philosophy and advisor to the Muslim Student Association. He completed his doctorate in 2014 at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, and his academic interests include Ethics, Liberation Theology, Decoloniality and African Philosophy. As an activist, Matthew collaborates with immigrant communities and inmates against racism, Islamophobia, counterterrorism and mass incarceration.
Bobbi Pratt is a full time mother who graduated from MCTC with an AS Degree in education. She is currently pursuing her second degree at Metro State in the individualized studies program. She is most passionate about molding and educating today’s generation. In her spare time she enjoys spending time with family and friends creating memories.

For over 30 years Michael Seward has been teaching a variety of subjects at various levels, from eighth grade to post-graduate. He has been involved in global education in a number of capacities (including two Fulbright teaching exchanges) and countries (including England, Germany, Slovakia, Costa Rica and Poland). Currently he teaches English and serves as an Assessment Coordinator at Minneapolis College.

Sarah Jean Sharp is a multi-instrumentalist with an insatiable love of music. They can be found swaying to whatever song is their head between classes at Augsburg University where they are earning a Master of Social Work degree; they pay attention to systems and how they might change or be dismantled to become more equitable. Sarah completed their generals at Minneapolis College while also employed there.

Diana Silver is working towards majors in criminal justice and human services at Minneapolis College; she intends to continue onto a bachelor’s degree. She has a Monarch butterfly stretching from her left breast down onto her left thigh,
in remembrance of her mother. She believes silence is consent, and therefore it’s important to speak truth.

○

**Yvette Trotman** has served in many roles at Minneapolis College for over twenty years, most recently as Dean of the School of Nursing, Health Sciences, and Public Services, and formerly as Instructor in the Biology and the Health Departments, and as special assistant to the President for Diversity, and the chair of the committee that SAAB, from which AME evolved.

○

**LaKeshia E. Vance-Wilkerson** is pursuing a Criminology degree from Minneapolis College. She enjoys the arts, spends her free time writing fictional stories and poetry. She loves her family and is a persistant woman with a drive to be successful in all that she does. In the future she plans to do more writing.

○

**Tia Williams** notes that privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it is not a problem for you personally. She is a humble activist who is a fierce protector of her children and family defined broadly. She is a former student at Minneapolis College.

○

**Betty Yang** worked at Minneapolis College as a Power of You advisor and is now working at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities as an academic advisor. Betty believes in the power of education and she is inspired by stories.
Appendix A Suggested Chapters for Specific Disciplines

Addiction Counseling

A Story of Honor by Honor Lamont and Matthew Palombo (pg. 134)
Book Bound Life by Diana Silver (pg. 125)
Evolution of a Jewel by Jewlene Bellamy (pg. 260)
Home Port by Marcallina James (pg. 17)
How I Got Out of Prison by Marc Martin (pg. 245)
My Walk: Addiction and Return to Community by Marie A. Harris (pg. 169)
Paraphernalia by Teresa Kontney (pg. 78)
Rebuild this Foundation by Robert Gundy (pg. 27)

American Indian Studies

A Story of Honor by Honor Lamont and Matthew Palombo (pg. 134)
An American Story in White, Black, and Red by Nanette Missaghi (pg. 159)
How I Got Out of Prison by Marc Martin (pg. 245)
Seven Generations by Tia Williams (pg. 292)

American Studies

All chapters in Out from the Shadows of Minneapolis are relevant.

Composition

All chapters in Out from the Shadows of Minneapolis are relevant.
Creative Writing

All chapters in Out from the Shadows of Minneapolis are relevant.

Criminal Justice

A Story of Honor by Honor Lamont and Matthew Palombo (pg. 134)
Dreaming in Color by Ikraan Abdurahman (pg. 101)
How I Got Out of Prison by Marc Martin (pg. 245)
My Walk: Addiction and Return to Community by Marie A. Harris (pg. 169)
Rebuild this Foundation by Robert Gundy (pg. 27)
The Man of the House by Ivery Lue Baynham (pg. 68)
The Northern Lights by Bobbi Pratt (pg. 277)
The Plaintiff Charges the State of Minnesota Educational System for the Murder of Marcellus Davis by Marcellus Davis (pg. 113)

Ethics

2015: The Year I Discovered I was Black by Sarah Jean Sharp (pg. 267)
An American Story in White, Black, and Red by Nanette Missaghi (pg. 159)
Evolution of a Jewel by Jewlene Bellamy (pg. 260)
Home Port by Marcallina James (pg. 17)
How I Got Out of Prison by Marc Martin (pg. 245)
My Walk: Addiction and Return to Community by Marie A. Harris (pg. 169)
Paraphernalia by Teresa Kontney (pg. 78)
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Seven Generations by Tia Williams (pg. 292)
Sunshine’s Table by Michael Elliott (pg. 43)
The Last Time I Saw my Father by Avelino Mills-Novoa (pg. 142)
The Man of the House by Ivery Lue Baynham (pg. 68)
Unveil your Fear by Yvette Trotman (pg. 251)
Vagabond Wonders: This Life’s Chapter of Swirl and Gratitude by Charles H. Watson, III (pg. 180)

