MOTHER ETHNOGRAPHY: A PERFORMANCE OF POSSIBILITY

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Mother Ethnography: A Performance of Possibility

A Dissertation Presented
by
SONJI M. JOHNSON-ANDERSON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of

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College of Education
Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies
Mother Ethnography: A Performance of Possibility

A Dissertation Presented
By
SONJI M. JOHNSON-ANDERSON

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Jennifer Randall
Associate Dean of Academic Affairs
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DEDICATION

To my Black mother and her Black mother before her
To my Black grandmothers and their grandmothers before them
To all Black mothers of Black sons and daughters
To all Black women who mother each other
Our children
And
Our men …
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

When I uprooted my family, left my job, gave up my home, yanked my son out of school, left my relatives, church family and friends behind to come to settle in a small New England college town where we knew no one just so I could return to graduate school, it was among the most disruptive and courageous things I had ever done. We, my beloved husband and I, came here with our son and suffered the loneliness, isolation and anonymity of faceless strangers in a place that did not yet know or care that we had come. It was a disorienting and painful transition – a journey which, once undertaken, was fraught with struggle and uncertainty. Now that I have arrived at the end of this journey, I am obliged to look back and to thank the many souls who walked a part or the whole way with us.

Drs. Erold and Carol Bailey were not only instrumental in my coming to graduate school but have remained our friends and our base of support throughout this entire way. The first “school” friends I made here and who have together with their families, remained precious to me and mine: Heonsook Cho and Dr. Youngmin Park. Our journey to survive our first classes together while we met at each other’s homes, ate together, studied together, hung out together made me to know it was possible to survive the coldness of the New England weather and the coldness of the New England social scene. Thanks too to that special group of women from the Social Justice concentration of the then School of Education who gathered as a consciousness raising group and invited me in to be a part. You cannot know what you did for a lonely sister in those days. Thank you!
I wish also to thank the members of my cohort who became my friends: Jen Cannon, Dr. Kirsten Helmer, Charles (Charlie) Hestus, Ally Hunter, Dr. Katie Lazdowski, Ying Zhang and my little sister, Dr. Leta Hooper whose accomplishments have inspired and made me so proud. My friendship with fellow travellers on this doctoral expedition: Letha Gayle-Brissett, Dr. Nigel Brissett and Jasmine Robinson as well as my friendship with Georgia Malcolm have proved to be a source of encouragement and strength.

Life as a graduate student has been far from uneventful. There were several occasions when the support of a community was crucial. Life in this town necessitated I link arms and voices with “fighters for justice” and speak truth to power both for my own cause and the cause of others. These audacious foot soldiers for justice made me a part of this community in a way I would never be without their tirelessness and pluck. They are a force to be reckoned with and in many ways have taught me how to stand strong, fearless and relentless and to speak up with confidence, conviction and passion for the right. They are my friends, they are my family, they are many but among them: Vira Donangmany Cage, Ed Cage, Andrea Battle, Kathleen Anderson, Sovann Malis Loeung, Pat Ononibaku, Dr. Michael Burkhart, Dr. Susan and Renee Theberge, Caridad Martinez, Dr. Jacqueline Smith-Crooks, Ingrid Askew, Drs. Carlie and Gary Tartakov, Jacki Odess-Gilette, Michael Mongeau, Ray Elliott, Dr. Ash Hartwell, the Drs. Whitney and Trevor Baptiste and the Drs. Demetria and Amilcar Shabazz.

I thank my family at Grace Baptist Chapel in the Bronx, New York for your prayers, your support, your many, many acts of generosity towards me and my family. I will always be a part of you and love you. I honor you with this work. I am particularly
grateful to the late Augustus Davidson, my deacon, who literally moved us here and prayed over us and our new home in the midst of our aloneness, and for the staunch and selfless support of his dear wife, Lunet whose enthusiastic backing remains unfazed to this day.

I shall miss the warmth, love and friendship of my friend, (now) Dr. Brenda Muzeta, whose help, generosity, optimism and infectious laughter brightened many a dark day. I love you, Bren! I am grateful to my sister-friend, Dr. Carolyn Gardner with whom I have walked for the duration of this journey. Our battles have been countless, but our adventures have nevertheless, been intense and exciting. I thank her for her love, her support, her brilliance, her generosity, her friendship. She is my friend for life. She helped make this the ride of a lifetime

I must not forget to specifically thank Dr. Marge Magouirk-Colbert for her encouragement which was so influential in my final decision to move here. She ensured I was funded for the duration of my studies in this graduate program. Dr. KC Nat Turner, thank you for your help and guidance during the first stages of the journey. To Dr. Laura Valdiviezo, our quiet storm, what an inspiration and source of strength and model of academic excellence you have been! You told me I could do this. You told me what I had to say was worth hearing. You cannot know what that meant to me coming from a female professor of color. Dr. Barbara Madeloni, thank you for your humanity and your warrior spirit. You inspired me to question, challenge, speak back, and be bold. Thank you also to Dr. Ray Sharick for caring, for checking in, for encouraging me, also to Mike Hanna (crew member number 4) for your helpfulness and positive energy. Dr. Maria Jose Botelho, it was your early direction that led me to an amended research agenda and to
what later became Mother Ethnography. But it was the courage and guidance of a young professor, my advisor, Dr. Kysa Nygreen, that set me free to speak and write in the only way I could be authentic and true. The other members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Claudio Moreira whose brilliance, passion and teaching of a course in performance ethnography lit a fire in me and Dr. Denise Ives whose scholarship, sense of humor and the bond we share as mothers of Black boys supported my work.

On December 19th 2016, I lost one of the bravest, brightest, most courageous souls I have ever known: my very dear friend, Sandra Kenton-Fraser. I am saddened she is not here to walk me to the finish line for I had plans of joining her in her ongoing project of educating Jamaica’s children – a project appropriately named Sankofa. Though not here in body, I know she has transitioned and has joined with the pantheon of our ancestors and is rooting for my success. I shall always love and miss you. As such, I honor the memory of all those who loved and supported me and my quest but never lived to see me finish: Augustus Davidson, Sandra Kenton-Fraser, Lorenza Jay, Sheryl Lawson, Patricia Rivera-Smith and Hillary Wilson. May your souls rest in eternal peace.

I cannot thank my parents, Derrick and Thelma Johnson enough for their unwavering, multifaceted support and love over the years -- way before this doctoral program began. I especially thank my mother for her counsel, her engaging conversations, her prayers, her constancy, her example of dignity and strength, and her passion to see me succeed. Mummy, I hope you can be proud of the work I have attempted to do here and that it, even a little, honors your years of sacrifice, the pain of your loss and your ultimate triumph. My sisters, Michell, Jackie and Marlene for supporting their little sister all along the way as good big sisters should. You are beautiful
and amazing women who I love and of whom I am extraordinarily proud. I am still mourning the loss of my big sister Hillary who left us too soon on August 25, 2013. I miss you and could only imagine your great pride and excitement had you been here in body to witness the completion of a journey you were such a big part of starting. I love you, my sister. The wound you left in my heart is yet to be healed.

To all my other family members and friends whose names are too numerous to call, you have not been forgotten nor your love and contribution to this walk overlooked. You are present in this work. I thank the majestically strong Black mothers whose voices I attempt to amplify in this work of research. It is my hope I have reached back far enough into our history and stretched far enough forward into our future to do justice to the struggles already waged and the challenges yet to be overcome. To this end, I honor the participants of this study, Allison and Eloise. They are women whose stories give life to the experiences of other Black mothers of Black children who must daily struggle to maintain their humanity and whose experience of such can never be adequately portrayed on the pages of any book.

It is imperative that I acknowledge the loves of my life: my husband Clive Anderson and son Joshua. There aren’t enough words to express how very blessed I consider myself and how deeply grateful I am for your love, your support your being there ALWAYS. Clive, for all the early mornings and late nights you spend on the road often through snow and sleet and the threat of police harassment back and forth across state lines to and from work. For the hours you spend taking care of us and our friends. I thank you for your warmth and generosity to my friends and your love and friendship to me. My sweet baby Josh, you will always be my baby no matter how old you get. Thank
you for trusting Mommy to speak through and for you. She will do this while you learn how to speak unapologetically for yourself. This degree belongs to you both every bit as much as it belongs to me.
ABSTRACT
BLACK MOTHER ETHNOGRAPHY: A PERFORMANCE OF POSSIBILITIES
May 2018
SONJI M. JOHNSON-ANDERSON, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES
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Directed by: Professor Kysa Nygreen
Blackness and Black womanhood as a mark of one’s inferiority are ideas largely
unopposed in American culture and therefore present an immediate challenge to any
theory or epistemology that claims the contrary. For this study, I will present and justify
Black mother-ethnography as a framework for speaking back to the notion of the inherent
inferiority of Black femaleness in the American (and global) academic understanding. As
a mother and a researcher, I will examine the intrinsic tensions of investigating the
schooling experiences of my teenage son, as well as the experiences of two other Black
boys with IEPs, as mother and researcher. I theorize about these overlapping/intersecting
issues using the lens of womanism, Black feminism and critical race feminism. I draw
from the principles of performance auto/ethnography which align seamlessly with the
aforementioned theoretical frames, and which provides the platform for resistance of
white male dominance and the discourse of deficit that is used to generally characterize
Black women, Black motherhood and Black scholarship.

The mother’s narratives were collected through semi-structured
interviews/conversations, journals, educational artifacts and analytical memos. Using
mother ethnography as both theory and method, I analyzed the lived experiences of these
Black boys and their mothers from the mother’s perspectives, and highlighted the
connection and sisterhood shared by Black women for each other and the shared pain and
joy of othermothering of each other’s children.
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CHAPTER 1
ILLEGITIMATE

Preamble

I find that I itch to PERFORM this research! I find I cannot sit still for the truth of it rests in my bowels and often moves them. I must, whenever I sit to process and write, be situated near the latrine for the truth goes through me whenever I read it, whenever I contemplate it, whenever I remember it, like Brooklax\(^1\) through my hardened childhood bowels on the September Sunday before my return to school.

I find I want to TELL this truth for writing it is insufficient. The meaning of the unearthing of our shame for not being good enough, bright enough, decorous enough, genteel enough, pretty enough, soft enough, cannot just be written with the vague chance of it being read by someone patient enough to cut through the verbiage of our theoretical and methodological frameworks! It must be TOLD! PERFORMED! LOUDLY, BOLDLY!

Research accounts carry the unchallenged justification for our lowliness and denigration, but the theories, the methods and the methodologies that support these claims are PERFORMED! EVERYDAY! EVERY MINUTE! EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY!! It is only fitting that if we are rising to make liars of the faulty conclusions of our oppressors, we cannot merely whisper the truth. We cannot merely hint at our findings by offering complex and multiplex layers of interpretation.

---

\(^1\) A medicinal substance much like a chocolate bar that was administered to children in Jamaica and the Caribbean as a “wash-out” (a treatment for worms). It prompted many trips to the bathroom and often caused stomach cramps.
When we were shamed for being Black and ugly, fat and reprehensible, unwanted and unloved, it didn’t just happen on the pages of books underneath the verbosity of the undulating cadence of nuanced and layered suggestion – it was performed, it was proclaimed!! There was no subtly to it. We ALL knew, oppressor and oppressed alike, what was meant, what was desired. We ALL understood, oppressor and oppressed alike, what was to be done, and, ultimately, again and again, what was done (and what is being done in real time as I write this). I find I want to TELL this research. I want to tell it means I want to perform it – I want to use my entire being to dispel it from my body for I carry its meanings in my gut. They well up inside me like slimy froth from a stomach in turmoil – sickened from eating sour food.

I want to vomit it so you may see and smell and be shocked and disgusted by the stench and the slime of your hate and your injustice and your exclusion. I want to vomit it so you may see how much of the sourness and the staleness of oppression I have been forced to ingest. I want to spit the froth from my throat and scrape the putrid particles from my tongue so you too may retch and be sickened by the rotting, stinking injustice you serve up on the gilded platters of your bare-faced hypocrisy.

This research must be performed. It must give as much as it gets. It must force its way into our consciousness and kick-start a wakefulness and an intention to either repudiate what has always been “a given” and “THE way things are and must continue to be” or to create change – a new way of preparing and serving up the way we do humanity: fresh, wholesome, inviting, and utterly appealing and digestible!

Will our performance automatically get us there? I think not. But I believe if those in the practice of force-feeding us the decaying and the unsavory are systematically made
to eat it themselves, perhaps they would not so easily discharge their duties … and we who eat so much of it compel our bellies and throats and tongues to spit it or to fast.

This research must be performed. It hangs off my waist and protrudes my stomach. It sags my legs, my-- breasts, my arms. This research must be performed for I cannot be rid of it, cannot expel the toxins that poison my soul any other way!

As a mother, as a woman, an African by way of the Caribbean, to the shores of these United States, I find I must stand, and I must tell!
Introduction

Why Mother-ethnography?

“[We need theories] that will rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries -- new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods” (Anzaldua, 1990, xxv).^2

Black female scholars like me who use qualitative research methods could be hard-pressed to find theories and methodologies that easily align themselves with their ways of being, experiences and world views. I found as I waded through the “tried and true” research theories and methods available to me that they did not allow me to explore, present and represent, to the extent necessary, the substance of my study about the schooling experiences (at home and school) of my son as well as my experience as his mother and witness to his struggles. My efforts to find a space to articulate the issues of salience in my research, as well as of myself as a researcher reaffirmed at the outset, that my identity, positionality, and ontology would be rendered illegitimate by the academy. This mother ethnography standpoint, positionality, and method that I propose is more than an ethnographic/autoethnographic presentation of my son’s schooling experience as well as my own experience of navigating his challenges as his mother; it is recognizing and owning the blurred boundaries of Black mother and researcher living, experiencing, observing, interpreting, presenting and representing from inside the same body, phenomena that is at the same time as personal, emotional and private as they are social, intellectual and public. Mother ethnography recognizes and problematizes the binary

^2 A quote by Gloria Anzaldua (1990) that asserts the need for researchers of color to find new ways, new methods to present and interpret data relevant to their experiences and world views.
outlook that social science, still influenced by hegemonic positivistic either/or approaches, brings to bear upon data analysis and interpretation. It unifies, instead of dichotomizes, the experiences of mind and body.

Mother ethnography accesses the messiness and the blurred lines between performance and performativity to engender what Denzin (2003) refers to as “performance of possibilities” which are different ways of writing, doing and presenting research and of being in the world. It is imperative that spaces are created to bring about interruptions and disruptions that lead to activism, as these are spaces that challenge the status quo, that present world-changing possibilities. These are spaces of hope! (Moreira, 2013, Lecture)

But it is a place that is firmly on the margins of what is considered acceptable by the confining dictates of the academy. As such, I expect that Black mother ethnography as a method/ methodology, standpoint, theory and positionality will be rendered:

Illegitimate!!

It is in the wind.

Illegitimate!

It echoes again and again in my ears

Illegitimate!

It dogs my steps, stumps my growth, blunts my force

Illegitimate!

It harasses, it silences, it demeanes, it invalidates, it violates

Illegitimate! Illegitimate! You don’t belong! Your story is a lie!

Illegitimate! There is no space for you here
You are invisible, inconsequential, illegitimate!

You don’t fit; we don’t hear you when you speak

Illegitimate!

Illegitimate, why do you even try?

I am a Black woman, mother, teacher, and scholar. My personal self is also my political self and there can be no daylight between us, because I take my Blackness, my woman-ness, my motherhood with me everywhere I go. Every time I raise my hand to speak or remain in silence, every time I sit, or stand, enter or exit, I am a political message. I don’t speak for every Black woman, mother, because I cannot and would not (Griffin, 2012). I speak for me! And I hope that by speaking for me other Black women mothers will find their voices to scream their own liberation womb songs, in defiance of oppressors and oppression, in pursuit of their unrelenting, inexorable work (Collins, 1993; 1994).

I am a mother, woman, Black. I see the world through a mother’s eyes. I experience it with a Black mother’s body. I rage against the assault of the world upon my Black body, Black consciousness, Black knowing, but it is its assault upon my Black child that enrages and energizes me most. I am guide, protector, seer, proclaimer. My charge has not just been to give birth to one, as I have done, but to give birth to a generation. I am thereby charged to rage and wage war against all powers that prove destructive to the survival and well-being of my progeny (Collins, 1989). I must, therefore, walk the tightrope of mother and activist, teacher and scholar, nurturer and warrior. My lived experience and understanding of my woman-ness have thusly positioned me to give suck while readying for war! I am not privileged to abandon either

**What is Mother Ethnography?**

In this study, I articulate mother ethnography as a standpoint, positionality, epistemology, theory and method. I describe the characteristics of mother ethnography using the “tools” of Black feminism, womanism, critical race feminism and Black feminist autoethnography (Griffin, 2012). I also speak briefly of the features of performance ethnography and how I use them to foreground the principles of mother ethnography.

Mother ethnography brings together the afore-mentioned theories and methods and uses them in a way that is instructive, transformative and liberatory; Black mother ethnography embraces the *whole self* of the Black woman mother and allows her the space to use her body, her experiential knowledge, her particular ways of knowing and caring to foreground, conduct, analyze and present the research. Quite significantly, the mother ethnographer is never able to step away from the research. She is constantly reflecting, processing, analyzing, exploring, and interacting with the data because it is happening in her body. Mother ethnography happens when the researcher and the mother occupy the same body; when the lived experience and ways of knowing of the researcher
are used to actively inform her understanding and interpretation of the data; when the researcher, fully embracing and owning who she is, uses the resources of her viscera to challenge, speak back to and resist the dominant ideologies that render her inferior, illegitimate, silenced. Her use of performance methodology as a means of representation, allows her story to be told honestly and reflexively, and creates knowledge that addresses the issues peculiar to the Black mother researcher.
CHAPTER 2
WHO’S A MOTHER?

Motherhood, and in particular, Black motherhood is a weighty responsibility but one that our culture tells us is tied only to the home and not to the public sphere (Johnston and Swanson, 2003). In a study that analyses the ideologies and myths of motherhood, Johnston and Swanson (2003) expose the extent to which racial and class biases exist within the social construction of what is considered good and bad mothers. Also, dominant ideologies, in their construction of motherhood, have little to do with lived reality for they purport that mothers should not work outside the home and do not take into consideration that “economically or financially privileged mothers continue to hire working class women, and Women of Color, who are often mothers themselves to perform more arduous childcare work” (Johnston and Swanson, 2003, p.22). The picture of the traditional mother, therefore, is the White woman who is educated, married, middle-class and is not employed outside the home (Johnston and Swanson, 2003; Griffin, 2012; Raddon, 2002). In other words, even in the work to construct a mother ethnography methodological and theoretical stance, my first challenge is in being recognized as “mother” for patriarchal ideology drives and reinforces the notion of White, middle-class motherhood as legitimate while sanctioning other types of mothers as “bad”.

“Your son needs your help
Who helps him with homework?”

I cannot breathe for I am suffocating
Under the weight of my guilt
It’s him or me. Either his homework gets done
Or my reading and preparation for my paper gets done
“He has so much potential, and can learn
But he needs more support at home!”

I hear the tinge of accusation
The charges of neglect
“Bad mother! Bad mother!
You sacrifice your child for a degree!
Bad mother! Bad mother!”

The understanding that as a Black mother I am rendered invisible, unseen, unacknowledged, is an omission that is portrayed as rational and logical for “[t]he exclusion of Women of Color from representations of motherhood and family perpetuate myths and stereotypes that only Whites value family, home, and involved parenting” (Johnston & Swanson, 2003, p.29). As such, children who are most highly valued and are seen as worthy of full-time stay-at-home mothers are white and middle-class (Glenn, 1994; Johnston & Swanson, 2003). White, middle class children are, by extension, the ones most worthy of the attentions and efforts of teachers and staff who are themselves mostly White and who operate in a naturalized system of White supremacy within our schools (Gorski, 2011; Kozol, 1991; 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2001; 2006; Lipman, 2004; Lipman & Hursh, 2007; Picower 2009). It is in this context and in this gap that I stand on behalf of my son and the sons of other Black mothers, who reside inside devalued Black bodies, to present a counter story located within the overlapping frames of Black feminism (Collins, 1986; 2009; hooks, 1981;), critical race feminism (Few 2007;
Villenas, 1996) and womanism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Kakli, 2011;) to disrupt the prevailing notions of what counts as “scholarship” and who counts as “worthy of research” and “by whom.”

The cultural and historical perception of who counts as worthy among the American citizenry overwhelmingly indicates that Black women and their Black children are not so considered (hooks, 1981; Morgan, 2004). It is against the current of this political/intellectual/cultural understanding that I attempt to insert and assert the liminal academic voice of my Black womanhood.

*Your door is shut against my tightened face,*
*And I am as sharp as steel with discontent;*
*But I possess the courage and the grace*
*To bear my anger proudly and unbent.*
*The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,*
*A chafing savage, down the decent street;*
*And passion rends my vitals as I pass,*
*Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.*
*Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,*
*Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,*
*And find in it the superhuman power*
*To hold me to the letter of the law!*
*Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate*
Against the potent of your hate.

Claude McKay “The White House”  

The Myths of Motherhood

Dominant motherhood ideologies exclude many types of mothers from the “club of ‘good motherhood’ ….” A number of researchers have addressed both the historical and contemporary exclusion of African, Asian and Latina American mothers from the cult of domesticity that defines American motherhood” (Johnston & Swanson, 2003, p. 29). I hasten to add that this same research acknowledges the social construction of motherhood as part of a dominant ideology that largely perpetuates “the cultural hegemony” (ibid) of patriarchal ideology of mothering (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). This ideology suggests a denial of women identities and selfhood outside of motherhood. The myths of motherhood as posited in this work, therefore, reinforce the ideas of female inferiority which is an identity that is of even less importance if one is not white. Because the dominant ideologies of motherhood paint a picture of the middle to upper middleclass white woman who is happy to be home and look beautiful for the wage-earning father and protector, the idea of the Black mother whose humanity is in doubt, who has to, more often than not, work outside the home and, frequently, is also the sole care-taker of her

3This poem by Claude McKay, Jamaican poet, novelist and essayist expresses an urgency and passion similar to what I feel as an immigrant and a female scholar of color living in many respects on the border (Anzaldúa, 1999) of American/academic culture and life. McKay’s work has been credited to give rise to the Harlem Renaissance. He was, while he lived in the United States, filled (like me) with an overwhelming sense of longing for home (where one feels acknowledged as a full human being) as well as a visceral repudiation of racial hatred that he experienced here and about which he said, “... it was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race and my feelings were indescribable...” (from his autobiographical essay, “A Negro Poet Writes,” 1918).
children and household, is not seriously considered. The idea of Black motherhood is antithetical to “traditional” conceptions and mythology of motherhood and is not an insignificant contributory factor to the uphill challenge of constructing a Black mother ethnography theoretical and methodological stance.

By advancing a Black mother/scholar epistemology, I am attempting first to restore humanity to black womanhood and black motherhood and to resist the widely accepted sin of omission of black motherhood from our cultural embrace and reflection. One first needs to be a person before claiming any other identity. In a culture dominated by a white patriarchal ideology where the place of the white female is relegated to the margins of inferiority and second-placeness (my construction) a black woman who sits at the furthest point opposite the white male on the power and identity continuum would not be perceived as a valued source of insight and scholarship nor would any issue peculiar to her existence be deemed important or consequential enough to engage. The space that Black mother ethnography attempts to open as both a theory and method, will afford Black mother scholars a place to resist white male dominance as well as the discourse of deficit used to characterize the ways of being of black women generally. As such, it becomes necessary to examine the theories that inform this particular stance, establishing their relevance to the theoretical and methodological standpoint of the researcher and the analysis of the research itself.

*The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but they are mighty to the pulling down of strongholds*4

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4 This is a biblical reference taken from 2Corinthians 4:10(KJV). The reference is deemed appropriate because of the spiritual nature of the oppression that Black women daily endure and speaks also to the increasingly subtle ways the
I must find all of me to live
I must find all of me so my son may live.

So your sons and daughters may live,
I must break through the forbidding walls of your fort

For parts of me are in there
The other parts are out here!
The walls that you think protect, only suffocate, divide
They may keep me out (for now)

But they keep you in
And render you a prisoner of your own making.
I’m not a beggar at the gate
I am a soldier, a warrior
I am storm, a hurricane

With winds within and without
That will shake your fort at its very foundations

And lay it bare

So we may build again
Together… as equals.

I see you

But do you SEE me

Coming…?

intersectionality of her oppression plays out in everyday life depresssing her mental AND spiritual state.
I am perceived within and without the academy as the other. My otherness in this society is a given. The understanding and perception of me as a person of lesser value and importance is unquestioned. As such, dominant discourses have me firmly positioned on the margins of American (and global) social, cultural and intellectual life (Cannon & Morton, 2015). It is there that I will remain unless I assert my agency and reclaim my fabulous Black self from the demeaning auction block of objectification and domination.

**The Tools of De-construction**

My use of the word “tools” as a section heading is a deliberate play on Audre Lorde’s (2007) quote: “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” I use this to suggest, as does Lorde, that in order to bring about liberation for ourselves - people of color - those on the margins, must employ their own strategies, cut across borders, (Anzaldua, 1990; Denzin, 2003;) and affirm their own ways of being to enact change.

**Womanism**

Womanism typifies a standpoint epistemology⁵ (Beauroeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1992; 2009). The term *womanist* was first used by author Alice Walker (1983) to characterize the positionality of African-American women from a cultural, political and historical perspective and which is grounded in the understanding of this group’s experience of slavery, segregation, sexism and classism for the duration of its existence within the United States (Beauroeuf-Lafontant, 2002). The term *womanism* though (with good reason) often used interchangeably with *black feminism*, has a particular viewpoint

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⁵ Standpoint epistemology according to Patricia Hill Collins (1989) asserts that “the presence of an independent, standpoint [such as womanism] does not mean it is uniformly shared by all Black women....[It is used] to emphasize the plurality of experiences within the overarching term ‘stand point.’”
that recognizes and acknowledges the experiences that Black women have of racism, sexism, and classism – a set of experiences and vantage point that “constitutes evidence, valid action and morality” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p.72). Beauboeuf-Lafontant, (2003) posits three central tenets of Womanism:

First, womanists understand that oppression is an interlocking system, providing all people with varying degrees of nature of penalty and privilege. Second, they believe that individual empowerment combined with collective action is key to lasting social transformation. Last, they embody a humanism, which seeks the liberation of all, not simply themselves. (p. 72)

All in all, womanism seeks to explicate the experiences, ideas, thoughts and behaviors of Black women in order to make sense of their ethic of caring within the context of their cultural and historical legacies. This particular standpoint embraces: “the maternal, political clarity and an ethic of risk” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p.72). Within the cultural understanding of the wider patriarchal society, the role of mother is generally denigrated, subordinated and decried as less central and important (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). Womanism challenges this notion of the domestication and domination of the woman mother as belonging primarily to the private (and subordinated) sphere of home, but embraces and reorients the act of mothering (theirs and other people’s children) as central to their resistance to racial and patriarchal domination and oppression. Thus, rather than the acceptance of mothering as an individual relationship women share with their own children and their men, womanism regards the act of mothering as a communal responsibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; hooks, 1981).
The Embrace of the Maternal

The embrace of the maternal as evidenced by the act of nurture is not limited to women, but expresses the relationship within the community that cannot be separate from authoritative endeavors (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1989). The embrace of the practice of “other-mothering” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 2009) and maternal responsibility does not fall within the limits of patriarchal family structure. Rather, drawing on the agency derived from an understanding of the cultural norms of West Africa as well as acknowledging the history of oppression suffered in this country by women of African descent, the maternal is understood as a deep commitment to the well-being and survival of the Black community. It is this same embrace of the maternal as a means of social engagement and resistance that is identified in the teaching practice of culturally relevant Black teachers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002)! Collins (1992) asserts that the giving of non-parents the rights of child-rearing, as is often done in the African American community, challenges dominant property relations and in this sense renders as revolutionary the customary blood mother and othermother relationship!

Thus, the maternal capacity of womanist praxis holds within it the deeply radical and political. It rejects the traditional model of patriarchal motherhood ideology as well as the traditional notions of caring (Bergman, 2004; Noddings, 1995) and extends to the caring of the entire community as a means of resistance and survival. It is this understanding that guided my study of Black mothers of Black sons and their schooling experiences and the attendant hope, pain and struggles. Their struggles, though individual and personal on many levels, are also disturbingly typical and thus of relevance to the community. Womanist praxis with this core value of caring, dictates that to care about
other people and other people’s children as if they were one’s own, suggests that one must love these children with the same passion and urgency to move one to do everything in one’s power to protect their humanity, their well-being, their wholeness of self, in order to ensure their survival.

**Political Clarity**

Political clarity is another dimension of Womanist ideology (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). It recognizes the social and political implications of systemic injustice and so positions itself as a means through which to contest the societal stereotypes imposed especially upon children. The practice of womanism, therefore, requires a political clarity that does not shy away from the realities and implications of domination experienced by people of color. Political clarity indicates a stepping forth and acknowledgment of the oppressive realities of the world as well as recognition of ways to repudiate, resist and thus neutralize the real and quantifiable damage these discourses have upon the lives of Black people. We do not need to look much further than the spate of police killings of Black men and women, boys and girls that have most recently received extensive media attention in the United States. For many in this country, this is a new problem or a problem recently come to light. For members of the Black community and Black mothers specifically, this is an ongoing part of Black life and Black reality. There has always been a political clarity on the part of Black mothers who are vigilantly aware of the real and quantifiable damage the discourses of white fear of black bodies in public spaces, for instance, have upon the lives of their children and themselves.
**The ethic of risk**

The ethic of risk is “rooted in [a] sense of existential interdependence … [and acknowledges that] the creation of fairness is the task of generations.” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p.81). Womanists understand morality not in abstract ways but in personal, very specific (and maternal) ways that demand an intimacy with, rather than an aloofness from, other people (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1986; Ferguson, 2011). One of the guiding principles of the ethic of risk, is the cultural belief that undergirds the understanding of the tie between the individual and the community, not simply as a chosen means of existence, but that the oppression brought about by the conditions of slavery and ongoing racial oppression are only overcome through individual/community interdependence - a crucial component of survival.

Embedded in this belief also is the notion and directive that one must be of purpose and benefit (my emphasis) to others and to oneself. After all, womanists and community activists have long labored under the understanding of the link between their individual and collective destinies and the fact that survival and racial progress is achieved only through ties of mutual support (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Bertrand-Jones, Wilder & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). Womanism, therefore, is unconventional in its combination of caring and power – phenomena perceived from a hegemonic perspective as antithetical. It is about a recognition of a “fundamental interdependence, regardless of the social divisions of class, race, and gender….It suggests that caring may not result in immediate, self-congratulatory success… [it requires that] one must have faith” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p.84). It also acknowledges that power in and of itself is not a negative thing – it becomes so, according to womanist understanding, when oppression
occurs as a result of its misuse. This indicates there is a disconnection – a refusal or a failure for people to care about each other.

Well, son, I’ll tell you:

Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

It’s had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.

But all the time

I’se been a-climbin’ on,

And reachin’ landin’s,

And turnin’ corners,

And sometimes goin’ in the dark

Where there ain’t been no light.

So boy, don’t you turn back.

Don’t you set down on the steps

‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.

Don’t you fall now—

For I’se still goin’, honey,

I’se still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair\textsuperscript{6} 

- Langston Hughes, “Mother to Son”

And the message that “life ain’t no crystal stair” is precisely what is embraced and acted upon in Womanist praxis. The reality of this fact and the need to remain hopeful and positive in it all, pressing for better, not just for one’s own children or the members of one’s own intimate group, but for the good of all, is not an insignificant distinguishing feature of this epistemology.

Black Feminist Thought

“[T]he general culture shaping the taken-for-granted knowledge of the community of experts is one permeated by widespread notions of Black and female inferiority” (Collins, 1989).\textsuperscript{7}

The assumption that Black women are inferior in every way is widespread and largely unquestioned. It is against these damaging, dehumanizing assumptions that black women, advancing a Black feminist epistemology, must persist to reclaim their humanity, their power, their agency, and their selfhood, taken from them and controlled by those who are most unlike them.

To repudiate these acts of social and psychological violence routinely enacted against her identity, her person, the Black feminist researcher cannot only engage mentally and intellectually, she must do so emotionally and spiritually as well. For it is

\textsuperscript{6} Poem entitled “Mother to Son” by famed African American poet and literary icon, Langston Hughes. This is one of Hughes’ earliest poems. It was first published in Crisis magazine in 1921 (In Selected Poems of Langston Hughes, (1990). The message of the poem expresses hope and encouragement (of a mother to her son) in the face of great difficulties. Quite significantly, the language echoes the phraseology, cadence and conversational tone of African-American parlance.

the reclaiming of a whole self that she fights for. There is no choice in the matter - her survival, the retrieval of herself from discourses that position her as a moral degenerate or from erasure, depends on it! The journey of the Black feminist scholar is a relentless upstream swim for it is an epistemology within which lived experience is a criterion for credibility (Collins, 2009).

There is much commonality that Black Feminist ideology shares with womanism. I attempt here to highlight the specific areas where these ideologies complement, rather than overlap each other. In addition to shedding light upon the challenges of racism, sexism and classism and their intersectionalities that Black women experience daily, and which is covered by the tenets of womanism (and Critical Race Feminism to be later expounded upon), Black feminist ideology, in particular in the way it is used in making sense of the data in this study of Black mothers and their Black sons’ experiences in the public school system where they are/were students, uses the “outsider within” (Collins, 1986, p. S14) lens to theorize and explicate the issues endemic to the struggles of Black women. Additionally, Collins (1986; 1989; 2009) along with hooks (1981) and Lorde (2007) clarify a standpoint of and for Black women … [so,] while Black feminist thought may be recorded by others, it is produced by Black women” (Collins, 1986, p.S16). Also important in the explication of Black feminist thought, is the reality that it contains observations and interpretations of Black womanhood that describe and explain different expressions of common themes. Therefore, as Collins (1986) sees it, there is not (nor should there be) any one platform from which one may measure the exactness of a particular thinker. For Black feminist thought comes from a rich tradition, much of which is oral and produced by ordinary women in their roles as mothers, teachers, musicians,
preachers, etc. This notion in part challenges the idea that only a limited, specialized group may engage in theorizing and that theory may only come from “specialized legitimating theories … by full-time legitimators” (Collins, 1986, p. S16).

Black womanhood has for generations been externally defined thus giving way to its stereotypical understanding and interpretation. It is why asserts Collins, (1986) Black women’s self-valuation and self-definition are of such key importance in the explanation of Black feminist thought. These themes represent a push back against a white American main-stream imposed controlling images of African American womanhood and are responsible in large part for the dehumanization of the Black woman and the exploitation of her labor (Collins, 1986; Gilkes, 1981; King, 1973). The assertiveness of Black women in resisting their multifaceted oppression is a threat to the status quo and as punishment, Black womanhood has been assaulted with a number of images that are externally derived used to neutralize and/or punish what is perceived as forceful Black female behavior (Collins, 1986; 2009). As such, the claims of Black women about the oppressions they daily experience are often dismissed as simply the ranting (and exaggerations) of angry Black women. 8

The intersecting nature of the oppressions suffered by Black women gives them a clearer, deeper understanding of how these oppressions operate and it is this robust, first-hand knowledge that undergirds the theoretical and methodological praxis of Black

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8 Black women’s anger, though often dismissed as hysteria or as overreaction or evidence of her “aggression” is very much owned and embraced by Black feminist epistemologies. Black woman’s anger is justified. It is her right to feel and express her rage for enduring the ongoing, relentless assault upon her humanity and the assault leveled against her progeny. The overall idea here is that Black woman’s anger, however she chooses to express it, is justified and NOT to be dismissed! See section titled “Black Feminist Autoethnography.”
feminist epistemology. Deeply embedded in the Black woman’s reality are experiences of knowing and feeling that defy even the most eloquent, clearly defined and articulated explication. Black women endure the daily pain and indignity of macro and micro aggressions. Theirs is the minutely task of striving against a society that is united in its perception of Black women’s supposed inferiority and subordinated humanity.

Black feminist thought must vigorously challenge these widely accepted notions of the Black woman’s devalued status to claim a position that affirms her humanity, her place and her way of seeing and engaging the world – and this must come from her!

Black feminist thought above all else, is constructed by Black women and is the space where they reclaim their selfhood and humanity. bell hooks (1981) supports this stance by referencing Elizabeth Janeway’s (1981) assertion about the powers of the oppressed which are in the repudiation of the description of oneself by the powerful. I venture here to reassert this perspective advanced by hooks (1981), Collins (1986; 2009), Davis (1983) and Lorde (2007) among others. The humanity, dignity, worthiness of the Black woman cannot be restored to her by others; it must be done by her! It may only be achieved by her insistence on her inclusion in social, cultural and academic discourses, by advancing her standpoint on issues crucial to our fuller understanding of a big and ever more complex and diverse world made smaller by increased travel, advancement and access to technology and the proliferation of social media. Ironically, it is through these same means that the humanity and the worthiness of the Black woman receive their daily offensive. This discourse is not naïve to that. It sees this as a further challenge which it must undertake in its determination to construct and lay its own path, chart its own direction, dictate its own terms.
Black feminist epistemology, therefore, addresses its own issues, in its own voice. Its embrace of truth as it is lived and experienced by those who author and construct its tenets makes it revolutionary in the way it provides a space for the recording and analysis of data that fall within its theoretical and methodological parameters. Beyond all else, it gives Black women a space and a platform to speak back to a white male academic tradition that does not willingly yield to or acknowledge their legitimacy.

This epistemology bears profound relevance to this study as the issues it attempts to raise i.e. the schooling challenges of my son and the other Black boys with IEPs inside the classroom as well as in the hallway, and the pain their mothers experience as they attempt to help them navigate their way through a largely inflexible and traditional public educational system, are germane to the discussions around the achievement patterns of children of color with special needs and the experiences of their parents from the parents’ perspective. Black mother ethnography is the construction of a theoretical frame which seeks to shed light from this much less considered (often overlooked) vantage point.

**Critical Race Feminism**

While there is significant overlap between critical race feminism and Black feminist thought, critical race feminism’s orientation is a legal one and takes into consideration my status as an immigrant woman in a way that the other epistemologies do not. As an immigrant, my outsider within status is heightened as this adds yet another dimension to my self-understanding and self-expression. It is true I am a Black woman living in the United States and as a Black female body, I am regarded with the same suspicion and derision as other Black women, but I am an *immigrant* Black woman mother. The experiences that shaped my upbringing and understanding of the world are
still somewhat different from my peers. I speak with a different accent, I claim a
different ethnicity and I perceive my movement in the world and my responses to my
oppression still somewhat differently than my American born contemporaries. The
differences of my experiences in this culture, though subtle, are significant. As an
immigrant, I look to my home country as the means of escape from the oppressive
systems of America, having to acknowledge that the systems of white supremacy though
manifested differently “at home,” are as constraining and debilitating there as they are
here.

The awareness that *America is never home* and requires an ongoing reorientation
and acclimatization project is a significant feature of my racial and ethnic identity, and as
a mother, informs my mothering and community involvement.

Admittedly, critical race feminism operates seamlessly with Black feminism when
examining the experiences of African American and African diasporan women. I make
specific reference to critical race feminism to shed light upon the significance of my
immigrant status (though a naturalized American) and its impact upon the way I
experience my oppression and understand the US society. I often find myself as an
outsider even among those with whom I have the most in common in terms of my
identity and experiences. It is necessary to note my bewilderment whenever this occurs.
Critical race feminism, taking into consideration the experiences of difference along the
lines of ethnicity, does acknowledge this.

I therefore approach this research phenomenon broadly positioned as a Black (i.e.
African American) woman, but quite specifically as a Black *Jamaican* woman. And one
who has had, in light of her Caribbean sensibilities and experiences of intersectional
oppression, to be very savvy about the way she navigates life in this society. My survival strategies have had to be different in many respects from my African American sisters, requiring a particular kind of astuteness that is quite reflective of the sentiments expressed in the ingenious poetic styling of Louise Bennett (1982)⁹ (pioneering Jamaican poet who mostly wrote using the Jamaican creole). The Jamaican woman, like her African American sister, has historically had to be strong, and smart and tenacious. But the Caribbean woman experiences the world differently partly (but not insignificantly) because she comes from a society comprised primarily of people of African descent where those specific circumstances saw her experiencing society and her femaleness in a different way than her African sister in North America. There were also less free people of Color in North America than in the Caribbean (Adas, Swartz & Stearns, 1992). Even with a stronger direct African influence, evidenced by these demographic realities, the Caribbean woman is marginalized in the Caribbean society generally as a woman and a woman of color, most especially, as a dark-skinned Black woman. The Jamaican woman is aware of the sexism of the Jamaican man, yet she supports him even as she takes on the role of leadership and balances the fate of the Jamaican family and community upon her back. It is this that Bennett lauds in her poetry that celebrates the survival instincts and the courageous, progressive efforts of the “Jamaica Oman” (woman):

⁹ Louise Bennett-Coverley, (1919-2006) Jamaican poet, folklorist, writer and educator was a progressive entertainer that raised issues of great import to the Jamaican people and culture using humor (satirical and otherwise) and the Jamaican creole to shed light. Miss Lou (as she was affectionately called) courageously and subversively used the then much tabooed creole as her medium of expression, following in the footsteps of Jamaican literary giant, Claude McKay (1889-1948) who also, early in his career, wrote using the Jamaican creole.
Look how long Jamaica oman

--Modder, sister, wife, sweetheart --

Outa road an eeny yard deh pon

A dominate her part!

From the grass root to de hill-top,

In profession skill an trade,

Jamaica oman tek har time

Dah mount an’ mek de grade

Some backa man a push, some side-a

Man a hol’ him han,

Some a lick sense eeny man head,

Some a guide him pon him plan

Neck an neck an foot an foot wid man

She buckle hole har own;

While man a call har ‘so so rib’

Oman a tun backbone!

This excerpt of the poem is profuse in its acknowledgment of the virtues of the Jamaican woman who holds her own beside the Jamaican man (or any man!), and while her contributions are being sidelined, ignored (in the Jamaican context) as inconsequential by the Jamaican man (who refers to her as merely the rib [so-so rib] --
biblical reference of Eve being created from Adam’s rib and therefore of less importance than Adam) she is in actuality the backbone, another body part, but the mainstay of the body, holding it together!

It is in this quite specific way that critical race feminism makes my identity as an inside outsider of salience to this discourse. It invites my perspective, language and culture into the discussion that I believe Black feminism and womanism, which are US centered discourses, do not do in as robust a way.

**Black Feminist Auto-ethnography**

*Where is the critical voice which speaks to Black women’s identity constituted in the experience of slavery, exile, pilgrimage and struggle?* (Griffin, 2012)

Black feminist autoethnography (Griffin, 2012) working in tandem with performance autoethnography acknowledges and owns the rage that Black women endure daily for being routinely denigrated and repudiated and locked out of the social, cultural and intellectual discourses of main stream society. It provides a means through which the Black woman mother may be afforded a “homeplace” (hooks, 2007) – a place where the Black woman may voice her anger and frustration at a system that demeans and dehumanizes and rejects her being (Griffin, 2012).