Global Studies

Dreaming in Color by Ikraan Abdurahman (pg. 101)
Following my Father’s Courage by Betty Yang (pg. 60)
The Last Time I Saw my Father by Avelino Mills-Novoa (pg. 142)
The Struggle to Get to My American Dream by Thi Nguyen (pg. 283)
To Be Continued by Susie Brown (pg. 87)
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History

A Story of Honor by Honor Lamont and Matthew Palombo (pg. 134)
Dreaming in Color by Ikraan Abdurahman (pg. 101)
Following my Father’s Courage by Betty Yang (pg. 60)
The Last Time I Saw my Father by Avelino Mills-Novoa (pg. 142)
The Struggle to Get to My American Dream by Thi Nguyen (pg. 283)

Human Services & Social Work

Book Bound Life by Diana Silver (pg. 125)
Dyslexia disforia by Alyssamarie Hanson (pg. 150)
Evolution of a Jewel by Jewlene Bellamy (pg. 260)
Home Port by Marcallina James (pg. 17)
How I Got Out of Prison by Marc Martin (pg. 245)
My Walk: Addiction and Return to Community by Marie A. Harris (pg. 169)
Out With the Old, In With the New by LaKeshia E. Vance-Wilkerson (pg. 191)
Rebuild this Foundation by Robert Gundy (pg. 27)
Seven Generations by Tia Williams (pg. 292)
To Be Continued by Susie Brown (pg. 87)

Intercultural Communication

2015: The Year I Discovered I was Black by Sarah Jean Sharp (pg. 267)
The Last Time I Saw my Father by Avelino Mills-Novoa (pg. 142)
Out With the Old, In With the New by LaKeshia E. Vance-Wilkerson (pg. 191)
Seven Generations by Tia Williams (pg. 292)
The Struggle to Get to My American Dream by Thi Nguyen (pg. 283)
Vagabond Wonders: This Life’s Chapter of Swirl and Gratitude by Charles H. Watson, Ill (pg. 180)
Social Sciences

All chapters in Out from the Shadows of Minneapolis are relevant.

Women's Studies

2015: The Year I Discovered I was Black by Sarah Jean Sharp (pg. 267)
A Story of Honor by Honor Lamont and Matthew Palombo (pg. 134)
An American Story in White, Black, and Red by Nanette Missaghi (pg. 159)
Book Bound Life by Diana Silver (pg. 125)
Dyslexia disforia by Alyssamarie Hanson (pg. 150)
Evolution of a Jewel by Jewlene Bellamy (pg. 260)
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Home Port by Marcallina James (pg. 17)
Las Espinas de mi Rosa by M. (pg. 33)
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The Northern Lights by Bobbi Pratt (pg. 277)
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Appendix B Open Letter from Students of Minneapolis College, Fall 2015
Partnering with students to create venues for first voice is one of the Minneapolis College Equity and Inclusion Division’s highest priorities. Thus far Out From the Shadows is likely the most visible of those vehicles. The anthology follows in the tradition of the 2015 Minneapolis College Student Letter included below.

In November of 2015, then Interim President Mills-Novoa, sensitive to Black Lives Matter demonstrations, numerous college student protests, and Islamophobic incidents, worried how the police shooting of Jamar Clark, an unarmed black man on the Northside, would impact our students. The following Monday, Clark yet survived in the hospital and we began to host weeks of
conversations in the African American Empowerment Program space. The process involved over 80 students of diverse backgrounds.

As college employees spent hours in discussion with students a set of demands coalesced. The demands ranged from cultural competence training for employees to extending campus hours of operation. As they identified barriers to success, students, some of them authors in this work, shared both the authentic conditions of their lives and the cultural mismatch between their worlds and our educational institution.

The letter would directly impact policy, procedure, and practice on campus and inform the Minneapolis College Strategic Inclusion Plan 2016-2020. Today the letter serves as a framing document for the Equity and Inclusion Division and leads to a sequence of qualitative and quantitative data sets guiding our equity work and institutional direction.

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Comments on the Open Letter from Students of Minneapolis College, Fall 2015 by Jay M. Williams, PhD is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 4.0 International license. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/legalcode
Dear students, faculty, and staff,

It is difficult to discern a single student voice from a campus population of thousands. All too often, however, significant numbers of the students of Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) report feeling unwanted, unvalued, and underserved on our campus. Many students arrive from communities already distrustful of public institutions, and experiencing elevated rates of joblessness, hunger, and homelessness. Members of these communities are also beset by stereotypes blaming them for the condition of their lives.

Yet we as the MCTC community represent an option, perhaps for some the only option for pursuing higher education, and the dream of a career and livable wage. We are the most selected destination to pursue this dream among the students of all Minneapolis high schools. Many of these students believe earning an education is a choice between life and death.

Arriving on campus in hopes of obtaining a degree or certificate and launching a career, far too many MCTC students will leave without a diploma or improved job prospects. Instead they face student loan incurred debt that perpetuates their economic struggle. Frequently we dismiss those that fall to the wayside, the majority of our incoming students, as different, uneducable, uncommitted, or even as problem people. This majority is our institution’s life blood, and should be at the heart of our ethical and strategic considerations, rather than dismissed as inferior and inevitable failures.

We are living a myth, a self-protective story of how things are in Minnesota. We cling to old notions that reduce the human condition to individual choices without context. We dismiss much of the suffering and struggles of the people of our state, and particularly of those coming from marginalized communities of color and Native American communities, as a result of their own defects. This absolves us of all responsibility, provides us an excuse to withhold our best efforts, and ensures progress will be sparing. At the same time Minnesota suffers from the deepest collection of gaps measured between people of color/Native American peoples and White people in wellbeing (i.e., health, education, employment, income, and incarceration).

We have a choice to make regarding these conditions. We can continue to wrap ourselves in the ego protecting story of Minnesotan racial progressivism and minority deficiency, or we can take a hard look at how this condition plays out through institutional practices and discrimination.

Realizing our promise at MCTC, to deliver a transformative education, will not be realized through supporting only a small number of students, those already most like us, towards success and exceptionalism. Our promise can only be realized by transforming the culture of our campus. Our graduation and retention rates are intimately related to the kind of experiences students have on our campus. From their first interaction with staff or faculty, student perceptions quickly become assessments. We want these assessments to be that MCTC is a place where students feel valued, supported, welcomed, and empowered.

An institution is only the sum of the individuals that serve within it. The power to transform our campus into a hospitable space conducive towards the learning of students from all sectors of our state, is in our
hands. Ask yourself how do we design our college to better meet the needs of our students, and what do I do each day to make our students feel welcome and supported? Are there types of students I fail to welcome and support? What might the cost of the latter choices be to our students and institution?

If we have one charge in addressing our success it is to realize our path to that success lives in every interaction. Staff to staff, faculty to staff, staff and faculty to students, etc. Do we have the courage to offer the authenticity and accompanying vulnerability requisite in listening (for both understanding and validating students), building trust, and forging meaningful relationships with our students?

The abundance of powerful programming, exceptional classroom pedagogy, and student success stories, are a testament to our collective ability to transform, but can we extend this to every student? Can we offer every student a holistic ally or partner, willing to navigate with them, step by step, through bureaucracy, regulation, and policy, leaving no doubt that our institution and those within it are here to serve them? Can we resist the urges to reduce the experiences of struggling students to a story of their deficiency and our absolution? Can we avoid relationships of resistance with our students born from our inability to validate the real world challenges they face?

Can we create an educational space free of paternalism, dismissal, and micro-aggressions, challenging our students to grow while reinforcing their dignity and self-worth?

Students of MCTC identify the following items as a partial list of approaches that may better fit our institution to our student body:

Human Resources/Supervisors

- Mandating cultural competency training for all MCTC staff
- Embedding cultural competency within employee performance reviews
- Establishing diversity within all offices and departments of the college
- Ending MnSCU patterns of cronyism

Diversity & Equity

- Creating a Title 6 and Title 9 student assessment panel empowered with the Diversity office to enforce policy changes and establish a proactive diversity plan

Student Support/Outreach

- Establishing a women’s center on campus including support for mothers (i.e. child care, space for breast feeding)
- Advertise and provide full student support programs for undocumented students
- Reducing student debt and providing financial literacy training

Academic Affairs/Policies

- Mandating cultural competency training for all MCTC faculty
• Ending certificate and degree requirements that will not transfer to 4 year institutions
• Making popular program transfer requirements available as DARS reports in e-services
• Requiring all faculty of all disciplines to establish culturally relevant classroom pedagogy
• Expanding the add drop window for classes
• Establishing attainable course incompleted or safe pauses in study, for students in good standing, to deal with life emergencies
• Connecting advisors to the student support programs and better prepare advisors to guide students to efficient, cost effective, degree and certificate completion
• Offering more courses focusing on the experiences of the communities our students are from

Student Life
• Establishing an ethnic student caucus
• Offering affordable housing for at a minimum our homeless students

Facilities/Technology
• Establishing gender neutral restroom facilities
• Expanding the access to the library to 24 hours
• Seeking to offer affordable computers for students

Customer Service
• Providing customer service training for staff
• Requiring front line staff to automatically refer students to student support programs (i.e., AME, UNITE, TRIO)
• Addressing the fear on campus that results in minority students being reported or suspended for minor issues

Adopting these practices will send the message to our student body that MCTC is here to facilitate student success and present students the opportunity to blossom rather than the likelihood of withering. Every system is perfectly designed to get the exact results it gets!