Undergirded by the tenets of critical race feminism, womanism and Black feminist ideology there is acknowledgment of the intersectionalities of oppression

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10 Griffin (2012) citing the words of Angela Davis (1998) in her article titled “I am an angry Black woman: Black feminist autoethnography, voice and Resistance.” Griffin’s coined term of Black feminist autoethnography is used in concert with black feminism and womanism to produce this form of autoethnography wherein the black woman may tell her story and express the full extent of her feelings: her anger, her passions and her pain.
11 Performance autoethnography explicated in a later section
endured by the Black woman mother as Black, female and mother who is often struggling economically as well as affirming her womanist warrior stance. As biological and symbolic mother, she vigorously challenges, pushes back and advocates and petitions the system on behalf of her children and members of her community, including black men. Black motherhood holds to the necessity of mothering the community; the necessity of taking on the work of activism; of owning but holding her anger and her pain. It is this that Black feminist auto ethnography embodies to make a “homeplace” (Lorde, 2007) for voices and bodies such as mine. Black feminist auto ethnography enriches the groundings of Black feminism, womanism, and, I add, critical race feminism, to call the invisible Black body of the Black female academic out from the shadows of obscurity. Amplified by the afore mentioned theoretical positions, autoethnography “which in the academy is more often associated with and published by white women (Calafell, 2007; Calafell & Moreman, 2009) Black feminist auto ethnography offers a narrative means for Black women to highlight struggles common to Black womanhood without erasing the diversity among Black women (Griffin, 2012) allowing them to “strategically speak back (Griffin, 2012; hooks, 1989) to systems of oppression. (Griffin, 2012).

Black feminist auto ethnography’s project is also to reject the notion of keeping the personal private. According to Griffin (2012):

BFA as a means to voice is obligated to raise social consciousness regarding the everyday struggles common to Black womanhood; embrace self-definition as a means for Black women to be labeled, acknowledged, and remembered as they wish; humanize Black women at the intersections of multiple forms of
oppression; resist the imposition of controlling imagery; and self-reflexively account for how Black women can reproduce systemic oppression.

Griffin’s assertions also account for the paucity of Black female scholars who have published accounts of personal experiences of oppression and fewer still who explicitly mark their work as auto ethnography. In it, the personal and the political, the private and the public, collide! Black feminist auto ethnography helps to establish Black mother ethnography as less of a “what”, and more of a “how”.

**Performance auto/ethnography**

*Performance auto/ethnography* lends to Black mother ethnography a means of representing and performing the rituals from everyday life, using performance as both a method of representation and a method of understanding. It realizes that no one theory is capable of explaining the messiness of social reality and so the process of research returns society’s gaze. It then becomes “an act of intervention, a method of resistance and a form of criticism” (Denzin, 2003, p.38). Performance ethnography is a knowledge that cuts across borders and uses performance as a method of investigation, a way of DOING ethnography and as a way of collaboratively engaging the meanings of experience. It represents an attempt to inscribe culture for the purpose of increasing knowledge and social awareness. The auto ethnography reflexively inserts the researcher’s biographical experiences into the ethnographic performance project. It is an interpretive event, a way of projecting understanding about the self and its situations and experiences (Denzin, 2003). As such, performance auto/ethnography is of salience to this particular research, in the way it makes use of the tenets of mother ethnography and lays the path that honors not just how the story the story is told, but also of the storyteller.
Conceptual Frame

Through the lens of mother ethnography which is constructed upon the theoretical frameworks of womanism, Black feminism and critical race feminism (see Figure 1 below), my study attempts to make visible the invisible struggles and pain Black mothers endure to support their sons’ efforts to succeed in the public school system and in the world. It also highlights the deep joy and pride these mothers have for their sons. Mother ethnography aligns seamlessly with performance ethnography which invests it with its performance possibilities. Black feminist autoethnography embraces the pain, rage and fierce love the Black woman holds within her body and frees her to express these embodied passions and experiences using them as resources to give substance to her research. It also highlights the connection and sisterhood shared by Black women for each other and the shared pain and joy of other mothering of each other’s children.

I stand at the edge of the cliff with a stiff wind at my back
My outstretched arms clutch at nothing
But my baby clutches me
I fight to dig my heels in at the crumbling brink
Only my will prevents me from falling
I am hurting and tired
But still the wind comes, unrelenting and constant
I am tipping, my muscles straining, knees buckling
And still my baby clutches me
My love will not give me leave to fall
Or he is undone and so am I
But this wind is heavy and blows stronger still
I cannot give in; I must not give in
But my strength wanes with each determined gust
And, as dust and rubble precede my descent
I am grabbed from behind
Fingers intertwine my own
Heaving, hauling, stepping back, rejecting
The pull of oblivion

The wind still comes
But I hold as hard as I am held
And I live

Research Question

Through the lens of mother ethnography I will address the following research question:

How do Black mothers make meaning of the experiences of their Black sons with IEPs in the public school system?
CHAPTER 3
MOTHER ETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD

The struggles my son endured as an elementary school student have persisted through junior high school and into high school. He now attends a performing arts public charter high school in eastern United States where I hoped his artistic inclinations and natural abilities would be engaged and actively used as a marker of his scholarship. Although this particular school attempts to do so more than I believe to be the case of the junior high school and high school he would have gone to, state mandated high stakes testing and test-preparation methodologies rule the day, and he will achieve the hope of moving on to a post-secondary education with a high school diploma only if he can pass these state-mandated tests. Otherwise, the school system’s plans for him include passing him off to one of three state agencies to which the school will relinquish its responsibility for his education. Need I say what I expect his outcome to be from all this? With this realization, our forward struggle is assured. By all indications, I remain the marginalized mother of a marginalized son. And as I continue to tell his story, it is my contention that I tell the story of countless boys and girls, Black boys and girls, who belong to mothers, Black mothers, who cry at night and fight during the day for the reform of a rigidly white school system to care about their children’s outcome and do all it can to ensure they too succeed.

I also contend that it is important to represent the pain of such mothers and their sons in a manner that is raw and visceral, capturing the unseen, often unspoken and therefore unacknowledged embodied dimensions of the struggle for survival into which families of color in American society are interminably locked.
In this study, I present an ethnographic research of two other Black mothers besides me who have children with IEPs and who attended public school. By so doing, I hope to broaden and deepen the scope of insight and understanding these mothers’ narratives will lend to mother ethnography. I believe these mothers’ observations and interactions with their children at home as well as at school where presumably their children are deemed less successful than other children, and where, quite possibly, mothers themselves are perceived by school personnel as less effective parents – even as bad mothers, will enrich the findings of this research methodology.

I decided to undertake this investigation of my son’s schooling experiences and the experiences of other Black mothers and their children because I had a hunch that my son’s experiences and mine of always fighting on his behalf are not unique, especially to Black mothers of Black children with special needs. Also not unique are the ways these Black mothers process their experiences - the anxiety and the pain they daily feel (amid their intense love and joy) as they witness and anticipate a future fraught with hardships for their children and for themselves. All parents hope for their children to succeed beyond where they themselves have been able to go. The possibility of our children who have been diagnosed by the school system as deficient is akin to a metaphoric death sentence upon their future. The implications of this research therefore, are huge as this highlights the challenges children of color with IEPs and their parents face of navigating the school system and of claiming a space of value in society. As these students continue to struggle to get through a system that does not adequately nurture their potential, so much is lost to our society and world when they are prevented from coming to full potential as their gifts, abilities and learning styles are almost flippantly disregarded.
Using mother ethnography as a theory and method of conducting this research, I used all the resources of knowing that mothers have in their arsenal. Black feminism honors the lived experience of the Black woman and uses it as a criterion for credibility (Collins, 2009) and critical race feminism honors the counterstories of its participants to “[debunk] stereotypes and [identify] gaps and misrepresentations” (Few, 2007). The anxiety I feel for my son’s future is apparently shared only by members of my immediate family and friends circle, disturbingly, not so much by those who work with him at school. Walking into school as I often do these days to advocate for him has made me more exposed to a growing hostility that glides just below the surface of the exchanged civilities between his teachers and me. My unrelenting advocacy and questioning/challenging of the ways my son’s behavior and performance at school are assessed and his teachers’ response to him as a student in a racialized body have placed (it seems unavoidably) the school and my family on opposite sides of the figurative boxing ring. In my own interactions and friendships with mothers of Black children, even of Black children who supposedly “do well” in our public school system, I have found the parent/school relationships to be at best tenuous and tension-filled. I am curious to learn more about the experiences of women who are mothers of children of color and the nature of the relationship they share with the school as they dart in and out of it as insiders and outsiders or as inside-outsiders (Collins, 2009). I am interested to hear from Black mothers specifically for as mothers we share a particular relationship with our children, with our households, with our jobs and with the wider world, that, when conflated, becomes a very different thing to behold as well as for us to hold within ourselves and experience in our bodies. This is why it is insufficient, wholly inadequate
to represent these deep and very complex, intertwined, inextricable, often nuanced data in an oversimplified, singular and linear manner.

A distinctive method of ethnography is that it privileges the body as the site of knowing (Conquergood, 1991) and therefore stands in contrast to most academic disciplines that set issues of the mind above the body; the spirit above the flesh, where further patriarchal understanding align women with the body and men with the mind thus reinforcing the mind/body; reason/emotion; objective/subjective; masculine/feminine hierarchies as stable (Conquergood, 1991, p.180). The notion that women are associated with the body -- irrational and dangerous and unruly -- is juxtaposed with the idea that this “inferior realm” can only be ruled by the superior powers of reason and logic – that which is both morally and epistemologically superior and which is associated with maleness and whiteness. Conquergood (1995) further contends that knowledge must be engaged, not abstracted and is “derived from solidarity with, not separation from the people.” This study attempts to do just that.

This research genre sets us free and seeks to utilize the tools we as Black mothers use and have used across time and space to survive the hostility imposed upon us, our partners and our children for generations. Black women have used conversation, song, poetry, humor, storytelling, metaphor, and religion to help us bear the weight of Black womanhood and Black motherhood. Our understanding of struggle and the life lessons, values and mores we gain from it are what we pass on to our children and that which shapes the way we respond to our partners and influence our way of being in the world. The support Black women give to other Black women and to the members of our community as a means to survival form an integral part of this study as it highlights our
experiences of interfacing/interacting/negotiating with the school system, present a more
robust, panoramic picture of their reality.

Participants and setting

The participants of this study, therefore, are two women, Eloise and Allison,

women with whom I have differing degrees of familiarity in the community where I live.

They are Black mothers of boys with IEPs who were public school students from

Starkfield, a White sub-urban school district, located in the north eastern USA. Both

women are professionals.¹² In order to protect their identities, their names and other

identifying features used during conversation, analysis and reporting have been replaced

with pseudonyms. All hard data are stored in a secure location and all electronic data are

password protected.

Eloise

Eloise is a woman of great significance in Starkfield but most especially to the

African American community at large. She was approached for this project with

inordinate respect and it was an honor to sit at her feet and hear of her experiences

fighting to raise her son during a time when his diagnosis of autism wasn’t fully

understood even by those who diagnosed it.

Her son, Peter, is African- American with a mother, Eloise, who was a

professional in the civil service industry and a father who was a professor. By all

measures of society, Peter was a child from a privileged background who led a privileged

life. Interestingly, he was not exempt from the stigmatization and the exclusion that

consistently accompanies the condition of Blackness and a diagnosis of “special.”

¹² “Profession” is defined in The Merriam Webster Dictionary as a paid occupation,
especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification.
I came to know Eloise because of her activism but she did not at first identify herself as such. Eloise comes from a family of activists and a life of activism. She talked briefly about the impact of her parents’ (in particular her mother’s) activism, such that they became infamous in her neighborhood and in that part of the state where they lived, for pushing back against various forms of state sanctioned prejudice: the Jim Crow Laws!

Allison

Allison is Black woman of Caribbean descent who works as a college administrator/adjunct faculty member. She recently finished graduate school and has been employed to lead a science program at Starkfield University. Allison is a single parent and legal guardian of an adult son, David, who lives with her full-time. David now 25 years old spent his k-12 educational years in the public school system before being referred to state-funded agencies for support services on account of his developmental challenges.

Allison is divorced from her son’s father who was a stay-at-home dad when her son, David, was very young, and who, shortly thereafter removed himself from their lives and has not since been involved with David or his mother. Allison re-married but that marriage has also ended. As such, Allison has raised her son, David as a single parent for very nearly all of his life! Like Eloise, she has lived in different parts of the United States, though, except for Starkfield, she did not spend any long time in many of these places. Allison’s greatest source of anxiety continues to be her son, David about whom she worries unceasingly.
Sonji

I am the married mother of a 16 year old son, my only child. He is a student at a performing arts public charter school. I am a graduate student and an adjunct faculty member at a local university.

I am a Black woman who immigrated to the United States almost thirty years ago. I have been an educator for all of my professional life and have also worked in youth advocacy with “innercity/at risk’ populations” for as long as I have lived in the United States. My husband of 25 years is also a Jamaican immigrant with a performing arts/community organizing/activist background and is an involved parent who now works with people with developmental challenges.

Data Collection

In order to obtain data of the experiences of mothers’ interactions with their children, and to gain insights into the day-to-day lives of the families, I engaged the mothers in semi-structured/conversations about their experiences and dialogued about their accounts of their sons’ experiences with school personnel, in meetings, and other avenues of their daily lives. Mothers articulated the emotions they felt and how they made sense of those experiences. I made detailed field notes from our conversations (see Appendix A for a list of the question prompts). I reflected on the conversations by interacting with the transcriptions especially as they called forth memories of my experiences with my own son. Whenever this occurs, I have interjected where I deem appropriate. Wherever my voice has been interpolated in the script, I have used bolded text to indicate this occurrence. This form of data collection allowed me to be involved in
ongoing conversations with the mothers while simultaneously positioning me as a participant in the study. Thus, my opinions and responses are included as data.

My initial conversation with the mothers in my study was to re-establish a rapport with them in my role as sister-mother researcher and to offer us an opportunity to share freely our experiences as mothers and chief caretakers of our sons. Conversations were ongoing throughout the study. I wrote poetry and commentary which I have included in the study as my in-the-moment reactions/responses (analytical memos) to conversations as they happened. I did this also as a way of processing the experiences of the other mothers and/or of my own experience with my son especially when they are experiences that are reminiscent of my own. I collected artifacts from home and school for instance, classroom projects and mothers’ accounts of home activities. The poetry and commentary capture the thoughts I had during and after the conversation sessions or points of clarification that came to mind. My analytical memos (poetry, commentary, stream of consciousness etc.) reflect my thought processes of the stories/experiences as they happened or as I interacted with the textual accounts of the experiences. The mother journals and accounts of home activities as well as the artifacts informed my understanding of the whole-child experience and provided a rich description of the emotional and embodied dimension of the families’ experiences including my own.

My interaction with the families lasted for a period of three months during the spring of 2017. I met with participants in their homes or in a setting of their choosing where they felt free to share their experiences. These included classrooms at Starkfield University, in my home and in restaurants in the downtown area of Starkfield. I originally felt that I would be able to conduct interactions with participants via phone or
video chat but fortunately, those alternate mediums were not necessary and which I believe contributed to the more powerful experience of sharing physical space with the women. At first, the women and I had agreed to meet twice weekly for 30 minutes per session, but the intensity of the conversations were such that 30 minutes proved inadequate. So with the participants’ consent, instead of meeting twice weekly for 30 minutes, we met once weekly for at least an hour.

The data collection phase of the study adhered to the tenets of Black mother ethnography, in that, of equal importance to the written accounts of observation, dialogue and conversation, these mothers’ experiences included all the forms of expression they used to cope with the day to day challenge of helping their children survive.

Research participants were afforded the freedom to use all the means the act of communication gave them to relate their ideas, perceptions, feelings. Their embodied experiences: their sighs, their tears, their song, their movement/gestures, their hugs, their screams, their laughter, their silence are honored.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis phase of the study overlapped in some instances with the data collection. Again, consistent with the methodology of mother ethnography, the data representation includes poetry, song, symbolism or metaphor. An important aspect of performance ethnography and which is true of mother ethnography, is not to present Truth but to represent the lived reality as it comes, in the moment it comes (Denzin, 2003).

The data analysis was ongoing intertwined and simultaneous as I interacted and conversed with these mothers about their experiences. Whereby my sense-making of the
The data is performative and represented as part of the embodied experiences of these mothers. As previously noted, mother ethnography embraces the whole self of the Black woman allowing her the space to use her body, experiential knowledge and ways of knowing to conduct, analyze and present the research. Black feminist epistemologies, upon which mother ethnography is grounded, highlight the connection and sisterhood shared by Black women for each other and the shared pain and joy of othermothering of each other’s children and thereby enables a necessary softening of the researcher/participant divide. This gives leave to the Black mother ethnographer to represent these embodied stories as her own.

It is through the sharing of the stories that the Black mother ethnographer processes and analyses the experiences of the mothers with whom she shares and thus darts in and out of the transcription with poetry, commentary, narrative depiction, quotation, photograph and picture/illustration. This necessary intertwine of stories with analysis while calling into effect the epistemologies upon which this methodology is constructed is her method of analysis.

The stories I tell in the following two chapters are largely in the words of the women who tell them. I present their words without much interruption or filter. I converse with these women and the issues of salience they raise by interspersing the text with my own analysis in the form of prose or poetry. I present these stories as a glimpse into the lived realities of these mothers of sons who have been deemed “special needs” by our system of education as well as by other systems in the larger society.

Parents who negotiate and advocate on their children’s behalf within the school system are often swamped by the overwhelming authority of the system of education (in
all its imposing formality) and the “jargony,” clinical language used to characterize their children. The input of these mothers, as well as my own, have often been reduced to a few sentences and bullet points presented on the children’s Individualized Education Plans (hereafter IEPs) as almost inconsequential to the recommendations and assertions of the school personnel. In this way, the input of parents is dwarfed by the official stance of the educational system. It is an ongoing dilemma.

I am attempting to give these mothers a voice. I have attempted to give them leave to express their alarm, their pride in their children, their outlook and differences of opinion with each other, their assessment of their own struggles to help their children cope and overcome their challenges. It is their story. THEY (and no one else) should tell it!

I first present Eloise’s story. Allison (my friend and whose story is told later) often sat in on the Eloise interviews. She mostly listened, but there were times when she entered the conversations with comments or clarifying questions, I believe, more for her – as a way of gaining more insight to help her in her continuing challenge with her own son, than as a direct benefit to me. Eloise’s story is compelling and as we listened, and conversed we were riveted.
CHAPTER 4

ELOISE: HE’S A PERSON

Eloise’s story is told as a reflection, as she looks back upon her journey to support her son’s education and life.

Her son, now 36 years old is a man. He is single and still lives at home with his parents. But he is an independent man with a job and many skills and talents. He has friends and an active social life. In talking about the experiences raising her son, Eloise is very clear about how she felt about the issues she encountered then and how she feels now. The immediacy of the emotions she may have felt while enduring the struggle to get her son educated have all but dissipated and have been replaced by a deep sense of pride in herself for staying the course during what must have been dogged years of trial, but most especially a glowing, beaming pride in her son for the loving, beautiful, compassionate and talented man he is today.

Eloise’s storytelling could come across in parts as somewhat detached. She is no longer required to go into school to mediate and advocate for her son. The adrenaline of passion that enabled that kind of intervention is no longer needed. She is now able to enjoy Peter as a sensitive and respectful adult. And the laughter in her voice and the irony in her tone as she tells her story, have little to do with amusement. She won! It is her triumph. Despite the trials and the trouble ... she prevailed – but more than all, Peter prevails!!
Meet Eloise

(Eloise describes herself in her words. Here she interestingly speaks of herself -- interwoven with my own narration -- in the third person)

“Eloise is a person who believes in education and also believes that you do not look at the evaluation of anyone prior to meeting that person.” She is actively involved with children but, “not to the point of smothering the hell out of them.” She thinks it is important to “find out from the child to see if they have homework but also to look at the child as a whole for they need to be involved with school as well as with the community, meaning the world at large as well as meeting other people and meeting other life-styles, asking questions, and finding out from others with the answers. She believes in travel and would travel all around the world. When she had children she still traveled a lot, but though it did slow her progress some, she took the children nonetheless. She believes in the mutual respect between child and grown up. No sugar for children. She taught children to make healthy food choices because of her own struggle with asthma. So she taught children to read food labels as well. One child did not have ice-cream till he was 18 months old. She believes in parents being strict but not to the point of fanaticism. She believes we should never stop learning for learning is a life-long project.”

Eloise is twice married with a child from her first marriage who is now middle aged. She married her second husband less than 20 years ago but she has been in relationship with him over several decades. The child from that union, Peter, will be 36.

Eloise has lived on both coasts of the USA. She grew up in the South but lived in the Northeast and thence to several cities along the west coast before she came to settle in Starkfield in the Northeastern United States.
Eloise’s Story

It had snowed some days before and it was cold. There was snow and ice on the ground and the path to Eloise’s apartment on the outskirts of one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Starkfield, was a little precarious. Allison and I, laptop in hand, walked gingerly upon snow and ice that crunched under our feet toward the side entrance of Eloise’s condo, where she stood waving a warm welcome indicating to us where to walk. She is diminutive in stature with (by Black people’s standards) a greying head of soft-textured, majestic locks. Somewhere in her seventies and not at all looking the part, Eloise is a beautiful woman. Her glowingly smooth dark caramel skin belies her years upon the earth and her fight to live.

We entered a small hallway where we exchanged our now dripping snow-covered boots for the soft house slippers Eloise provided us. She then ushered us into a warm wood paneled living room with an unlit brick fireplace, easy sectional seating and tufted leather chairs. The shades of the high ceilinged glass windows that ran along the entire western side of the room were half way drawn casting a soft light over it. Re-introductions, compliments and other pleasantries aside, we sat down to talk about Eloise’s journey. I placed a copy of the list of questions (see appendix A) I would ask her in front of her. It is to these questions in their written form that Eloise responds. She would systematically move on to the next question each time she felt she sufficiently responded to the one before. Unless, of course, there was more I wanted from her and at which time I would ask those questions. Whenever and wherever additional questions were asked, interjections and comments made, I have indicated (in bold) this occurrence in the transcript.
This was my first trip of many to Eloise’s home…

Tell me about your son. Describe his personality. What makes him happy?

My son today is 35. He is very happy. He used to work at AB electronics. He’s a handsome Black man. He’s been at his workplace for five years now. He used to volunteer for about six years at a local company as a graphic artist. Now he works at CD Electronics Store as a television technician. He has a wonderful laugh. He would do anything for his friends. He loves games and he loves computers. He’s built two or three computers on his own. He loves his friends. We have a large family all over the country. And when we have family reunions he loves the kids. We call him “Peter Pumpkin Eater” (pseudonym). He dislikes people doing mean things to others like people taking advantage of others. He takes a keen interest in politics, in what is going on. He loves CNN. So he has a lot of hobbies.

A few years ago his father came down with dementia, two of my sisters died at the same time and he was a God send. Now he drives me home. That’s the type of person he is. At one point before he started working he would drive everyone home. Oh, he also makes a mean chocolate, chocolate chip, chocolate cake. And he cooks. He cooks for holiday gatherings.

What makes him sad?

If anything should happen to his friends that makes him sad. He is very protective of his friends. He doesn’t like to see people taken advantage of.

What do you admire about him?

I’ll tell you what I admire about him: he helps people; he’s there for his friends and family. He would drive people wherever they would want to go. I’ll tell you why I
know this child was special: he offered to cook for me when he was very young so he could help me out. He got some Ramen, some apple sauce… (laughter as her voice trails off)

A mother tells the story of her son
Uninterrupted
And glows with pride
A mother tells the story of her son
Her own story about her own son
Whom she knows like no else
Knows him
There are no
Explanations
Or Justifications
Necessary to show him to the world
He is himself
Without apology
A mother tells the story of her son
SHE tells it
It is not told TO her
Nor FOR her
She it was who grunted and squeezed
And pushed to
Bring him all the resources
She could muster
To shape and mold him into a man
She it was who labored
And bore the birthing pains that
Delivered him to manhood
She it is who continues to stand by him
Loving him without excuses
Bearing him, though now a man,
On her back, and in her gut…

Allison: I remember when I first came to Starkfield with my son, everyone told me I had to connect with Eloise and her son

*What about when he was young? Tell me about his infancy and growing up years. Describe the kind of baby/toddler he was. Was he active/precocious/delayed in development (speech, walking, etc.)?*

He walked around the same time when it was normal -- about 13-14 months. He was breast fed till he was about 30 months. He babbled at the appropriate age. He knew colors at 18 months and just about the time when he was 22 months someone said, “You know, Peter doesn’t talk.” Because my little brother didn’t talk till he was about four years old, I wasn’t worried. When he got to be about 32 months [old] I went to the communications department of Starkfield University where someone in the speech department told me he was “retarded.” I went for services to another town. When I went, I was told he hears very well. [His hearing] is very keen. When he was young they measured his head and the circumference was off the charts, which is one of the
indicators of autism, but his dad has a big head, I have a big head, so I wasn’t worried (laughter).

*What are his strengths/ challenges at home and school and other contexts?*

When I went to another place [to seek help] supposedly because [my son] doesn’t talk … the woman who worked with him and whose daughters interacted with him told me her daughters said, “What do you mean he doesn’t talk? He talks to us all the time!”

**We are not what they say we are**

**Our children are not**

**Who they say they are**

**We defy their expectations**

**Disprove their theories**

**Everyday!**

**Though our knees buckle**

**And our steps falter**

**With the interminable mother load**

**Strapped to our backs**

**Our march has always been**

**Forward**

**And upward…**

I reached out to this early intervention type program and it was there that he was diagnosed with autism. I was not trying to hear it. I don’t trust you! No. What are your credentials? They thought I was in denial. This was about 32 years ago. I challenged them that they were not qualified to deal with my child. I was told of a new program
started by some doctoral student at Starkfield University that would accommodate only three kids: my son and her two kids. That was going to be the first program in this area. So Peter lucked out. He was diagnosed at one of the best diagnostic centers in the state. They confirmed his diagnosis of autism. They said they would like to see him again in about six months. He wasn’t talking to other people but he would talk to me and my friend and her kids. Six months later when we returned, his attention span had increased so they ditched the autism diagnosis from autism to PDD which today is PDD NOS, I think: Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

*How does he perform at school? Is he in any way different at home? How?*

At the place where we went, it was very structured. Kids were partnered with buddies. Kids were enrolled at two and half years. They had parties and such. The other thing is that my son was always included in everything in both home and school. Wherever I went, he went. He was supposed to stay in this program till he was five and a half years but the City [of Starkfield] decided they wanted him back in their system. We fought them but lost. So after negotiation they allowed the program personnel to come into school as consultants. In kindergarten, kids were to choose who they wanted for a teacher. There was no structure. He was going from class to class. He was a kid diagnosed with autism, he needed structure! They didn’t have someone specifically trained; it was someone from off the street! I had to come up with the ideas.

*My hairs are standing on end. In a way, I wish I had Eloise’s calm. I need to have that for my feelings of fear and the accompanying stress are not sustainable. I cannot believe that in a school system that declares its goodwill toward our children that they could be this flippant and negligent. If you mean to do no harm, yet are so*
obviously and insistently careless and cavalier about choosing personnel you know

to be ill-prepared and ill-trained to care for our children then I am left with no
choice but to perceive deliberateness on your part to inflict harm!

(Such were the thoughts that filled my head as I listened to Eloise tell her story

of struggle. My thoughts hearkened back, as they would, to my own son and the
difficulties we NOW face as he goes through a school system that is still as cavalier in
its handling of children like Peter, like David, like so many countless nameless,
faceless others who are clawing their way through…)

In the [Widener] (pseudonym) program he was before, they would come to the
home to train the parents on the strategies to use for the children. In the public school
system, they didn’t do that. In the first grade, a teacher specifically asked for him. She
asked because she said the way she saw him treated in kindergarten, no child should be
treated like that.

STOP!!

“No child should be treated like that!”

Who doesn’t know that?

Should YOUR child be “treated like that”?

How about YOURS?

YOURS?

But mine should?

Who/ what protects…

Prevents OUR kids from being

“Treated like that”?
I stand in the gap for my son
And her son, and hers and yours
I give my body, my strength, my soul
To prevent my child and her child from
Being “treated like that!”
I am mother as she is
Black mother as she is
My growl
My fierceness
My animal strength
Come roaring forth
EVERYTIME you place
Our kids’ humanity
In jeopardy …
Didn’t you hear?
Don’t you understand?
NO CHILD SHOULD BE TREATED LIKE THAT!!

Wait a minute… Is that what they meant when they said “No Child [should be] Left Behind”?

She was also somewhat trained in the strategies on how to engage him. She ended up training the other teachers on how to teach these special needs children. So first grade was great! But her husband was a doctoral student who got a job out of town so
they left and so did the aid. So we were back at square one. But in the second grade, he had a very good aid.

I used to interview his teachers before deciding whose class he would be placed in. His third grade teacher was also very effective and he missed her when she left. In Junior high he had a great teacher. She was the autism specialist that the school had finally hired. Her class turned into a dumping ground before she left.

In high school he went in to academic support, one of the deans there (everybody loves him) but I don’t think the teachers understand the students, for all they want to do is yell and scream at the kids. Somebody had knocked something over and blamed it on my son and my son went off on him. When I went in about it, I told him the situation would probably not have happened had he read my son’s IEP. He was an African American man. He calmed down after our talk.

I would there would come a time
When our chances for survival
Were more than merely
Just by chance!
I would there would come a time a time
When our children would be met
With understanding and compassion
With systematic, strategic planning
And preparation
And not have to await the off chance
Of someone having an attack of conscience
Or integrity and make it their priority
To do right by our children.
Are they not valuable to the Republic?
Don’t they too hold within them
The promise of a better America?

My son had lots of friends in the neighborhood. High school was partly inclusive and partly regular classes and regular academic support.

After high school he went on to a local technical college. He did well the first year because they have wonderful support system there. After the first year, he did so well that they moved the supports and it was a disaster. I had to go in. I had to go in for they were wrong! They moved him to a certificate program. It was a certificate in videography. He realized he needed more so he wanted to get an Associate’s degree. It was hard getting a job. It’s hard getting a job in this area, if you’re Black.

If you people would just work hard
And get off your lazy asses
And apply yourselves.
If you people would just do what is right
And stop depending on us and our hard earned
Tax-payer dollars to scoop you out
Of your filth and your degeneracy
Well, maybe then we could have a
Better America!
**What was it like for you as a Mom?**

Well let me tell you! (*Eloise says this with earnestness and emphasis*) They told me I had to be involved. How can you be involved when you have to work 40 hours a week and then work 25 miles away? (*At this point, her friend of 40 years enters. They both grew up in the South – we are introduced and a very pleasant interlude follows – it is brief. Eloise continues our conversation)*...

I was looking for groups to join. We got together, a small group of us around autism. Five short women and one tall man! (*laughter!*) I’m retired from DIAMARA (pseudonym) – they changed their name. So in B town I went to get my pay check and I was sitting there chatting and I was talking about what I was doing and someone overheard me and approached me about an RFP a Request For funding, for autism. This was to start a pilot program for people with autism. There was nothing in this area for people with autism. This was about February 1978. I told them I had a group who I called up afterward and told them about it. They in turn called somebody else at 200 Circle Avenue – the area office. They got together and wrote up and submitted a proposal and submitted it. So I am one of the founding members of Community Research for People with Autism in the area. It was started by parents.

**Allison:** That is amazing! I get their emails all the time! I had no idea you were involved in that!

**Eloise:** Yeah, they changed their name

**Allison:** The DDS\(^{13}\) office?

**Eloise:** Yeah, that’s what they changed their name to.

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\(^{13}\) Department of Developmental Services
When community research first came out, they would go to your house to train you to be advocates. They would train people around advocating for people with IEPs. They would get you involved in the parent organization.

**Sonji:** You mean like CPac$^{14}$? Like our friend who is now a strong advocate in CPac in Starkfield?

**Eloise:** We had our own agenda. We had it parent run. We stayed in touch with each other. One time with Amelia Sorren$^{15}$ who used to run an area daycare. We got a grant to do an outdoor wilderness, so we got that. Then we… participated in family empowerment. When it just came out they awarded you $500 and you were able to do almost anything with it. To the point that you could go out with your significant other… because they knew people needed a break. And they stopped doing that when people started doing all kinds of innovative things. I can’t think which [politician] it was that stopped the program. . .

**We can ALWAYS count on**

“A politician” or “a policy-maker”

To stop a good thing

From happening

We can always

Depend on

Someone

To keep the gate

From swinging too wide open

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$^{14}$ Special Education parents Association

$^{15}$ pseudonym
Someone

To close the gate from time to time

To stem the flow of too many of those people

From coming through

We used to get families to go to Boston to advocate for whatever we needed. One of the things that came out of that was to collaborate with other groups and early intervention came out of that.

Allison: Autism Speaks! was not around then?

Eloise: No.

Community research started having their conferences every year. It started with 50 people, now it’s packed with hundreds of people. They encouraged us to read. They encouraged us to do it ourselves but not by ourselves.

Allison: You know, I think that was one of my biggest issues.

Eloise: Yes, that’s the fault of the school system

What’s going on these days shows you can’t do it by yourself. So we used to meet to talk about what we would need to do. We had to learn to speak up. Not just self-advocacy, but knowing what to do. You need to know what is hip on what is happening. You had to read to be able to share about what was going on. The other thing was that you had to be aggressive. I was ahead of the teachers about what was going on. Talk to friends for you never know who your friends know. With my son, while we were in the state school, there were three Black speech pathologists working (during the late 70s). I would call up my friends for I would read something and would be in disagreement with it. They would mail me a whole list of resources of what I could do to help support my
son. I had a friend who had a friend of mine who knew someone in DC who was the head of this and who would make recommendations about what to do for my son. They would agree with all of my recommendations. It took me a long time to trust these professionals.

There was something going on and I told a parent I could help, that I had a lot of information and she was like, “No, it’s confidential. They told us not to. They told us not to.”

**Allison:** It’s a pity they set us up as an “us against them” scenario

**Eloise:** Yes, they think we don’t know anything especially that we are Black. They keep people with an IEP separated from other people and talk about confidentiality issues so we don’t hear the experiences of others

The other thing was… I saw my child as a person.

**Allison:** What?

**Eloise:** A person

You see your child as a person

I see my child as a person

Because HE IS!

He is as much a building block

Of our community

As anyone else!

He shouldn’t be separated

Relegated

To margin hood

He is not a secret
He is not a dirty word
He is not a whisper
A shadow
An inflection
A suggestion
He isn’t an illusion
Not an allusion
A mention
A suggestion
An insinuation
He is not invisible
Indiscernible
Imperceptible
He is HERE
He is PRESENT
He is IMPORTANT
People meet to discuss
The IMPORTANT
The IMPORTANT is what is on
Everyone’s mind
The IMPORTANT is
What everyone makes
A Priority.
Yes, my child is
IMPORTANT
Because he is
A PERSON!!

You treat everybody the same way. We not supposed to be separated. We all don’t learn the same way. If you are a teacher, you find a way. And you work with families. We are one community and that is the only way you could teach that child.

Allison: So the support that you had, was it mainly from Black women?

Eloise: No

I was the only Black woman. It was only that people would use labels…. I would never tell people that Peter had autism because they would look at him in a different light. I let them get to know him as a person.

Yes! My child is
IMPORTANT
Because he is
A PERSON

Allison: Who now runs the community for autism? Because I had the hardest time. I now get their emails…

Can you describe a school based project/assignment that he excelled at or was particularly challenged by? How do you think he dealt with either situation? How did you support him?

When he was in the 6th grade he did very well. He had worked with a group and his group did very well. His teachers were extremely happy. One thing he did extremely well was, he played the piano. This was also on his IEP but they would never hear me
about it. But one day he played the piano and everybody was floored and surprised about something that I kept telling them he could do. I helped him with homework when he would let me. Come to find out years later that he knew a lot more than a lot of people I knew.

Of course, they don’t hear us

When we speak

Our story is a lie!

*Describe your involvement in his school life. Do you routinely help with homework/ study time/ etc.? Do you now or have you ever volunteered at his school in any capacity? Describe your experience of doing that.*

I did not have time to volunteer at school because I worked. But I would always go to open house.

You mean you don’t volunteer at your son’s school?

Wow! What kind of mother are you?

It’s always the parents whose children need the most help

Who are NEVER here!

*Describe your current/past relationship with school personnel?*

In the beginning with the school personnel [were] very combative; they didn’t have his interest at heart. Word got back to me that the principal of his elementary school did not want him in that school. He felt he should be in a self-contained situation. I tried to get them information about how to deal with children with autism and they would not go [along with it], but I would stay on top of any information that the organization called Autism Connection would put out. I would try to keep up with the latest practices and technology on how to deal with children with autism.
It is not my son’s fault he has challenges at school

But is it not at school that we plan how to help him overcome?

I am mother, he is my child. They try to tell me who my son is

They try to determine how far he can go, what he’ll be able to do

They watch and are puzzled and

Yet it is me who must find out how to help him

They don’t really see me or hear me

I’m invisible, but

They see him

Because he is marked by difference

Marked by blackness

Marked by specialness

Marked

My only focus is my son

Who must be helped

Who must survive

By any means necessary!

Are you satisfied with the support your son receives /received at school? Why/why not?

I kept abreast of the practices I learned at Widener to be positive with him. I also tried to keep him involved with other “normal” children by also making sure he wore the latest clothes, was always clean and had fresh cooked meals. I was working in three separate towns at the time but made sure to rise early to get all this done. I was aware he needed values so I made him go to Sunday school. I heard about a place but I didn’t like
the way the kids were treated there. I didn’t make him go to that one. But I later learned of another place where children would make really beautiful craft items, so I sent him there where there were “regular kids.” He went and was included.

I want him included because
He is a PERSON
I work to make him included
Because I will not stand by
While you exclude him
While you mark him
Then erase him
If his new clothes will do it
Then that’s what we’ll do
If attracting friends to his new toys
Will do it
Then that’s what we’ll do!
Mix him in with
“regular” and “normal”
So he’s harder to capture and isolate
I will do
Anything
Everything
I can
So my boy
May

LIVE!!

I would go to places including family reunions and teach them how to deal with my son so they would know how to interact with him. I remember having a run-in with a family member who spanked my son. Needless to say, we left in the middle of the night. I had learned from early on that my son needed to be dealt with with consistency so grandparents and other family members had to be taught how.

I watched to see who the best teachers were. I remember his speech pathologist realized his deep intelligence for he would always get her jokes when other kids would not.

I tried to get him into cross-country running but he hated it. He preferred to use his mind to do more analysis type things. He was creative and loved to show other smaller kids how to do things.

I teach my boy

I teach my boy’s teachers

I teach my boy’s friends

I teach my boy’s relatives

I teach my boy’s community members

I never rest

Must always teach

Though my teaching

And my working

My striving
My strategizing
Are not seen
But I cannot rest
And wait for the applause
There is none coming
And time is going
While my son is waiting
To take hold of his fate
His fate
That together we eke out of
Uncertainty -
The only certainty

What activities/endeavors is he currently engaged in? Do you think this is adequate and suited to your child’s ability and potential? Why/why not?

When my son went to high school and he learned how to drive, that was his independence. I would have him use my car… I told him to use his junior permit and I would ride with him for six months. I told him the first accident he got into he would no longer drive. This went on for two months until one day I fell asleep in the car. So I would allow him to go with the car until one day he called to say he was in a town an hour and a half away with another 17 year old! He was a very careful driver. The mother of a friend of his trusted him above all the other youngsters to drive.

Sonji: Well that was very impressive

Eloise: Yes, with autism!
He also liked gaming. He did that a lot with his friends. The other thing was fixing PCs. He’s built four or five of them over the years. His other friends would be described as nerdy. He loves all types of music including electronic (techno) and he loves anime. He loves the music that goes with them and he has the DVDs. He loves to dance and he can dance. He loves to cook and does it very well; he makes the most amazing cakes. I’m older now, in my seventies, so he does a lot of the cooking, including for holidays. He loves to cook and entertain his friends.

I don’t think the things my son has been able to do and has had the opportunity to do are not adequate. I think the state should make better provisions for him to develop his potential to go as far as he is able to go. My son has a lot of potential, if I’m not around or if his cousins or other family members are not around he wouldn’t have anywhere to go. For people who work with these state agencies only speak to a label but not to the person. He has learned to go to people to get advice and help when he needs it, but you never know sometimes who your kid would end up going to and whether this person would have his best interest at heart.

The “I” identity (Gee, 2000) is the identity given to one diagnosed by the institution. When our children are rendered “special” by the power of the system of education, their identity, who they are, remains fixed, permanent (Osei, 2010; Taylor, 1991). They become their diagnosis. They are treated as their diagnosis. They lose their individuality, their uniqueness, their humanity. Expectations for their capabilities and their potential are stymied by what they are diagnosed as in the eyes of the state. What they are is therefore whatever the state deems them to be. The individuals working these systems are functionaries of a structure that is skewed.
against difference; a system designed to validate only what the status quo dictates as “normal”: white, male, heterosexual, protestant, wealthy, able-bodied, English-speaking… And as a parent, a mother who is Black, this understanding and exclusionary indicator of “normal”, gleaned most powerfully from experience, is what fills my awareness, and Eloise’s awareness, and Allison’s awareness as we walk the tenuous tight rope of parent and advisor to our children. Black feminism embraces “experience as a criterion for credibility” (Collins, 2006) which is significant for us all as Black women for generally our point of views and ideas are discounted because we are not believed and our experiences rendered inconsequential. For we know how their identities, so at odds with what is considered normative by our society, will serve to handicap their progress and block their access to the resources necessary for their growth and advancement.

Describe what it has been like for you as the mother to support and advocate for your son throughout his lifetime.

Being a parent you have to realize this person is not yours. He/she is here for a reason. When you have a child who has a so-called disability, you have to do whatever is needed to ensure this person reaches his/her God given potential. I have to do a lot of reading and advocating. It takes a lot of energy but I look at my own parents. They did all they could for us. I did everything I could to keep him up-to-date with other people. I took him on vacations; I gave him everything he needed to enrich his knowledge. We knew almost every town in [this part of the state]. He knows most towns in the [state next to this]. We went to all the zoos around no matter where we went. I tried to answer every question he had. I believe children should be seen AND heard which meant a lot of talking. Getting down on the floor to their level. Going cross-country skiing. Whatever
bridge or river we crossed we would talk to him about it. His dad read to him every night,
[Peter] loves the book of Job in the Bible. It helped him while in college. We found tutors
for him.

The hard part was when he came out of school. He went on to a local agency
[that] told him not to do the things that he wanted to do. Rather than encourage his skill
and interest in photography they would steer him into retail (to become a cashier). I set
up supports for him in student support services here at the local university but this local
agency steered him away and as he was 18 he didn’t listen to me.