In an age of social protest, mass incarceration, police brutality, global terrorism, rising tides of Islamophobia, immigrant resentment, economic violence, and wellbeing gaps, can we afford to replicate the world our students experience each day or can we provide a haven for growth, enlightenment, and transcendence?

MCTC Students:
Abdikarim Omar   Amairani Jonapa-Sanabria   Asli Abu   Attalah Robinson
Brice Okocha   Carla Campbell   Debra Williamson   Eric Williams
Esther Callahan   Gemario Suttles   Grisell Orozco   Jocuana Lee
Jimmy Vang, Josue Estrada, Juan Davila, Jumondeh Tweh
Karon Harris, Kimberly Anderson, Kyarra Edmond
LaKeshia Vance-Wilkerson, Lauro Clara-Flores, Lyndsi Skipper
Lucas Teixeira, Marie Harris, Mary Peterson, Michael White
Michelle Jimenez, Mohamed Jama, Robert Ellis, MCTC Student Senate President
Rodney Williams, Ronnie Russell Bey-El, SAAB President, Rosamond Sturgis
Roy Lee Spearman Jones, Scelena Ross, Shanese Watts, Shayla Rutledge
Stacey Khang, Teresa Kontney, Tia Williams, Timothy Marino
Tyron Searight, Valeria Gomez-Cardenas
Sarah Sharp, AME Student Coordinator, Muslim Students Association

Alumni
Estefania Navarro Hernandez, Alumni, Kirk Washington, Jr., Alumni
Emilia Gonzales Avalos, Executive Director Navigate Minnesota, Alumni

Faculty, Staff, & Administrators
Connie Rhodes, Executive Director, Restoration Incorporated, Ruthanne Crapo, Philosophy Faculty
Lisa Bergin, Philosophy Faculty, Rebecca Marsh, Information Studies Faculty
John Plomondon, American Studies Faculty, Mathew Palombo, Philosophy Faculty
Rosa Shannon, MCTC Chicano/Latino Advisor
Sharon Fodness, Women’s Studies/Anthropology Faculty
Jay Williams, MCTC AME/SAAB Coordinator

Whitney Harris, MCTC Executive Director of Diversity
Patrick Troup, MCTC Vice President of Student Affairs
Avelino Mills-Novoa, MCTC President
I had the great privilege of being invited into the room during the process of students talking through what they would say in an open letter to administration about issues on campus. I was then Editor-in-Chief of the student newspaper. I was there to listen, so that if I wrote about whatever came out of that room I would have background for it. I committed to not sharing the contents of the discussion. Because of that I don’t have notes from that afternoon; I can only say what I remember sitting in the AME Space for hours one afternoon as appointment alarms for places I was supposed to be went off in a silent buzz and were ignored.

I knew the most important thing on campus that afternoon was in that room. My greatest challenge in sitting in a room as students considered which concerns to emphasize was to keep my mouth shut. I knew talking would not help. In that room, my words were not central. However, I shared many of the concerns: library hours, campus hours, and not always having felt as if every staff person
wanted my success.

Not only did I share some of the concerns raised in the room, but I was well aware of many of them. I knew that roughly ten percent of Minneapolis College students experienced homelessness. I knew about student, faculty, and staff activism - including by students experiencing homelessness - to support such students, and I knew that work was described as “an underground railroad of support” by one activist.

I had also written about other issues students brought to campus, including the fact that on a statewide survey of college students in Minnesota 47 percent of Minneapolis College women reported experiencing domestic violence in their lifetimes compared with 27 percent of students on average. I learned that the number one measurable predictor of whether a Minneapolis College student would be successful was whether or not they checked their college email once.

I had listened to students who were uninitiated as to how financial aid worked, about how to advocate for oneself with a professor, about how crucial showing up to class was, and about how to apply as a transfer student before one graduated. I knew this college was changing lives for the better. I knew the college was also, statistically, not always successful at getting students to graduation. As a student journalist it was critical to me to explore why that might be, and what solutions might exist.

So I sat in the AME space one afternoon, probably for going on five hours. Students filtered in, and students and administrators left and returned. The timbre of voices change and anecdotes synthesize into an explicit understanding of the ways policy existed, both tacitly and officially. There also developed a discourse around what could be. This is the work that continues here. These are the voices to listen to to learn how policy exists, its effect on
people, and who is excluded and included in Minneapolis. Even more importantly, these are the voices who point the way to how policy could be better.

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