He had gone to a special program for photography but he didn’t get to finish in
the prescribed time though he showed real potential for it. They said to bring him up to
their standard would have required him to be there much longer but they didn’t offer
anything of the length of time, so he had to leave the program. I continued in my role as
his advisor, I encouraged him to not see it as a failure. I encouraged him that he was
good. I told him of a cousin who was mostly self-taught as a journalist and who was
doing well and inspired him to do the same.

**What does success look like for our children?**

I think a lot about what it means to be “successful” at something and even
with that notion as a mother of a “special” child I have had to take issue. In the eyes
of his school he is probably not seen as particularly “successful.” Although he can
speak to articulate his feelings and opinions and does offer them emphatically and
passionately whenever he finds the need; though he is sensitive and compassionate
and has a heart for the excluded and the forgotten; though he stands on the side of
the voiceless and the oppressed and pushes for their cause and his own, he is not
considered “successful.” What then do we ultimately train our children to become if not compassionate, sensitive members of the human family whose humanity is realized in the extent to which they reach out to alleviate the suffering in our world? Who do we hope our children ultimately become after their trail of A’s and degrees and six figure jobs, if not caring, compassionate human beings who challenge the status quo relentlessly so fairness and equality are realized in our world?

Tell me, by what standards do we measure success?

How do you think you have been affected by your son’s struggles? What lessons have you learned? Skills and insight and understanding gained?

That’s a tough one. Yeah you’re always affected by what you’re dealing with. It goes back to your role as a parent and your hope is that your child is as productive as possible, that he is on top of what is happening out there. And if the school system is not doing it, then you have to do it yourself. This makes you more of a researcher. It reinforces the idea of working with other people to share resources. It has improved my life skills and made me better at some things. It reminds me of something I read yesterday which said, “Once a parent always a parent.” With my son I just want him to be at where any person his age is at the same time. I don’t hover over him. I see my role as an advisor. I let him take the advice if he wants to. I have to learn how to back away. If you want him to learn how to fly you have to know how to back away. If you want him to learn how to fly you have to know how to back away. There was a philosopher who said that your child is not your own. You have to let them be who they are supposed to be. Walk your talk and be aware of anything that seems like it’s going the wrong way. Have adult conversations and allow that person to grow from the time they are a child. I know you won’t be able to discuss everything but to let them know you are there. These are some of the things I’ve learned from all my years. You train them how to advocate for
themselves. You’re being here lets them know they can go to someone they trust for help when they need it. So he’s going to need to rely on someone and to know how to read people who will treat him as an equal and not as a label.

He belongs to the universe

He doesn’t belong only to me

He is a person

Not a label

He is mine,

He is yours

He is the world’s

He is a person

NOT a label!

Do you feel hopeful about your son’s future based on the support (or lack of it) and/or experiences he has had thus far in his life at school and at home?

Public school was adequate. Elementary to high school was adequate. All this was because I was advocating and staying on top of what they were doing at school. I would research and go out to find resources from a friend who was a speech pathologist. I got information from other people with kids in special education. People learn from being with people. You deprive your child if you don’t have him with the main community. He must learn social cues. That’s why sometimes White people have a hard time dealing with us and sometimes why the super-rich have a hard time dealing with the middle class because we don’t understand each other’s cues. I wanted my son to be around people, so-called normal people, which is why I don’t support any kind of exclusion. I am a strong advocate for inclusion at all levels of society.
Did they ever want to separate him from the rest of his peers?

Oh yes. I had to fight to get him included in these classes. They said he was deficient in math, English, and reading so I allowed them to keep him in small groups for that, but he had to be included in everything else. Later, he became friends with some “nerdy” guys who loved computers and that’s how he got involved with that.

I also noticed that kids liked being around the best dressed kids so I made him the best dressed kid. I also noticed there wasn’t a swing set in the neighborhood so we got our son one so all the kids came to play with him. I also encouraged him to learn how to ride a bike. He only had an old one but I promised I would get him a new if he learned how to ride a bike. He learned and then was included in all the groups in the neighborhood.

His friendships were formed at home but not at school. He didn’t have any cousins around but he would go out to friends who lived a little out of town but he would play with them. Many of them did not realize he had autism till they were young adults.

They didn’t realize
Because he’s not a label
They didn’t realize
Because he’s a person
He’s not at school
Where who he is
Is determined for him
Not by him
He’s at home
Among his friends
And his family
Where he is
A PERSON!!

In high school he met some South Asian friends. They were children with IEPs and he managed to form some relationships in that class at about the 10th grade onward. My son is very exposed to all kinds of experiences. He has a well-developed palate (this we agreed in reaction to some delicious tea he made us all).

So you’re very hopeful then?

Oh, you have to have hope! While I was in the situation I planned for what could be. So I had a goal. Sometimes we depend on the school to do what the entire community should be doing. One set can’t do it all by themselves. The schools make the big mistake of thinking they are the only ones able to do anything. After the Second World War, most people… I think, most White folks felt like the school could do everything for your child. You teach your child at home.

“You teach your child at home”

Only if they don’t take it back

When he goes to school

You teach your child

To love himself

And trust himself

And respect himself

And those who look like him
And those who don’t
But when he goes to school
Who teaches him
To trust and love and accept himself?
Who teaches him to respect
And celebrate his difference?
What do they teach our children
At school?
You better teach your child
At home!

Allison cuts in …

But most schools should not be absolved of their responsibility for the child. And when they [the school and teachers] drop the ball, they pass the buck to the families.

Eloise: But if the school doesn’t do its part, it makes the work of families harder. When I started out, I had no respect for the professionals. I was a mess and a half when I started out. I realized after that I did have allies. I think we all should work together.

Allison: I don’t think parents are angry for anger’s sake. I think the school puts up a barrier to parents, especially to parents of color. They tend to be more accommodating of White parents than they are to black parents.

Eloise: My son’s diagnosis of autism came at a time when they were taking people out of institutions because of bad diagnoses. So all the parents came together at about the 70s and started to advocate for their children by petitioning the states all the way up to congress. [For] more people started noticing that their children and grandchildren were
diagnosed with autism. So it was at a time when psychology became more aware of this disorder. So between the mid ‘80s and into the ‘90s the system realized how expensive it was to provide resources so they determined to find ways of how to knock people with Asperger’s and other diagnoses like PDD off the list.

I welcomed this unplanned discussion between Eloise and Allison. Eloise seemed to hold the opinion (though she acquiesced some after Allison’s challenge) that schools should be held less accountable for the child’s progress, while Allison, who has a more recent experience of getting her son through high school has a less positive outlook on the education system. Eloise had the support of the community. She had the support of friends who were professionals and who could make recommendations that she reinforced to the education professionals at her son’s school at a time when information on how to deal with autistic children was not as pervasive as it is today. Eloise had the good fortune (if it could be called that) of co-pioneering parent advocacy groups, of petitioning politicians and community leaders to invest in providing resources for parents with good effect. She was able to enjoy to some degree the fruits of her labor of advocacy. Although she worked 40 hours per week and was a chronic asthmatic with a husband who she rationalized was prevented from equal involvement with her son because of the demands of his job as a college professor (this had its own challenges for a Black man in his position), Eloise perceived her efforts to support her son and his outcome as an independent man, as a major achievement.
What do you do to cope with the challenges of mothering a child with special needs?

Life comes in parts. I think I lucked out. I had three friends who were speech pathologists who advised me what to do and on the advice of the director of the Learning Center, I joined a support group and with the help of friends who supported me, I coped. I read and read. I attended conferences and workshops.

Oman luck deh a dungle
Some rooted more dan some
But as long as fowl a scratch dungle heap
Oman luck mus’ come!\(^{16}\)

Allison: Did you ever feel overwhelmed?

Eloise: The school system did not know what to do at the time for the literature was just coming out. So, no, I was not overwhelmed. It was my responsibility to set my child up to become an important part of the community.

No, she had no time to feel overwhelmed. It was her job, her responsibility, to ensure that her child received all he needed to become a productive member of society.

I let my family in the loop. I would go visit them but had to educate them about how to deal with my son. They felt my child needed a good spanking. I had to make them know that’s not acceptable.

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\(^{16}\) Excerpt from poem “Jamaica Oman” by Louise Bennett (19--?) referenced in Chapter 2 (?). Women are believed to have good fortune come their way only after fighting and struggling hard, and even so, some women have it harder than others. But, good eventually comes if women do not give up, remain hopeful and keep “rooting” in the “dungle heap” (trash) till they find the treasure (or get the good result) they seek.
Allison: Did you ever feel like you needed a break?

Eloise: Yes. My daycare provider once suggested that for she saw that everywhere we went we would take him. So she offered to keep him for a week and we went up to [a neighboring state] and that was our break. After that, we would take him with us everywhere we went. I drove to Chicago for at the time I was the only driver. We got lost.

*Did your son like the driving?*

Eloise: Oh, yeah.

Allison: My son loved to travel for long distances in the car as well.

Eloise: My son decided once that he wanted to go the other way and was insistent. I stopped the car and gave him a stern talking to and that was the end of that.

Allison: For me it was so difficult. It put a strain on my relationship.

Eloise: It was hard for my husband to keep up especially, him being a professor who was always swamped with grading papers.

*Some back-a man a push*

*Some side-a man a hol’ him han’*

*Some a lick sense eena man head*

*Some a guide him pon him plan*

*Neck an neck and foot an foot wid man*

*She buckle hol har own*

*While man a call har so-so rib*
In typical Black “oman” fashion, Eloise balanced the weight of caring for her son upon her back giving leave to her husband to move forward in his career. It was upon her back that her son advanced in school and enjoyed a social life. It was upon Eloise’s back that Peter saw the world and discovered himself and honed his life skills and came into his own. And, arguably it was against her back that her husband leaned for support as he progressed in his profession. Eloise, like so many Black mothers and wives before her was (and is) the backbone of her family.

For me though, as the mother I would meet up with friends and go and see plays, eat together. Many times my son would go with us. Many of my friends worked at the state school so they had training in children with “alternate” behaviors. For instance, one of my now oldest friends would fry chicken and my son would prefer her fry chicken to mine. They treated him well and made his behavior a non-issue.

Allison: It was good you had community

Eloise: After a while however, people moved and went to different towns and different states. One of my friends moved to a town more than an hour away, but we continued to visit with her and her kids and they would treat him just like any other kid, not like he was different. One was a year and half younger and the other was three or four years older.

Yes, he was treated

“like any other kid”

Because he is

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17 Excerpt from poem “Jamaica Oman” by Louise Bennett
A PERSON!!

You have an older son, yes? Was he good to his brother?

Eloise: Oh, yes! My son worships his older brother. When my son turned 18 I viewed and treated him as an adult and I started to take an advisor’s role with him for he thinks sometimes that I am mothering him too much. The fact that he is Black and living in this nonracial racist area, he must continue to survive. But because if he applies for government help for housing, he knows where the housing for [such people] is located and he is afraid of being taken advantage of in those questionable areas of the town. I know when people see you have special needs they tend to want to take advantage of you and he doesn’t want to go there to live. I had a friend with a son who came from money and who lived in such an area and was taken advantage of. I don’t know what ultimately happened to him.

“I don’t know what … happened to him.”

Difference is bad!

Difference means you don’t belong!

Difference means you deserve to be mistreated

Mishandled

Cheated

Black is bad!

You walk around in the wrong skin

Akin

To immoral

Abnormal
Irregular
Atypical, odd
Built, but not by God
Who turns His back
Doesn’t defend you against
Those who attack
He blinks His eyes
So He doesn’t witness
Your systematic demise
In Blackness you are alone
Shadowed
Isolated,
Weighted with the added
Burden of “special”
“Exceptional”
Not in, but out
Marginal, liminal
Peripheral, minimal
Borderland
And
Always “casting pearls before swine”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} Biblical reference paraphrased from Matthew 7:6 (NIV) in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount: “Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” This verse has
Oh, and I did a lot of reading. Nonfiction. But then I returned to fiction. I loved Octavia Butler, but then she died. I also loved reading Jeminisin—fantasy, science fiction, I got into mysteries because another Black writer, Barbara Neil wrote mysteries and my older son put me on to her. When I was working, I would work eight hours and read eight hours. Sometimes I would find I’m up till four in the morning and I had to get up at six. How did I find time? Most important to me was my son. But the other part was taking care of myself. I had to work and take care of the house that things did not fall apart.

I had very bad asthma. I had to go to ER at least once per week for this condition. One time I was out for four weeks because of asthma and pneumonia.

I became involved in [this certain religion] when my son was four years old, but before that I was brought up in the Baptist Church. I couldn’t understand why people would claim to believe in Christ and be fighting each other.

**Allison:** My spiritual journey and faith were always an important part of my life and for my son.

**Eloise:** Going to church/temple was an important part of socializing with me and my son. I went to one place and was met with such a cold reception. I also did a lot of reading, ever since I was a teen, about personal growth. When I became involved in the Civil Rights Movement I really believed in the nonviolence movement. I had read the writings of Gandhi and I believed in the lessons from my parents and Sunday school, so I came to embrace this [certain religion].

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been interpreted to mean: do not give that which is precious or beautiful or valuable to those who do not understand or appreciate its value as it is a waste of time.

\textsuperscript{19} As in black novelist, NK Jeminisin
For so many Black families, the embrace of faith is integral to their daily walk. Holding on to hope is hard when all around point to almost certain disadvantage. It is the walk of faith that gives the impetus to continue to put one foot in front of the other, to not give up and to continue to strive, to press on, to plan for better. It is the embrace of faith that gives hope to many Black families. Faith in a power and an idea that is bigger than ourselves – that the good will finally win out. It is her embrace of her faith that helped Eloise see the hope on the horizon. Her faith helped her keep hope alive.

Did you have other members of your family in the Civil Rights Movement?

Eloise: Yes I had two older sisters. There was no way we would not be part of the Movement. When we were in high school we joined the NAACP. We were known as the ________ sisters. Then there was this handsome tall guy. He came and informed us of the sit-ins and we were set to participate.

Activism for you was a way of being?

Activism has to be a way of life for the Black woman mother. If she doesn’t stand in the gap for her children, for her family, who will? Activism is a must for the black woman in American society. She faces the daily onslaught of denigration or omission – it is the legacy passed on to her children who are already marked by difference. Eloise has done what many generations of Black mothers did before her: quest for survival regardless of the odds; remain hopeful despite the difficulties; balance work and home and school upon her back; strategize, plan, find resources where none seem to be so that her child might overcome. So that her family may prevail.
(As Eloise responds to this question, there is a bright smile on her face. Her answer is emphatic and confident. She has done it and she and Peter have prevailed!)

Oh yes! We joined the group. We believed in it. It influenced the way I raised my son. My daddy was very involved. My mom participated in whatever was going on in school. For instance, in the area we lived, there was no playground. It was just the streets and my mother organized to get a playground. I would hear people whisper as I walked by in school that my mom was “one of them parents” advocating for more. I got that from her. White kids went to school for longer hours and had better equipment, so my mom agitated that way. We lived in a working class, poor neighborhood, but my parents made sure we had encyclopedias and lots and lots of books. Our neighbors had never seen a Black family with so many books! I was poor but we never knew it. My mom never went to church because she wanted us to look good, but when we got older we spent money on her. I believe you cannot define a person. I wouldn’t allow them to define my child. You allow the person to become who he/she is going to become. I believe that about my son. I got that from my religious training and also from my involvement in the civil Rights Movement.

**Womanism posits a political clarity and carries within it the ethic of risk (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2003). Black women are very clear about the risk factor in their activism. They are also very clear about the political implications of pushing back on the status quo, countering the “common knowledge and beliefs” of the majoritarian culture, but they do it anyway! They know it holds consequences for their immediate survival. They know it holds repercussions for the direct quality of life and endurance of their own children, but more than all, they know it holds**
ramifications for the subsistence of the Black community in general! It is in their acts of resistance that their hope for better is martialed.

**Allison:** Isn’t it amazing how the personal and the political collide, especially for a Black mothers and Black women?

**Eloise:** One time this White woman who was my supervisor was offended when I challenged her for trying to reprimand me. I reminded her she is no better than me nor is she more important than me. She didn’t like that, but I didn’t care.

*(Click, click, click… finger snaps from me and Allison in celebration of Eloise’s assertiveness).*

*No words are needed here.*

**How does your son cope on the job? How does he handle people who try to be confrontational with him?**

*(As we neared the conclusion of our conversation together, and with Allison’s now full engagement, the questions which Eloise’s responses begged came naturally and without hesitation)*

He handles it mostly well but sometimes he has run-ins with people. I have always taught him to advocate for himself. He deals with personal situations head on. If he and I get into a tiff, we will usually sit down and deal with it. He’s a good thirty five year old person, so I think he’s going to be all right. It takes some time for him to get many of the lessons. He’s fair and very loyal to his friends.

**Allison:** It sounds like you are both proud of him and very proud of the work you have done of raising him.

**Eloise:** Oh, I’m very proud of him! He’s a good man!

I often look back on my journey of raising Peter and see how far we have come! In a word, I feel PROUD! It wasn’t just him but all the other people who played a role in
getting him to this stage in his life. As a mother, no matter how mature or independent
they become you always think about and worry about your kids. My door is always open.
I think the Creator saw I was open and my son was looking around for someone to
mother him and He chose me. (She laughs). He chose me, the crazy one.

A mother speaks of her passion,

Her determination
To see her son succeed
Despite the in-built inequities in the system,

Her struggles with health,
Despite all she had to do to
Advocate
To educate
Herself and others
How she strategized
And planned and plotted
Traveled far and wide
Read and read and read again
So she could know
And show
That her son, her future, her life
Is not just hers alone
But belongs to a family
A community
A world

That he is smart

And shouldn’t be marked

For hostility and exclusion

That he is a man who

Is more than just a diagnosis

That he is a person

That he is himself

Fully, firmly, resolutely, determinedly

Himself!
CHAPTER 5

ALLISON: ALWAYS A FIGHT

Meet Allison

My friend Allison is a young woman of Caribbean extraction like I am. She is brilliant but matter of fact about it. Her primary focus for as long as I have known her has always been her son, David whom I eventually met after Allison and I became friends. Allison and I first met when we registered for the same course on cross cultural communications at Starkfield University. She was warm. But I was most drawn in by that distinctly sweet Caribbean accent which, despite her many, many years in this country, she had not lost. It was a comfortable and familiar place for me, alone and friendless in a mostly White institution among people with whom I had yet to become familiar.

When Allison and I first met, she was teaching math at Enfield High School, one town over from the university we both attended as graduate students. I had never met anyone so comfortable with math before. It was always either they taught math but were very intimidated by it, almost as if afraid the math would rise up from the page and expose them for being imposters, or they felt and moved like they were demigods, endowed with an extraordinary dose of superhuman specialness and smarts that made them rightfully deserving of our reverence and awe. Allison was neither of these. Though obviously brilliant and gifted in the subject, she never felt one had to be specially endowed with so-called above average intelligence to grasp or even master it. It was this approach to her teaching of math that intrigued me. Had she been my math teacher in high school, I might have had much more success in the subject. It was these qualities as
a teacher that led me to ask her to tutor my own son in math. With her as tutor, my son’s math anxiety was considerably lessened – but that is a story for another time.

Allison used her status as a senior teacher at her school to give access to her school to a group of us from our class to conduct a mini-research on pedagogical style and its impact on the experiences of students of color there. My observation of her easy, open manner to her students outside of class is second only to her ease with teaching math inside the classroom. Observing Allison in the classroom is to watch a maestro at work: students engaged and excited to learn math; students leading discussions; students working problems at the board; students asking questions and taking risks. Allison’s relaxed posture and approach to the subject cultivated an atmosphere of safety, autonomy and love in her classroom. And all this she would foster while sitting unobtrusively in the back of the room.

**Allison’s Story**

What follows is Allison’s story of her fight, interspersed with her pride and joy, to keep David engaged and determined to persevere. Allison’s struggle with her son has not been at all easy.

At the start of this project, Allison and I met for our first conversation in one of the study rooms in the education department of Starkfield University where we were both graduate students. Although we are friends, I sensed a tension in her as she prepared to dialogue with me about her son. Her tension showed in her sighs which came in quick succession. I began this part of our conversation by reminding her that she was free to discontinue our conversation at any time if for any reason it became too difficult. She nodded a quick assent. At the time, she was a graduate student preparing to defend a
dissertation; she knew the drill. I too was a little tense. Maybe it was that this easiness between friends had suddenly taken on a formal seriousness at the outset that made us both a little anxious.

I pause to reflect about that: the academy is a real thing, a massively imposing institution with its traditions and conventions that do not generally honor the stories and contributions of people like us. We get reminded of this every day in myriad ways. Perhaps it was this – the fact that we were about to make our official presence known in this exclusionary arena that had us both a little apprehensive.

I brought the paper with the question prompts I had placed on the table closer to me. I wanted to do this right, so I read the questions and, though somewhat nervous, I began nonetheless:

Tell me about your son. Describe his personality. What makes him happy? What makes him sad? What are his interests/likes/dislikes? What does he like to do most? How does he get along with family members and peers?

Allison: My son David is very honest, he is very bright and very “to the point’ He is tall and handsome and one of the most unassuming individuals you would ever meet. He’s routine-oriented while flexible and much disciplined. For a person who struggles with language issues, is very articulate. He is very ambitious and independent. On account of his disability, he will always need stricter structures, particularly surrounding structures that provide physical and emotional safety.

He loves food. He’s happy when he’s eating. He loves his dog, Bringles. He loves his own space. Whenever he is in his own space he is very happy. He loves animated movies. He loves water! It is very calming for him. He loves to shower. He loves his own space because he does not have judgment. He likes sitting calmly in the dark and he is able to
do so in his own space without judgment. He loves to dance, though [his movements are] awkward, he loves to dance sometimes to the music in his own head and he loves to do that.

He loves politics and enjoys listening to political commentary. He is fascinated with the Putin/Trump controversies. For instance he wants to know why it is ok for Putin to go naked when no one else can’t. (*Laughter*)

(*I know David and could just hear him asking these questions and making these comments. Without meaning to, his truthful comments come across as dry humor, his timing impeccable.*)

David is sad he lives in a family with 90 plus percent women. He doesn’t have a dad and this makes him sad sometimes for he craves male connection. He loves art and videos. He’s fascinated with how movies are made and what motivates people to make movies. He loves painting, particularly pastel and water paint. He doesn’t like bright colors. He loves the subtly of water colors and becomes frustrated if prompted to make his lines more defined when he draws. David carries his grandmother’s last name and has his own alias, Bruce Perry\(^\text{20}\) which he uses to switch identities with me in his writing where he switches the parent role with me and which seems to be his way of saying/suggesting to me what he would do if he were the parent of a child with his challenges.

For an autistic child, he is remarkably sociable. His way of being social is being around people though not connecting with people. It may be that he does not know how to connect with people (though he tries) and people do not know how to connect with

\(^{20}\) Psuedonymn
him. What did not work for David in school was he did not like to be patronized. He is very sensitive to people who are “trying too hard” to connect. He just wanted to be a regular student like everyone else. He is [now] better at structuring conversations around his needs and to communicate what works best for him in a given moment. He had struggled before with expressive language, but now he is better at advocating for himself as well as for others. He is a social activist for issues of the environment in particular.

David loves to go for long drives, especially scenic drives. He finds them calming. He likes to hang out in town around college kids. He loves also to write stories in particular those that tell real life situations. He loves to go grocery shopping and to save his money. His favorite subjects are history and architecture especially anything having to do with Asian and Egyptian architecture. A big secret of David’s is that he sings very well. He has a photographic memory and he is very observant. He is very precise with time. He is very punctual and conceptualizes time almost to the second! There are so many things my son can and would do in school that would help him excel.

Because of the way David presents, his immediate family (namely me) understands him very well. I know what the cues he displays indicate about his moods and needs. We understand each other very well: our likes and dislikes and differences and preferences for food. Our schedules align in that we both go to bed early and wake up early. We each have our own living spaces at home though there are certain shared spaces. He can be very respectful and caring. If I get sick, David is there. He has a faith and likes to pray and to meditate.

My family never learned how to deal with individuals with disabilities like my son. We [my family and I] live in different parts of the country, but when my family members
come around there is a lot of learning and unlearning to do and he gets annoyed with that.
But there is obvious love and concern. Family is mostly women so it exacerbates the tensions. They do not call him [on the telephone] very often but he does speak with them by phone on special occasions like for birthdays etc.

There is a loneliness and an isolation that accompany having a child who is considered different/ disabled. The child faces isolation from his peers. And his parents, because of their different experience parenting him, are isolated from their peers. It is an enduring dilemma. It is painful. It never stops.

We too
Face tension
And isolation
And separation
And estrangement
For this different child
(Our blessing but)
Our curse
Is the finger
Pointing at
Our deficiency
Look! Look!
Here they come!
Look! Look!
There they go!
Tight smiles…

Uncomfortable conversations…

Their derision

Is our pride

And our joy

David doesn’t really have friends, but he is on social media. There is one other autistic boy who lives in our neighborhood; they sometimes get together but they each have different interests and so they do not get together very often because of this.

_How does it make you feel to talk about your son?

(I ask this though not one of the questions I have on the page to ask. But I sense in Allison a rising exultation that seems to surprise even her. It fascinated me. There is a story here and I think it needs to be told. She responds, her words deliberate like she is really thinking this through as she relates her response to me).

It is an opportunity to reflect on who he is and see how many strengths he has. I am proud to be his mother! He has so many more strengths than challenges, but because of how the world views him with his disability the impression of him is very different. My son has been able to find a way to exist in this world without constant supervision. My son does not see his disability as a challenge. He sees that as my responsibility to deal with it. It’s in his body but as his mother, I am the one who wears it. David has taught me so much about what it means to be human and valued and my journey with him has made me so much more focused and stronger. He has made me a better person. My journey through life would have been so much different if I didn’t have him to hold me
accountable for my thought processes. He holds me to a higher standard of humanity. I am proud to have him as a son with all the strengths he has and this significant disability.

Finally, talking about him in this setting, I can talk about him as a person with strengths and weaknesses. Talking about him in other contexts forces me to fit him into a box but getting to speak about him like this, frees me to present him as whole and not constricted into a narrow conception of who he is based on his disability.

As Allison spoke of her son, as she recalled his challenges and smiled at the strength and the wonder of him, my own mind strayed to my son and I too smiled at the wonder of him. I thought of all the parts that others who see him do not get about him. I thought too of all the ways he was excluded even within our own community of color, we who have been taught to view his difference and our own as something to be uncomfortable with. Nowhere else have we practiced more exclusion than among ourselves – for we see and perceive ourselves and each other with foreign eyes. We do not embrace ourselves, for to us, even to us, we are foreign. We see ourselves through the eyes of the oppressor and it is the oppressor’s gaze of suspicion at our strangeness that we fight outside of ourselves but, most notably, within ourselves! As Allison spoke about the stolen moments and stolen opportunities her son had to endure in a school system that insistently renders him and all others like him, intruders, outsiders, strangers -- inscrutable and unfathomable, but most of all, undesirable, I couldn’t help but recognize in that moment the system, specifically the educational system, for what it really is:..:

It is a thief!

A system that holds us down
Ties us up and steals our children’s humanity
Steals our humanity
Forces us to lie, to look the other way because
We are hog-tied and gagged
Voices muffled, hands, feet, bodies bound
It is a thief!
A system that tells us to,
“Look away, look away, look away…”
From ourselves

It is a thief!
A system, a society, a culture that says constantly
Only one thing:
“You do not fit!”
You who carried in your body
And on your body the stain
Of difference
Of imperfection
You with your imperfect child
Wear the scarlet letter
Of shame
And deserve exclusion
And silence
And invisibility

“You do not fit!”

And rightly so …

So stand aside
And stand aghast
You with your child
Who bring us discomfort
Stay your body and your voice
Be still and do not speak

At the end of the session, after I read Allison the poem I wrote just listening to her talk so profusely, so proudly about her son, I asked her if she thought the poem did her feelings and experiences any justice and she said “Yes!” After which her tears flowed. She then quietly remarked, “You know, this is the first time I have ever talked about my son as a whole person and not in terms of someone who is deficient!” At which point, we both were silent. Both silently crying. It was a powerful moment in time. It is the least a human being requires of other human beings: to be acknowledged, regarded, treated, talked about as one! It was the first time since her son’s diagnosis of “delayed autism” that Allison had had the chance to acknowledge the specialness and uniqueness of her son as just him being himself and not him being inadequate, deficient, pathological. It was a powerful moment shared by two mothers who did not need words to express a deep pain known by them only too well. So we let the tears flow and the moment wash over us like water for a cleansing.
I read the second question:

Tell me about his infancy and growing up years. Describe the kind of baby and toddler he was. Was he active? Precocious? Delayed in development (speech, walking, etc.)?

David was a gift. He was two weeks overdue and was finally born on my birthday. He was born with the temperament… the same temperament he exhibited before he was born. I say that because I feel like I knew him before he was born. He would quiet down in my belly if I went for a drive and he would be the same way when he was born. He was very easy going. He was a big baby - nine pounds eleven ounces. He talked early, potty trained early. Learned how to read and count early. The only thing I thought was different was his inability to latch on to my breasts, so I pumped milk. When he was three days old, he was diagnosed and hospitalized with a severe bout of jaundice, but he was ok after he came out of hospital. He had severe separation anxiety after his father left when he was eleven months old. He would cry profusely when I would leave him for day care. This went on for months. When he was five he became a bit isolated from his peers which we didn’t think was unusual. He would draw a lot. He would say after a time that he felt like he had bees in his head but would want me to cover his head for him. So I would put my hand/arm on his head and with my arm on his head he would continue to draw. I don’t know if he was beginning to feel some kind of funny sensation in his head.

He eventually lost language. He was less than two years old when he started to read. When he was five or six years old, he lost language. Just suddenly, one day, he just could not speak! He did not say anything that made sense! And I was told he would perhaps never speak again.

PAUSE …
I have to pause at this. I cannot imagine the pain, the panic a mother, (alone with a child) experienced having to witness her child go through this. “One day, he just could not speak!” Without warning, a whole world turned upside down! My heart is pounding in my belly. There is a weak sensation. I know that sensation. It is what I felt when I got the screaming panic over the phone from the daycare worker that my son had keeled over on the floor at daycare where he was playing and begun convulsing, then not breathing, and that the paramedics were already on their way. I remember the rise of bile in my mouth, the light-headedness, the weakness in the knees and the sensation, that sensation at “mi belly bottom!” In a daze I gave the phone to my husband and in a daze I watched him run from our house and peel off in our car. I was hyperventilating and becoming more lightheaded when I realized I had not hung up the phone. Sonji! Sonji!! The voice seemed to be coming from a distance. It brought me back from a looming unconsciousness. Are you OK? Do you need me to come to you? The owner of the daycare was on and concerned. “I… I’m… I’m Ok ,” was my weak reassurance.

I came back to the present… But, along with Allison we had made a terrifying trip to the past, to the beginning. Only it wasn’t the beginning. For our struggles with our children predated them, it predated us. Our presence and our children’s presence in the world would be faced with new challenges atop the challenges we already had. The challenge of existing while different, while Black!

About a year after he lost language [David] started trying to speak again but it would come out garbled and confused. I specifically remember his struggle to pronounce the
letter “B.” His placement of words would be misplaced so words came in a confused order. Doctors continued to be puzzled.

After this we moved to the South East. He started hating school because so much of school was language based and he experienced so much anxiety being there because of that. In about the 2nd grade he was really beginning to hate school. He was teased in school. I was told by teachers in the South East US that my son should be institutionalized. I quit my job as a chemical engineer to spend more time with him.

If you people would just get off
Your lazy asses and work!
If you people would just not depend
Upon our hard-earned tax dollars
To bail you out of your laziness
And your degeneracy …

After we moved from the South East to the North East, it was downhill from there. We had to be going back and forth to doctors. The school was insistent that he be evaluated he had to be labeled so that “he could get services.” That is when the doctors came up with the label, “delayed autism.”

His expressive language was really delayed and quite a bit of a challenge for him. He tried to slow his speech down and so he developed a stutter. Again, I was told he should be removed from the “regular” classroom and separated. I again fought that. It is a fight I have had since. Ever since he was put on an IEP, I was by myself on one side of the table (though a round table) and about eight to ten school specialists on the other side. I was intimidated. The team included the speech therapist, the therapeutic teacher, the
occupational therapist, the physical therapist, the guidance counselor, classroom teacher, special education teacher, district personnel (including the psychologist) and school administrators…

Could I be more alone and isolated in my fight?

THEY sit in the seat of power

THEY decide my child’s fate

THEY can choose to dismiss my concerns

And THEY do

THEY are on the inside

I am on the out

THEY know they have the authority

To make the claims about my child

And me

I am alone on this side of the table

Minimized

Exhausted

Outnumbered

Out powered

Out sized

Outsider!

[David’s] penmanship was impeccable! He was once given an assignment to draw ghosts in an attic. He took a long time to do this activity because he wanted to draw the ghosts doing all sort of activities, but because he did not draw ten ghosts lined up and in
the time allotted to do this activity, (my son is a bit of a perfectionist) they [his teachers] concluded he did not know the number ten! This is something my son knew since before he was two years old!

He did not follow instructions

Cannot follow instructions

Black child cannot spell

Black child cannot count

Black child cannot learn

Borderline

Borderline

Borderline!!

David hated school since his elementary school years. He had given up on school. He was an affectionate little boy who loved to hug and touch people. He was calm.

Urban, angry, loud, aggressive

Urban, angry, loud, aggressive

Ghetto, gang, crime, prison

Ghetto, gang, crime, prison

Death

Death

And deservedly so

Death!
What are his strengths/challenges at home and school and other contexts?

He loved to memorize movies and act them out. He would act out stories he knew doing the actions to go along with it. His memorization was fluid with all the voices even though he wouldn’t immediately be able to respond to questions when asked about such things as the specifics about the story line. As a result, he got very caught up with words and their meanings. For instance, he would want to know the shade of difference between the words “date” and “appointment.” He developed and still has a robust vocabulary because of this.

He is enamored with dinosaurs. He loved everything about the orient, art, architecture, etc. He loved everything to do with Egyptians. Once when I sent him on a trip abroad to see his grandparents, of all the material he could choose to read on his plane ride there, he chose to read the *National Geographic* because it had the face of a pharaoh on the cover. We started reading together before he boarded the plane. We discovered Ramses had over a hundred children and he remarked in the departure lounge, “My! That’s a lot of sex!” This, to the amusement and amazement of the other travellers in the departure lounge.

**Black child cannot count**

**Black child cannot spell**

**Black child cannot learn**

**Loud, aggressive, angry, ghetto**

**Crime, criminal, crazy**

**Medication please!**
There was a time one of the teachers felt he should be on medication for ADHD. Again, I disagreed. So I was locked in another fight with school personnel. Because we had so many disagreements, there was a hyper vigilance at school around him. There was difficulty in my [second] marriage and so they called Child Services on me and I almost lost my child. It ended my marriage.

There are no words.

I did not want [David] in a Special Ed classroom and because I insisted he stay in a regular Ed setting, he was abandoned and left to his own designs. My child was abandoned by the system and a teacher had said as much to me in confidence. It was always me against school personnel. I did not get help for David even after he was high school age. I once asked an advocate, interestingly, a White man from an adjoining town who just came and sat in the meeting. He said nothing. He just sat there, but his presence was enough to get them moving on offering services and alternatives for my child. In fact, it was the only meeting that the director of pupil services from the district showed up for and at which she made offers of alternative services for my son. She had heard I was going to show up to the meeting with an advocate.

Well, son, I’ll tell you:

Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

It’s had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.
But all the time

I’se been a-climbin’ on,^{21}

It was always a struggle to get services for my son. When David entered the ninth grade, he met a Black male teacher and bonded with him. But one day David came home after school and declared he would not be going back to that school. I pushed back. I told him he would not be a high school dropout – over my dead body!

So boy, don’t you turn back.

Don’t you set down on the steps

‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.

Don’t you fall now—^{22}

This resulted in his first mental breakdown and was hospitalized for two weeks in a mental health facility. Even after this, he still insisted he would not be returning to school. I could not afford a private school, which is what led me to send my son to an alternative high school program. He had been traumatized. It wasn’t until years later that he told me he was bullied in that school. He was eventually put in a small school for special learners but it lasted only one year and then the school was merged with an alternative school for kids with truancy and behavioral issues – a holding cell for kids waiting to go to prison.

He wanted to fit in with those kids so he started to model some of their behaviors. He wanted attention and so he started to ignore teachers’ directions, he started to smoke but didn’t like it, but he would get cigarettes and pretend to smoke. He started wanting to go to bars and that is one of the things that have remained. He started to cuss – like using the

^{21} Excerpt from Langston Hughes’ poem, “Mother to Son” (See p. 21 in Chapter 2).
^{22} Ibid
“F” word and the “b” word - even to me. He started to get on Facebook to be a “thug,” or his perception of a thug. So he would mimic the way these boys would dress with pants hanging down, wearing of hoodies. However, when he would get detention, he didn’t like it for it isolated him. This led to his many hospitalizations during his high school years. It was a very, very tumultuous time. He wanted to fit in. Unfortunately, the group of students at the school was also in the process of creating their own identities. The kids over in that school were supposed to be “bad” (she uses air quotes) so they were bad. They never got the…ah.. they never really got the support they needed. It never really supported their learning styles, so what do kids do when they are bored? They act up!

Loud, angry, aggressive

Criminal, criminal-minded

Thug,

Thuggish

It is all they know to do

Loud, aggressive, angry…

I remember when David wanted to get into video class. It was supposed to be one of the ways that he would buy in to the learning there – they never allowed him in the class! It took him a while to gain admittance. Oh, that place! He was marginalized there. On the school bus, further marginalization. There was no place for him! He stayed at that school for five years, never got an “F” yet never graduated with a high school diploma. What was he doing with his days?

Every time he would take the [standardized state test] he would miss the mark by a LARGER MARGIN! (Her emphasis)
Black child cannot spell

Holding cell

Black child cannot count

Holding cell

Black child cannot learn

Borderline

Borderline

Borderline

Borderland!

He never had a failing grade on his transcript yet he never officially graduated high school. He only had a certificate of completion. I had to end up suing the school district for them to provide an additional eighteen months of service in compensation for the years of services he missed.

This system was just not set up to accommodate my son! It had NO INTEREST (my emphasis based on Allison’s stresses) in seeing him succeed. After the [mental] break in the ninth grade, not even his teacher with whom he had so bonded could convince him to return to school.

“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

- Frederick Douglass

So what was diagnosed as “delayed autism” became diagnoses [by other mental health professionals] of psychosis, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia etc. I now have to fight the mental health system for the wholeness of my son. We were fortunate to find a psychiatrist who insisted David did not have a psychosis. He has now developed coping
skills that when he feels himself getting to a point of being overwhelmed, he checks himself into respite.

He is passionate about getting his high school diploma so he is motivated to go to school. He is never too sick to go or never late. He loves school. This is the love of school he lost while he was in high school. My son and [other Black boys with special needs] like him are met with such indifference by our society. He has embraced his invisibility and fights back by being nonchalant about his stemming behaviors in public for he feels that if you don’t see me then I don’t need to be mindful of these behaviors which you may find strange.

“The thing worse than rebellion, is the thing that causes rebellion.”

- Frederick Douglass

My son’s experience has been one of marginalization and isolation. This happened at a time when I could clearly see other White kids getting services while my own was neglected and left to suffer. I have worked in the same school district and could observe from within the institution of the school the difference in the treatment and the availability of resources provided for White kids with disability. A system that would not allow others to fail was as determined to prevent my son from succeeding.

And they say all this talk of the system’s failure to include and protect us and our children is a figment of our imagination. That the psychosis is in us. That we are the ones suffering the schizophrenia. And they are right! We have become mental and emotional contortionists; we are split inside and outside of ourselves. Despite our best efforts to subtract, divide, multiply and add again, the sum is always the same – zero … or less than zero. The math doesn’t work! The math doesn’t work! The fault
must lie in us, in our deficient children, in our deficient selves. Add, subtract, divide, multiply and multiply again. And again, the sum is the same: ZERO! Nothing or less than nothing. On a good day, maybe a little, just a little more than nothing…

_What are his strengths/ challenges at home and school and other contexts?_

The challenges at home that David faces has to do mostly with safety issues. For instance, he has to be told repeatedly about locking doors and securing the house before leaving, also of making sure he turns off the stove after use.

_While man a call har so-so rib_

_Oman a tun backbone!_

_How does he perform at school? Is he in any way different at home? How?_

I don’t know if it as a result of his disability, but David has sharp lines of demarcation between home and school. He felt home was home and school was school. I was Mom and the two never met, nor should they. As a result, he never did homework, but the school kept asking and kept penalizing him for not doing it. At home, he is the king of his castle. He reads at home. He likes to draw; he likes to watch the making of movies. He watches shows that talk about how movies are made and shows that tell /demonstrate how things are made and how to make cartoons.

School corrupts home!

School must have no power at home

Or his haven is lost

Gone forever!

School must be school and home

---

23 Excerpt from Louise Bennett’s poem, “Jamaica Oman” (see chapter 2, p. 28).
And the two must NEVER meet
Or safety and succor and security
Are lost …

There is something about the world of cartoons that resonates, it seems, with all three boys. I venture an explanation: the world of cartoons is a world of make-believe that is obviously so. It is a world over which our boys have control as creators and controllers of their universe. It is a world within which the good is rewarded and the bad punished; where one is allowed to be as angry as one wants or (sometimes as violent as one) needs to be -- to tell it like it is and walk away the victor for having spoken the truth. Where the last words spoken and which have the final say, are the words of the victim turned victor.

Our sons desire to be victors despite the odds stacked against them, despite the fact that they live in a society that speaks insistently and consistently out of two sides of its mouth.

He loves his food and he is very disciplined about eating his meals. He is extremely disciplined and he is this way pervasively. This is something I imagine should carry over well in school.

Only that, in school, none of that counted for sh--!

In church he’s this way. He loves church, he loves the music there. At church, it is one of the few places where he finds a community. Yet they still don’t ask him to take on certain responsibility or to participate. So even there he is only a participant and observer.
Even in God’s house? Where he is the “head and not the tail”? Where he is “above only and not beneath”? Where the “meek inherits the earth”? Where “the stone the builder refused has become the chief corner stone”? Even to there, especially to there (maybe from there) has this disease of hypocrisy and exclusion proliferated!

But at home he takes on more. He loves to shop for groceries, not for clothes. He loves going to CoSTCo and walk around the store and explore. He loves to sample the foods there. He loves to travel and to enjoy when we would leave really early in the morning like at 2:00/3:00 in the morning and he would go to sleep and then wake up when the sun is coming up. He is always asking to travel at that time.

He loves to meditate. I remember when he was about two, he was sitting quietly by himself, and when I approached him, he shushed me and told me “There’s souls in the wind.”

There ARE souls in the wind! But only those capable of being still, and quiet and at peace can know it for sure.

I do think there are souls in the wind protecting my son. I believe that. He likes the dark

...he doesn’t bring darkness to the dark

and he likes water and nature.

…they are calming and soothing and truthful

---

24 See Deuteronomy 13:28 (KJV)
25 Matthew 5:5
26 Psalm 118: 22
One video teacher told me that he would make a good nature videographer. He is always filming animals in the wild. He would go behind the local elementary school in the wooded area and film. He would go to film one fish in a school of fish and be real quiet and still and was able to get a film of this one fish. He filmed a squirrel once. It was amazing, it was as if this one squirrel was talking to David. It’s amazing. Another time it was a spider up a tree. I did all this was when I could afford to pay for all these private video lessons.

So when he’s home these are the types of things he does. He doesn’t want to deal with any academic activities.

Why would he? He has learned to associate anxiety, exclusion, hostility with school. Will have none of it! It is the only way he knows how to fight for his peace of mind. It is the only way he knows how to escape the psychosis, the schizophrenia, the emotional instability.

I am well acquainted with the dilemma – that of being made to feel as if you are the crazy one, as if what you see and feel and know to be true are played out ONLY in your head and no one else’s. I’ve been there with my son who did not (but now beginning to) make sense of the whole deal. Despite all indications to the contrary when he is at school, HE IS NOT CRAZY!!!! And neither am I, nor is David, nor is Allison, nor is Peter, nor is Eloise nor are you, Black mother, nor your child.

He just wants to do what he wants when he wants to do it. He does math but on his terms. He likes money in the bank. He has a dog now and it is now all about his dog. The dog brings him a lot of joy. The relationship they have is so interesting. He’s a very different person at home. He is in command of David at home but at school he cannot be.
David’s turn...

Why can’t I be the king I know I am

Wherever I am?

Why can’t I walk tall and hop and skip with joy

Where you can see

Where you will not judge me?

Why am I only a secret king?

Why is my kingdom shaded, hooded, hidden?

I am not hiding, yet not seen

I am not silent, yet not heard

I am not mute, yet not understood

I am bewildered by your contradictions

You say I am important, but I am never considered

You say my ways matter, but they are never utilized

You say you love me, but you only show apathy

Why?

I am a king

I am here

But I am cocooned

Silenced

Bound and gagged

My crown a cheap ornament

My kingdom a cruel joke
In your interminable
Pigeonhole

My turn...

I too have mothered a pigeonholed king
I have watched him
Raise sceptered hands
And lay full claim to his kingdom
The one shared only by me
And his father
The one over which he rules with
Certainty
My son is diminished
In your pigeonhole prison
Where you have
Sliced him
And diced him
And cut him down
Chopped him off
At the knees…
Can you describe a school based project/assignment that he excelled at or was particularly challenged by? How do you think he dealt with either situation? How did you support him?

My son constructed an amazing bridge which was a miniature of the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City. I think the bridge had to be structurally sound to hold a can of coke. It had to be functional. He didn’t understand the assignment as just an abstract thing, he wanted it to look like something he knew. Although the bridge was well constructed and he had put all this effort in, he received credit for the bridge being able to hold the can of coke. But for David what was valuable, was the aesthetics of the bridge. He was proud of what he constructed for it was far more detailed than the other bridges of his classmates, but those things were not considered or even acknowledged. He saw this as a failure.

How else could he see it?

He had invested so much of himself and his creative energy and effort into this project but got nothing much for it. There was another time he had to create a motor out of magnets and wires. This was to create enough electricity with the turning of the nail. This was an engineering project. He was required to do a demonstration where parents were invited to come in to see these projects but because his disability was “expressive language” he had a hard time to express what he was doing. When parents asked questions, he was unable to adequately explain to parents who did not understand his challenges and so he was discouraged and frustrated by the process. He tried so hard. Every time I remember it I feel like crying. Here was my son who worked so hard on this project, who understood so well but was constrained by his disability to explain it. He was forced into a round hole as a square peg. His project in my opinion so far exceeded
the projects of the other students in his grade, yet he never received the credit for the work he put in and the expertise he demonstrated by the construction.

Which of you cries for David? Which of you feels for a child stretched to his limit to give what is required and then some and does, but gets only emptiness in return?

I can’t think of a worksheet my son has ever taken home for which he ever received an “A.” That was not his strong point. And then, you know, that was school projects. But home projects, he sees himself as a writer. He has this interesting story in which I am the one with the disability. In this story I am the child and he is the parent. These are not stories for me to read necessarily, but for himself. He loves cartoons. He loves cartoons and making videos. Yet, when I tried to get him into a class at his alternative school in video production, we were told these classes were full. I think because they didn’t want to bother with him in their classes. When he did get into a video making class it was of [creating] videos that his teachers wanted, not things about which he was interested. Yet he never was absent from school. Never made excuses. But on the academic side, he just never found his footing. As a result he left school with a certificate of completion instead of a high school diploma.

If you people would get off your lazy asses…

If you people would only do what is required of you…
Then Allison said, almost to herself, “I wished I had saved some of these things. You never know when you will be called upon to have them.”

(Allison has since found a picture of David proudly displaying his amazing bridge and it is indeed something to behold. The photograph, sans David’s face – for obvious reasons – is displayed above. See figure 2)

I supported him to create and produce all these class projects. He could never get or understand why he never won a prize for any of his efforts.

**He should have won a prize for that bridge!**

**How do educators encourage pupil success in our school system? Don’t they celebrate their efforts when they go over and above to produce a work of excellence? Does effort not count, only outcome? And if outcome is what excellence is measured by, then this bridge, so carefully, artfully, meticulously constructed by a little boy who learns differently should receive the recognition it’s due!** See, even by its own
standards, by its own rules this system of education contorts itself so the status quo remains undisturbed!!

He was deeply discouraged by this and it pained my heart as his mother.

And it pains my heart as a mother. And as a Black mother ethnographer, I am compelled to tell it. I am so familiar with this! How many times has my son had to sit on the sidelines, the margins, the borderlands while he validated and celebrated the achievements of others? When, where was his celebration?

Sometimes I think that is why he has adapted this “don’t care” attitude where he doesn’t care what people think of him. It has kind of pushed him from one extreme to the next. As his mother I had to try to teach him not to find approval from other people but to find it for and in himself.

And he better. For there is none coming!

At this point, I add, “Oh boy, I so know what that feels like. It is so hard to have your child support the success of other children, but their time of celebration and acknowledgment never comes.”

There are tears. And they flow unabated. We are mothers in love with our children and channeling their pain and our own. We sit in it – in the pain. We sit in it as we must do, as we have done countless times before, as our mothers and those before them had to do countless times before. The very cells in our bodies hold this new but old pain. Can they not SEE? Can they not FEEL? Who does this to children and then goes home to dinner, pleasantly exhausted, thinking they have done a good day’s job? Who sits quietly inside a moment piously contemplating their own goodness when they have wreaked such havoc upon vulnerable children?
Who is satisfied to know they are the cause of ceaseless pain and tears?

Which mother? Which parent? Unless you are hollow. Unless you are like wood\textsuperscript{27} – unfeeling, numb. And wood isn’t human… It isn’t even a being.

*Describe your involvement in his school life. Do you routinely help with homework/study time/etc? Do you now or have you ever volunteered at his school in any capacity? Describe your experience of doing that.*

I was extremely involved in David’s school life in terms of advocating for his academic and social life within the school, especially for the accommodations in his IEP. I mediated his interaction with the school personnel: principal, guidance counselors, teachers. But in terms of school work he had a sharp demarcation according to him between school and home. So even if he was engaged with intellectual activities at home he felt like that is not school.

**School is anxiety inducing. School is hostile. School is disingenuous about its interest in his success**

For the school, [intellectual pursuits at home] did not meet homework standards and expectations. For my son, I was mom, not the teacher, so he refused to do any school work at home. For in his mind they were two separate spheres and were to be kept so. The school did not make accommodations for this student, my son, whom they knew were challenged by these concerns and who held these strong views of home and school.

They knew him, but did not value him. They knew him, but did not see him.

They knew him, but did not LOVE him.

They saw

\textsuperscript{27} The reference to wood here calls forth Alice Walker’s main character, Celie, from her celebrated work, *The Color Purple*. Celie referred to herself as “wood” because she had become numb and unfeeling to the affections of men who had been so pervasively abusive to her and her sister.
Black face
Crime, criminal
Loud, angry, aggressive, thug
They saw disability
Incapacity
Inability
FAILURE!!

But it wasn’t like he did not do academic work at home. I bought him all the computer apps and games I could that would enhance his skills in math and social studies and English and he would play them and do them, but teachers never accepted his doing these activities as valued learning that met any of the expectations of school.

Where have I heard that before? My own son’s elaborate cartooning sprung immediately to mind. This was his vehicle of communicating. This was his way of making sense, of analyzing text. This was his way of expressing his ideas, of processing the complexities of his world. Of speaking back to the injustices and the unfairness that he could see clearer and clearer with each passing day. David was an expert in inequity and injustice. His ideas, his robust understanding about these issues surpassed that of his teachers’.

Teachers felt because he refused to do school work, I was failing. I remember one time I volunteered at a school dance but he did not like my being there so I left early. I was always at school events to the extent he would be included. I made sure he was at school appropriately dressed etc. I had to drive him because riding on the school bus was traumatizing for him because of what he was experiencing in school. These are the types
of soft skills that are routinely discounted that I as mother had to do for my son even in the midst of judgment from his teachers.

**Judgment is a strength of theirs. It comes so easily, heck, it pours out without effort or restraint:**

“Bad mother, bad mother!

You are NEVER here

Bad mother, bad mother

Your child NEVER does homework!

Bad mother, bad mother

Your child cannot be controlled

Bad mother, bad mother

Bad mother, bad mother!

BAD MOTHER, BAD MOTHER!!!

BAAAAD MUTHA F____!!!

*Describe your current/past relationship with school personnel?*

It was an ongoing antagonistic relationship. The school personnel positioned themselves as a “them against us” set up. They assumed this defensive posture in all of our interactions so it couldn’t be any other way. It still is that, for my son was not properly served in the school so I still had to fight after he left. All they did was move him from one holding cell to the next. They just passed him on to another agency. I have never perceived myself as part of a team that serves David. They passed him off with a certificate of completion that means nothing for he can do nothing with that. They babysat him for five years and he left school with nothing but they would want me to
think of it as a remarkable achievement. You can’t have good relationships with a school
system and school personnel like that.

“All things considered, we did a heck of job schooling that ni____...Bla__ kid!”

The school district referred him (through 688 Referral to satisfy transitional
services) to a [state funded adult disability service] program they deem would best
support his needs, but this agency soon determined that he needed more individualized
support than they were able to provide, so they referred me to DDS (Department of
Developmental Services) who determined his IQ was too high for their designation so he
was sent to DMH (Department of Mental Health) whose evaluation determined that
because he was diagnosed as autistic he should go back to DDS and so they kicked us
around till finally he was accepted by DDS but with a low priority for services
designation which means he gets little to no services.

Add, subtract, divide multiply, add, subtract, multiply! The sum is zero! The
math doesn’t work!!

* * *

My heart is heavy
For I feel your pain.
You sit at the far corner of the room
Preoccupied it seems by your own thoughts
Of things you must do, things you must get done
For the sake of a son
Who was relegated long time ago
To the sidelines
The borderlands

That house his disability

You are weary and I can feel it

I feel your pain

And I cry from the inside with you

For truth be told

I dread the day when I too

Will suffer a similar fate:

My son is next in line

For your well established

Sidelines, borderlands, exile!

How does a mother sustain her joy

At seeing her son

Stretch, and bulk and feather

At hearing her son’s register deepen

And feel his defiance and respond to the force of his

Bourgeoning will

That oddly brings pride.

Is it frustration that I feel?

Is it anger?

Is it pain?

Is it rage?

Is it everything?
Stamped, rammed into my DNA
Into the memory of my cells
I bear your little boy now a man in my belly
I bear all little boys, grown and growing
In my belly
For I am mother
Eternal and everlasting
I am constantly bearing the birthing pain,
Of our struggle to keep breathing,
On my body and on yours and on his and his and his and hers
Are the whiplash of exclusion
And they sting
They stung then, they dehumanized and humiliated then
And they do now
We gave you our boys and you returned them to us
In pain and divorced from themselves
We gave you our boys
But you pushed paper
And made excuses
You deflected and obscured
You were disingenuous and dishonest
Distant and dishonorable
We gave you our boys
The best of ourselves
Our treasure
Our diamonds
Our pearls
But, like swine,
You trampled them
In the muck and the mud
What have you done?
What have you done?
What have WE done?
Cast our pearls before swine!!

*Are you satisfied with the support your son received at school? Why/why not?*

Not at all!

*What activities/endeavors is he currently engaged in? Do you think this is adequate and suited to your child’s ability and potential? Why/why not?*

He is currently involved with preparing to take the high school equivalency test. He currently goes to a center for classes. He needs a high school diploma so that is what he is doing now. He desires to go to college and he cannot go to college without a high school diploma. The school’s certificate of completion was a dud. It is of no value this is why he has to be going back now preparing for HiSET (a high school Equivalency test). The HISET is just one of the current equivalency tests available for students to take. He goes every day. He has support. He is picked up in the mornings and this person stays with him during his time in class and drops him back at home. This is a Monday through
Thursday endeavor. This is a challenge as sometimes the person who is supposed to pick up my son cannot come so he misses class.

If you people would get off your lazy asses
If you people would just try harder
Thug, criminal, crime, angry, aggressive
Loud, threatening, hulking, skulking
Bad mutha…
Bad mother, bad mother…

Describe what it has been like for you as the mother to support and advocate for your son throughout his lifetime.

(Allison pauses, then sighs) It was always a fight; it was always me against them. At no point have I ever felt like we were ever on the same team. They act as if they know more about your child than you.

Of course they do! You’re the bad mother

Of a BAAD MUTHA___

If you advocate for things in the class they would always say he can’t do it. There would always be push back. Always a “me against them” deal.

Anything else?

Very rarely do you make headway with them. You rarely ever get what you want and the result now is that David is still trying to get his high school diploma!

Sonji: You sound tired.

Allison: …And frustrated

I have no words. I am there. I was there. I will be there?
How do you think you have been affected by your son’s struggles? What lessons have you learned? Skills and insight and understanding gained?

I don’t believe in the school system anymore.

This is a TEACHER speaking!!

I don’t think it is designed for meaningful learning of students of color to take place in any holistic way.

This is a TEACHER speaking!!

The school system certainly does not take into consideration the individual differences students of color bring to the table. There is a “one size fits all” approach and the size doesn’t fit us. You would think if you are a teacher in the classroom you would as a teacher try to fulfill the needs of a child of color who learns differently in your class.

These are the words of a TEACHER!

A “been-there-and-done-that” TEACHER!

There is no process of accountability. I have never been asked to evaluate my son’s teachers. He has never been asked to do that. Teachers are evaluated by superintendents and other administrators. My voice doesn’t count.

Even though I’m a TEACHER!

TEACHER doesn’t wash away my Blackness

TEACHER doesn’t negate my son’s disability

Inability

To find a place

Of safety…

As long as their numbers look right,

But the math doesn’t add up!
How can the numbers
“Look right?”

they don’t care about the outcome of your child as an individual.

(Allison repeats the question under her breath... pauses... “skills.” She scoffs quietly then repeats the last part of the statement, “skills and insights gained”)

Just that the school systems are not prepared to deal with children like my son. As far as advocacy within the school system is concerned, that did not work. I didn’t learn patience or perseverance, because none of those things worked.

No grit! No determination!

I couldn’t say for instance to someone, “hang in there”, or “be patient” for none of those things worked.

But the boy across the way is Black

And he graduated...

Yes, he graduated...

IN SPITE OF

There was no lesson learned for me. If there was a lesson, I did not find it. Maybe the lesson was for me to just shut up and move along.

If you would just try harder

Perhaps, if you complained less...

(At this point, Allison engaged me in a conversation voicing her concerns for her son who doesn’t have friends and who she feels is affected by the racial incidents that
took place over the weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia. We shared our fears for the safety of our sons in this racially charged, hostile climate for children and young people of color).

Do you feel hopeful about your son’s future based on the support (or lack of it) and/or experiences he has had thus far in his life at school and at home?

I don’t have a choice but to have hope. I can’t just give up on my son. But my hope is not based on what the school system has done for us. I have to be hopeful. It is not blind hope, for I know that my son is capable of much more than the school system gives him credit for. Experiences at home include the things he has been able to do that the school did not capture. Based on my experiences with David at home based also on his skills and interests, he is very capable of doing a lot. He’s ambitious.

But he didn’t do his homework!

If he only did his homework…

For instance, he loves to write and does so profusely. I know he really wants to get his high school diploma and be able to pursue his interests in a manner that works for him.

If *you people* would only do the little that is required

And show more grit

And have more discipline

And determination

And staying power -

If *you people*

Would only show some ambition

---

28 The reference is that of the racial violence that erupted in Charlottesville, VA during summer 2017 over the push to take down Confederate statues because of their racist significance to individuals and communities of color.
And get off your lazy asses …

*What do you do to cope with the challenges of mothering a child with special needs?*

What do I do to cope? (*Allison questions herself quietly*) I think I’m dying inside.

**Bad mother, bad mother!**

*Nobody who matters gives a damn!*  

I don’t have a coping mechanism. I’m two levels below coping because David’s  
challenges are significant and he still desires to get his high school diploma and we still  
have these barriers in front of us.

**Get some grit!**

**It’s a thing, you know!**

He’s made some strides in particular areas. For instance, he’s gotten his driver’s permit.  
These are things that he’s successful at outside of school. I think about those successes. I  
think about the successes at home. It is these things that give me hope. Also, I rely a lot  
on my faith. It is what keeps me going. For if you rely on these people to help you or  
your kid you would be a wreck.

**If only you didn’t complain so much…**

**If only he did his homework…**

**If only you’d stayed married…**

**If only you’d helped him more…**

**If only…**

There is no escaping the issues you have to deal with. Even if you decide to take time off  
to go someplace for respite, your mind is always on your child.

**If you people would stop depending on us**

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For our hard earned tax dollars
To bail you out of your dependency
And your degeneracy
And your insufficiency…

You live with it 100 percent all the time. There is no escaping it. I pray. That’s where my hope comes from. That praying serves to build my hope, but there is no escaping it.

But, God…

There IS a better day coming
There will come a time…

Until then,

We keep pushing
Because we must
We have no choice

**Talk about your journey as a mother of a Black son with special needs.**

My journey has been quite a ride. It’s been quite a journey with many ups and many downs. And believe it or not, there’s been many ups. My son brings me joy and I believe I’m a better person because I’m his mother. It brings me blessings every day. There have also been many downs but I would not trade him for anything in the world. If I had a choice of not having my son or having him with special needs, I would choose to have him with special needs any day. Despite the challenges, he’s my pride and my joy and I wouldn’t trade him for the world! He doesn’t ask for much, he just wants to be loved and accepted for who he is. I don’t think that is too much to ask nor is that unreasonable. It is what everybody else in the world asks for.
It is what everybody in the world has a right to expect for herself

For himself

Pearls picked up from mud

Can be washed

And made clean…

BUT

“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men”

- Frederick Douglass
The stories of our children begin way before school. This is the reason why, for us as Black mothers these children, despite the stigma of their challenges, represent our hope, our joy, our greatest accomplishment. We were as proud and excited for our children as any parent was to witness her child’s entry into the formal education system. In this way, we are no different from any parent, but while our differing experiences may make our similarities end there, (our children’s entry into school posits their entry into a different world -- a sharp discontinuity between home and school) when our children come home to us we have just as much hope and warmth and love for them as any parent for any child whom she loves.

We greet our children at the door and must perform a daily “washing” of them – our effort to rid them of the toxins of exclusion, invisibility or hyper visibility. This is a routine. I remember when my son was still young enough to be bathed and his body oiled by me; I used the lotioning “ritual” as an opportunity to massage him in order to relax him before he went off to his school day. And as I rubbed lotion into his smooth, chocolate skin, I would tell him how beautiful he was, how shiny and magnificent his black hair that would be tightly coiled in on itself. I would marvel at his dark brown eyes and the innocence and curiosity I would see shining there. My beautiful son so full of innocence and idealism that I dreaded telling him (or having him find out on his own) that the world would not see his beauty nor would it value his presence and that he would one day, when he’s too tall to be cute, come to be suspicioned and feared. For the
moment, he would have to deal with the otherness that comes with being a Black boy on an IEP.

The black (W)hole

A Black body entered another Black body
And a baby, a Black baby cried
A Black baby being conceived perceived
That all it would or could do is cry…

A Black baby inside another Black body pressed against the Bloody odds of darkness and bone and pushed to be free
And a mother, a Black mother, cried
A Black mother who understand beyond the understandable
That all she would or could do is try …

To push harder as the muscles of her belly and soul contracted
With the crippling pain of the struggle she was about to birth…
The mother’s labor did not end on the bloody birthing table
And the staccato cries of the new life, hoping, straining for nourishment
Prolonged her weeping. Her labor stretches on into cruel infinitum

And her black body contorted and constricted, legs spread eagled
In perpetual lying-in with a black hole turned outward to shame
Her into nothingness. She is ravaged and picked apart by the scorning
And the scornful eyes of lust and derision. And her labor
To nourish the hope she births sucks at her teats and pulls
Virtue from her sucking her dry, effacing her existence
Rendering her invisible

And even in the black hole of her nothingness,
Her days of perpetual hard labor continue into infinitum
And the babies she birthed cry for their own pain
And their own burden which they must drag upon
Their chattel backs

And the black mother cries…
And the Black mother cries…
Her babies

Her babies

Her throbbing womb…

Her pain…

The narratives of Eloise and Allison interwoven with my own analysis and reaction are a representation of the “on the ground” experiences of mothers like us whose marginalized voices are squeezed out of academic theorizing as a matter of orthodoxy. The experiences of Eloise, Allison, Sonji and countless others like us do not, as a matter of course, make it into the annals of the academy.
The accomplishments of our children are not celebrated because their accomplishments are different; the steps they have taken toward their own progress start farther back than their peers’. But our system of education measures only the supposed finish line but never the distance traveled. Is this science, you may ask? Is it real research or is it storytelling? I say, all research IS storytelling. It is the general contention that research forces us to see ourselves, makes us understand the complexities of the world around us more fully and hopefully will make us desire to change the things about humanity that render us smaller than ourselves. It is my hope that this genre of research, in particular, will force a reflexive and critical look at our reality and ourselves. Our children are our continuity into the future. If we do not do all we can to ensure that they become all they have the potential to become then we cheat them and ourselves.

Critical race theory upon which critical race feminism stands recognizes and centers the marginalization of People of Color and the extent to which they have traditionally been locked out of discourses of power (Few, 2007; Knaus, 2009, Kohli, 2009; Lee, 2005; Yosso, 2005). It turns on its head the whole notion that People of Color generally, and Students of Color, specifically, like our sons, are merely disadvantaged and disempowered without cultural capital. That they will not be seen and heard in a way they deserve because of the misfortune of their birth. And that we, the Black mothers of such sons will also be gagged and silenced. But critical race feminism as one of the pillars of Black mother ethnography provides the avenue for mothers like us to challenge and talk back to the status quo in a way that allows us to reclaim our agency and our humanity from domination and erasure. The performative quality of the research centers the body without discarding the text and allows the voice to cut through and “[open] a
breach in the text” (Conquergood, 1995: 30) thereby reclaiming the saying from the said, the doing from the done and re-inscribing the research project with urgency and movement.

For all three mothers it was a situation of “us against them” for rarely in any of our experiences was the school working in harmony with us for the good of our children. It was always an uncomfortable situation where the relationship between parents and school personnel was fraught with various levels of tension and dysfunction. Our boys would face isolation in class, in the lunchroom, on the playground. Eloise had to purchase a swing and practically bribed Peter to learn to ride a bike so he could be included in neighborhood playgroups. She attracted neighborhood children to her yard so her son could have the opportunity to make friends and it was not coincidental that the most meaningful of Peter’s friendships were formed outside of school and maintained outside the community. We all thought about and adhered to the importance of having our sons well dressed and well presented. We knew any and all effort to help our sons find acceptance was valuable to their acceptance of themselves. Our voices are not the only voices they hear or are swayed by and as their elders we knew then what they have painfully come to know now: this society views them with fear and derision; this society does not understand or accept them for who they are; they will never be able to step away from their Blackness or their “specialness”; they will always be under-estimated and their humanity under-valued.

We all feel a sense of great pride in our children and have hope despite the odds stacked against them and their future. All children are creative and talented yet, in many instances, the school failed or fails to recognize such and use it as a means of teaching
and engaging our sons giving them the opportunities for success. As mothers, chief caretakers of our sons, we know this because we live it, up close and personal, every day!

Each story as told is unique and different. And while it represents each mother’s personal journey, it is a serious indicator of the issues Black families endure every day. Black Mothers in particular are endowed with the additional burden and responsibility of holding the family together. Black mothers channel the pain of their children and partners, especially in heterosexual households where the male/female roles tend to be more defined. Black mothers of Black sons carry the extra burden, especially in today’s America, of their son’s safety where there is a clear revival of the embrace of open hostility and fear of their Black bodies in public spaces, especially White spaces, which is where Allison, Eloise, Sonji and their sons live. The struggles and the pain are real. Also real are the stubborn will and determination of these mothers to see their sons and all the sons of their community survive.

*Always Underestimated, Always Under-valued*

Eloise’s story is representative of the stories of so many Black mothers of Black children with special needs. Eloise advocated for her son during a time when the school system and government systems grappled with the phenomenon of autism. She used their uncertainty to her advantage. She made use of the resources of her friends and community support groups to get the needed help for her son and in so doing helped other sons and daughters. Though more deferential to the school system than I am, than Allison seems to be, there were so many similarities in our experiences. All three of us had to be overly vigilant for fear of our children’s neglect and marginalization by the school system. All three of us are middle class, educated women with careers. And, with the
exception of Allison who is divorced, our children are from homes with both parents present and engaged. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006; ) often talks about the deficit view the system of education has of children of color generally, and though many researchers (Gorski, 2011; Kozol, 1991; 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2001; 2006; Lipman, 2004; Nygreen, 2006) speak at length about the deficit view that the education system holds of our children, it is usually a picture of Black and Brown children who are poor, living in urban neighborhoods, from single-parent households, often nonnative speakers of English that is painted and which unwittingly essentializes the experiences and profiles of children of color and in particular, children of color with special needs like our sons.

The public school system fails again and again to recognize and nurture the gifts and talents of our children. Drawing on the body of work on hidden literacies (Dyson, 2008), Ives (2011) expounds upon the fact that “many of the literacies students possess go unnoticed or untapped in schools” (p. 250). The literacies of our children so often go unnoticed and unused in the classroom because teachers deem them to be immaterial, inconsequential or unsuitable. In much the same way our sons are “otherized” by their race and dis/ability so are the literacies and the wealth of talent they bring to their own learning experience. Teachers’ profound lack of understanding of their students’ funds of knowledge cause them to miss crucial teachable opportunities that could win the interest and enthusiasm of their students. Peter was adept at playing the piano – a remarkable skill, but a skill his teacher did not know he possessed because she did not think him capable. Peter had an outstanding aptitude for learning the computers and of being creative with technology; David was an extraordinary artist and videographer; and Josh, an amazing cartoonist. None of their interests and talents were engaged by any of their
teachers and quite notably, teachers who served at different schools and during different time periods across the years. While just a glimpse at teachers’ attitudes to these students, it is a noteworthy indication of the school system’s failure to regard the capability and the humanity of our sons.

It is not only poor Black and Brown children from single parent households in urban centers who struggle in school and whose identities are marked and marginalized by the education system, but Black and Brown children from middle class households in sub-urban neighborhoods as well. The general implication being: Black and Brown children can expect to have significantly different (negative) schooling experiences than their White peers. For Black and Brown children deemed “special needs” by our public education system and for Black boys with special needs specifically, the negative schooling experience is significantly intensified.

Peter prevailed. But even with all the resources his parents, and particularly his mother, poured into him: time, money, intervention, advice, support and love, Peter, with all his potential for a brilliant future could still be ahead of where he currently is because of the system’s refusal at several places along his educational journey to provide him with the opportunities and resources he needed to progress.

**Up Close and Personal**

Allison’s claims about her negative experiences with school personnel are supported by research about the experiences of parents generally, but especially parents of color (Carpenter, 1997; Dyson, 1993; Fish, 2008; Osei 2010; Lipman, 2004; Taylor, 1991).

**I feel a pain in my body, at the pit of my gut, in my head, in my heart.**
What do I do with this rage that I feel? Where do I put it? How do I manage the fear for my life? For my son’s life? Bitch!! Nigger!! Nigger bitch!! Black, dirty, unclean, unworthy—you don’t belong here!! Your work ain’t sh*t, your story ain’t sh*t, your man ain’t sh*t, your kid, your family, your friends, your ideas—YOU AIN’T SH*T!!

F**k you, you nigger! The only good nigger, is a dead nigger!!”

I run to tell them for surely they know that to call me Nigger is wrong! I run to tell them, I feel attacked, unsafe. I fear they will shoot me, rape me, burn me, hang me. Surely if I tell them, they will be angry for they care about me. They tell me they do. They tell me they respect me, even love me! I run to tell for they will protect me from the few evil ones, the remnant from worse days that surely lie in the past. I run to tell them for they don’t believe those things. They see ME. Surely they will cry with me, surely they will be outraged with me. I will find succor and justice and healing. Surely, surely I must for they care—they told me so again and again.

So why aren’t they moving to give me cover? Why are their eyes hooded, their backs turned, their arms folded? Please, please help me. I know you care for me, I know you want me to live…

Then why do you say you care but walk away with your fingers in your ears? Why do you say you care but snicker when I cringe, when I cover my face to ward off the blows that come and come and come and come?

There is an explosion in my head, in my belly. My knees buckle but you smile for you say I am strong, built to carry burdens and withstand blows. So you
tell me you care, but walk away…and your footprints softly, mockingly form the words: Bitch! Nigger! Nigger bitch!! Black, dirty, unclean, unworthy—you don’t belong here! We hate you! You ain’t sh*t!!!

Allison became an educator. She saw up close and first-hand the unequal distribution of resources awarded to White children with special needs compared to children of color similarly labeled. Allison gave up a career as a chemical engineer when her son was diagnosed with autism. She gave up a considerable income and a prosperous lifestyle. David’s diagnosis of autism is what made her enter the education profession. It was her concern for her son because she wanted to have a close watch over him to understand the issues that he would face as a student with special needs in the school system that led her to this career path. And she took it on without hesitation.

Although an educator, Allison’s journey of providing support for David was not easy. The school system was not any less forbidding and unwelcoming to Allison as a mother. It is an experience we share. I too am an educator. I too had to endure the hostility of the school system as I entered to provide support for my son. The school system is not any more welcoming to educators of color who are parents when we try to petition it for much needed resources for our children. As a matter of fact, both Allison and I found the school professionals to be distant, even hostile at points. All our sons were believed to be incapable of accomplishing far less than they were able to do and endured the low expectations of their teachers.

Allison’s experience of going the journey of caring for son alone made her different from Eloise and me. She had no partner to look to during her struggle to attend and make sense of school meetings. She did not have the support of a partner to supervise
her son’s activities at home or as an additional source of support and security for them both at home. Allison’s perseverance as a parent, an educator, a member of her community while a single mother, intensified her isolation. As a boy with special needs, her son David did not have friends so there were no visits by friends; no birthday parties to attend; no fun sporting or social activities with friends and their family members to enjoy; no sleep overs. As the Black parent of a Black boy with special needs, Allison faced marginalization from friends even within the Black community because they too struggle with the idea of difference. They too do not know how to embrace our children who are rendered different because of their diagnoses.

There is a whole body of research that addresses the intersectionality of race, class and dis/ability and which shows that both race and disability are socially constructed, reinforced and serve to label, segregate and oppress (Gillborn, 2015; Ben-Moshe & Magana, 2014). Thus, the experience of our sons in school as deficient, as pathological, as falling short, is no coincidence. For “[d]is/ability (like race and gender) masquerades as natural, fixed, and obvious” (Gillborn, 2015, p. 283). Our children’s diagnoses have therefore become their “N” identity or their “nature” (Gee, 2000) and where they are treated as second class citizens – unworthy of teachers’ time and effort. Gillborn (2015) found that parents’ challenge to teachers about their children’s struggles with racial issues was often muted by teacher’s/school’s subsequent complaint about a supposed behavioral problem the student may be having. I highlight this reality to underscore the fact that as Black mothers who advocated for our sons, our efforts were often blunted and our voices silenced by these maneuvers to deflect attention away from the issues of concern. This was a deliberate tactic that ensured the problem remained unaddressed. The various ways
in which our children are ascribed to marginality are deeply disconcerting and hurtful to us especially that our sons recognize and understand what is being done to them. We watch as they must carry the feelings of exclusion deep inside them and know how profoundly affronted and diminished they are by it but are powerless to change their situations. This is what for mothers is most discouraging and disempowering.

This reinforces the reality that the journey of Black motherhood, especially to sons deemed different, is fraught with all kinds of pain, all kinds of struggle, and all kinds of anxieties. But, despite that, it is also a journey full of joy and hope. Although our children are different, their difference for us is a blessing. We construe their difference as a positive because their difference makes them special and all the more precious to us. Their difference makes us grateful for the small feats, the little accomplishments that are taken for granted by others. To watch our sons overcome challenges and grow to accept and embrace their uniqueness is our source of great pride and joy and gratitude. They may not be where we want them to be; they may not be celebrated the way they deserve, but as their mothers, we recognize their full potential and the wonder of them and will continue to advocate and to petition for them to know lives that are full and rich and happy. It is who we are as Black women who hold on to our faith in something bigger and greater than ourselves. It is this faith and belief in a higher power to see us through our struggles, so significant to the Black experience (Cannon & Morton, 2015) that we wholly embrace for it is, after all, what we do as Black women.

The Research Continues…

Our society grudgingly acknowledges the injustices dealt to its indigenous/formerly enslaved/ colonized/ displaced populations. And in the same grudging breath suggests the
injustices are all unfortunate acts of the past that have long been overcome and should not be used to contextualize the experiences of members of these same populations in their bid for recognition and acknowledgement in modern day US society. This narrative is, of course, a dangerous falsehood that allows the existing state of affairs to remain firmly intact. It justifies society’s inequities and it silences the voices of difference and diversity.

There is a price that such a silence and the continuation of acts of oppression exacts from us all. The academy is the space where knowledge is produced and legitimated, and, consequently, the place where humanity is reaffirmed or refused. The development of a mother ethnography epistemology not only intends to insert the ideas, perspectives, scholarship and experiences of the Black, immigrant, scholar, mother-woman, but to do so in a way that is both instructive and liberatory.

A huge part of advancing the ideas of the Black woman is a way of taking back her humanity that has been mortgaged to maleness and Whiteness. Whether the academy sees virtue in accepting epistemologies of Blackness or not, these ideas affirm that Whiteness is not the unmistakable be all and end all of intellectual discourse and endeavor! It is just another way of situating and processing the realities of the world!

The journey I have taken of researching my son’s schooling experience and the experiences of other Black mothers of Black sons, who traversed the public school system, is not a new one. Many parents have done this before me (Ingram-Willis, 1995; Osei, 2010; Kakli, 2011; Taylor, 1991; Wilson-Cooper, 2009) – it is their courage, commitment and determination that I have channeled through this project. I recognize the ongoing need that parents have of going into the schools where their children learn to see and experience first-hand the tremendous challenge their children face of coping with a
system that has been designed to ignore the great wonder of their individuality.

Admittedly, not all children struggle and suffer in school. For many, school is an
affirming, exciting haven where they make friends and enjoy their esteem and the favor
of their teachers. For such children, the joy of learning is its own motivation and the
experience of “success” is heady. These children are therefore used as the measuring tool
for their peers and their peers’ ability to “fit” comfortably within the accepted notions of
normalcy (emphasis is mine) feed a stubborn unwillingness on the part of educators to
change any practice of the status quo to accommodate the needs of children who are most
challenged by it.

Gloria Anzaldua (1990) affirms, and I agree, that we should seek to “create new
categories for those of us left out or pushed out of existing ones.” It is exactly that which
I have attempted to do here by advancing mother ethnography as
theory/method/positionality. If we do not do this, we are as guilty of locking ourselves
out of the academy as the limiting, sanctioned theories and methodologies are that
currently do so.

I sit in the quiet of the night listening to the steady breathing of my sleeping son, a
brief reprieve from the reality of being labeled “special needs” along with being Black in
a school where whiteness does not name itself or see itself and is oblivious of the
crippling and overwhelming effects of its presence upon those who are most unlike it
(Picower, 2009).

My son, now sixteen, finds himself less of being “Mommy’s baby” and more of a
full-blown adolescent. It is a bewildering place, to say the least, but layered atop (or
underneath – maybe more underneath) it, the never dissipating reality of his difference.
His difference in speech and expression, perception and understanding, culture and way of knowing, being and style of learning. As the mother, teacher and elder, I know from experience how hard this stage of life is to navigate for most children my son’s age. I know it is hard for him and especially so for all the reasons I named. It is why as his mother sleep often eludes me. It is why my warrior stance can never be relaxed. It is why my gaze is always fixed. And as I reflect upon my own experience of engaging and researching his reality, I feel the stinging pull of the tightrope beneath my feet, almost cutting into me but never able to cut through to the “dividing asunder” of Black mother and scholar. For though in the academy they are engaged differently and in entirely different spheres, in me they cannot be separate. For the mother ethnographer, it is at once and together, a dilemma and a phenomenon!

The Black mother ethnographer is the researcher who is aware of her positionality, her world view and is in full view of her unique circumstances that stand in contrast to the methods, methodology and assertions of a white male academic tradition that does not see or acknowledge the richness and uniqueness of the Black mother researcher’s perspective. The Black mother researcher who vigorously advocates for a space inside the academy that she hopes will say at long last:

Come in!

You are welcome. Come in.

Your gaze, your gait, your girth, your weight

Do not look the same as ours

29 Reference to Biblical scripture (KJV) found in Hebrews 4: 12 “The word of God is quick, and powerful and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit...”
But your strength, your power, your push, your pull

Make us want to, long to, hear you, see you,

With you here, we are safer, stronger, better

Come in, come in!

Oh how we awaited your coming!

But we are not nearly there. We are not nearly at the place of acknowledgment or willingness to see and perceive and understand differently or even to think that there could be another way, a different way of engaging the universe. Getting a place inside the academy that is equal to the space occupied by all the other white male perspectives therein is what this work is about. For until we begin to understand and engage with each other as equals we are in danger of missing out on truly coming into a fuller, more vigorous understanding of what our humanity is all about. When the dominant group continues to control and define the self-image of the dominated by delegitimizing and devaluing their claims of human subjectivity and perspectives and point of views, we do not add to our overall understanding of ourselves as a species nor to our understanding of life. Instead, we render ourselves less than we are, smaller, narrower and more limited than we are! What may be learned from the experiences and epistemologies of the “other” that are not already grasped by the White male academy? How might the academy’s role in creating and advancing knowledge be deepened and broadened by its inclusivity?

In as much as the academy’s openness is what is desired, the great necessity of advancing Black feminist epistemologies and other “othered” ideas, methodologies and theories is ever increasing and scholars must push through the resistance to advance these
ideas and methodologies. Failure to do this means that we relinquish to a White male academy the responsibility and the authority to define who we are in the world. We relinquish to the traditions and perspective of a White male academy, the awesome legacy of our existence, our values and belief systems, our stories and our experiences and the interpretation of those experiences. We relinquish to the traditions and perspective of a White male academy, the task of telling, valuing, interpreting and proclaiming who we are for us and not we for ourselves!
APPENDIX A

OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/PROMPTS

1. Tell me about your son. Describe his personality. What makes him happy? What makes him sad? What are his interests/likes/dislikes? What does he like to do most? How does he get along with family members and peers?

2. What do you admire about him?

3. Tell me about his infancy and growing up years. Describe the kind of baby/toddler he was. Was he active/precocious/delayed in development (speech, walking etc)?

4. What are his strengths/challenges at home and school and other contexts?

5. How does he perform at school? Is he in any way different at home? How?

6. Can you describe a school based project/assignment that he excelled at or was particularly challenged by. How do you think he dealt with either situation? How did you support him?

7. Describe your involvement in his school life. Do you routinely help with homework/study time/etc? Do you now or have you ever volunteered at his school in any capacity? Describe your experience of doing that.

8. Describe your current/past relationship with school personnel?

9. Are you satisfied with the support your son receives/received at school? Why/why not?

10. If your child is no longer in school, what activities/endeavors is he currently engaged in? Do you think this is adequate and suited to your child’s ability and potential? Why/why not?

11. Describe what it has been like for you as the mother to support and advocate for your son throughout his lifetime.

12. How do you think you have been affected by your son’s struggles? What lessons have you learned? Skills and insight and understanding gained?

13. Do you feel hopeful about your son’s future based on the support (or lack of it) and/or experiences he has had thus far in his life at school and at home?

14. What do you do to cope with the challenges of mothering a child with special needs?
15. Talk about your journey as a mother of a black son with special needs.
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Mother Ethnography as Theory, Method and Positionality: A Performance of Possibility

I. My name is Sonji Johnson-Anderson. I am a doctoral student in the Teacher Education and School Improvement program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I would like to conduct an ethnographic qualitative study in order to examine the intrinsic tensions of the schooling experiences of Black boys with IEPs from the perspective of their mothers.

II. In order to gather information for this research I will be conducting bi-weekly semi-structured interviews and conversations during the spring 2017 semester. Each interview session will be between 30 and 60 minutes. The study will involve the following methods of data collection and analysis:

   a. semi-structured interviews/conversations
   b. researcher reflective journal entries
   c. artifacts from home and school such as emails, school projects (past and present), school letters and IEPs, and any other relevant documentation.

III. I will write field notes to capture the substance of the interviews/conversations between the participants and the researcher of capturing the words and phrases of participants in the particular way they express their feelings and ideas about their children. However, names, schools, and any other detail that might disclose identities of participants will not be used in any written material in which I may use material from the study. All names and other identifying features used during collection, storage, analysis and reporting will be replaced with pseudonyms to protect your identity.

IV. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to refuse participation or discontinue at any time without penalty or prejudice.

V. I will use the material from the study for purposes of my doctoral study. By signing this consent document, you are giving me permission to use the data collected for my doctoral study, or academic presentation should that be appropriate, which may include manuscripts submitted to professional journals for publication.

VI. I am providing you with two copies of this informed consent document, both of which should be signed if you are willing to participate. One copy should be retained for your records, and the other should be returned to me. Your
signature below indicates that you have read and understood the
information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, and that
you may withdraw your consent at any time.

If you have any questions about the research, or your participation in it, you can
reach me at: 917-974-4996 or johnsona@umass.edu. You may also contact my
advisor, Dr. Kysa Nygreen at 413-561-5328 or knygreen@umass.edu or the
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the College of Education at the University of
Massachusetts, Dr. Jennifer Randall at 413-545-7125 or jrandall@umass.edu.

I, ________________________________ have read the information in this consent
document and agree to be observed, surveyed and/or interviewed under the
conditions stated above.

Participant's Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Researcher's Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________
REFERENCES


Anonymous, undated; 2005 or later. Patricia Hill Collins: Intersecting oppressions.


