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Life Notes about the Dual Careers of a Black Female: Race and Gender Politics in Public School
Administration and Higher Education Professorship
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Abstract

This article is written from the experiential and theoretical perspectives that I encountered as a Black female public school educator who, after twenty-plus years of public school teaching and administrative experiences, became an assistant professor at a predominately White research university. Being a student of critical race theory, I write this experience narrative from the perspective of *life notes* in order to help "demystify[ing] African American feminist ways of knowing, in moments of reflection, relation, and resistance" (Dillard, 2003, p. 135). Moreover, this article represents an " *endarkened* feminist epistemology" (Dillard, 2003) in order to shed light on how incidents and events with race, class, and gender translate into meaning for both of my professional careers and my life in general. A chronologic comparison of my experiences in both careers reveals the debilitating affects of race and gender. By sharing this experience, I hope that all who are involved in the recruitment, retention, and promotion of women and minorities in these professions (public school administration and the academy) will better understand how acts of racism and sexism create distractions that hinder their success in these careers.

Race and Gender Politics in Public School

Administration and Higher Education Professorship

There are several studies on female public school administrators that highlight race, class, and gender differences in the promotion and ascension into administrative or supervisory positions (Blount, 1998; Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1987). But there is a limited body of research on the comparative experiences of former public school administrators who later turn to the academy as their second careers. Some former public school administrators believed that by going upstream (university educator preparation programs) they might help to better prepare aspiring public school teachers and administrators for the realities of public school administration (Simmons, 2005). They, as did I, soon discovered that the academy's promotion and tenure system offered little or no advantages for practice. Instead, the system appeared to favor scholarship and "cookie-cutter" socialization skills.

In spite of the challenges in the careers of most female educators, few studies explore the political nature of

the education profession from the comparative perspective of a Black female administrator-turned-professor who seeks to access the career ladder while striving to overcome the barriers of race, class, gender, and traditional politics inherent in both the public school administration and higher education paths. Although experiences from the two careers--public school administration and academia--have surprising differences, the common denominators of race, gender, and politics in education remain the same.

In that vein, this article is written from the experiential and theoretical perspectives that I have encountered as a Black female educator who, after 18 years of public school teaching and administrative experiences, became an assistant professor in higher education. In these life notes, I share recent acts of discrimination and racism and align them with similar experiences that I encountered while growing up in the "Jim Crow" South. The purpose of aligning the present experiences with the past is to help emphasize the fact that racism is still prevalent in the daily lives of people of color, and is especially prevalent in U.S. educational systems. In revealing the past/present comparisons of my experiences that span a period of nearly 50 years, I hope to help contradict the belief that America is a "post-racist" society. As stated by Reddy (2002),

According to majority White opinion, we live in a post-racist society. Racism is widely -Whitely - perceived as an historical artifact, not as the powerful shaper of all of our lives it actually continues to be. This view of racism as nasty but finished, except for aberrational outbreaks by unrepentant white supremacists, is constructed as the truth by successful, conservative politicians and repeatedly reinforced by all kinds of cultural institutions, including ostensibly "liberal" media. (p. 52)

Unfortunately for people of color, many mainstream Americans do not believe that racism still exists. This fallacy enables acts of discrimination to continue, especially when little or no voice is given to the topic. So, I will use this platform to voice my encounters with race, gender, and class discrimination encountered in public school administration and in the academy.

Methodology

I write this experience narrative from the perspective of *life notes* in order to help "demystify[ing] African American feminist ways of knowing, in moments of reflection, relation, and resistance" (Dillard, 2003, p. 135). An experience narrative, similar to life notes, is "an account of an event--or of several related events--as described by a person who was involved in the described episodes, either as an active participant or an observer" (Thomas, 2003, p. 38). Sutter (2006) argued that a similar work by McNulty (2003) was a non-experimental research design referred to as the "life story research design," which "articulates the experiences and qualities within a type of life in a manner that is accurate, relevant, and compelling as determined by those who are familiar with it" (p. 320). However, the life notes approach differs slightly from the experience narrative and the life story research design because it enables the use of a more reflective approach of one's experiences. I employ it in this study to reveal an in-depth analysis of the common and contrasting elements of my two careers. By using the life notes approach, I am afforded the opportunity to expose the debilitating affects of sociocultural factors in an open and honest manner that includes a dialogue in the language that best expresses the pathos of these experiences.

The philosophical framework, "endarkened feminist epistemology" (Dillard, 2003), is used to elucidate how incidents and events with race, class, and gender translate into meaning for both of my professional careers and my life in general. An *endarkened* feminist epistemology is a term coined by the African-American feminist scholar, Cynthia Dillard (2003). She explains, "I have deliberately sought language that attempts to unmask traditionally held political and cultural constructions/constrictions, language that more accurately organizes, resists, and transforms oppressive descriptions of sociocultural phenomena and relationships" (p. 132).

In agreement with Dilliard (2003), as an African-American female I find it difficult to transform my

experiences of injured passion, conflict, and unresolved emotions into a formalized canon. Given the status quo of these malignant conditions that continue to be perpetuated against women and minorities in America (expressly in the predominantly White academy, and in male-dominated public school administration), my use of *endarkened* feminist epistemology better articulates my own lived experiences. Dilliard (2003) so eloquently states,

Therefore, in contrast to the common use of the term *enlightened* as a way of expressing new and important feminist insights (arising historically from the well-established canon of White feminist thought), I use the term *endarkened* feminist epistemology to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women. (p. 132)

In essence, only I can adequately pay homage to the unheard voices of my mother, grandmother, and self, as only I have inherited their struggles.

By using this structural framework, an interpretive analysis of these shared experiences can be generalized to other women of color who struggle to negotiate successful promotion (academy) and/or ascension (public school administration). An additional purpose of the study is to support the use of *endarkened* feminist epistemology as a viable method to express the importance of the intersection of personal connections and lived experiences as a theory of knowing. Importantly, sharing my experience from the perspective of life notes may help the reader to better understand how the common denominators of race, gender, and class that I experienced in both careers (public school administration and college professor) form a trimorphic nexus that determine my survival and success.

Early Offerings

I am an endangered species, but I sing no victim's song, I am woman, I am an artist; I know where my voice belongs; I know where my soul belongs.

There is an early knowing of one's place, voice, hopes, limitations, and aspirations. As reflected in the above quote, many women (especially those of color) grow up with a sense of personal responsibility for the improvement and uplifting of their oppressed races. Unlike their White female counterparts who argue that they "have no race - just American," African-American women of my time (pre- and early-post *Brown* era) carry the weight of racial responsibility in every pursuit that they encounter. Some of my most memorable life lessons were offered by elders who urged me to "insist on being heard." Their lessons were prefaced with statements about their experiences of forced silence and hushed regrets.

Although it takes courage to resist silence, the fear of being silenced is greater than the fear for the repercussions which result in "speaking out." There is an inherited legacy for the fear of being silenced and left voiceless. As early as 1892 Anna Julia Cooper, a human rights activist, stated,

One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman. The "other side" has not been represented by one who "lives there." And not many can sensibly realize and more accurately tell the weight and the fret of the "long dull pain" than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America. (Lemert & Bahn, 1998, p. 51)

Armed with the list of expectations and hopes of my elders, I attended undergraduate school at a predominantly White college--one that I swore I would never attend. It was my mother's heartbreaking alma mater, where she became one of the first-known African-Americans to graduate. As a small child I

remember the debasing articles in the local newspaper headlining, "Negress is intent on spoiling the halls of this great institution." But those words were not as harsh as the threats from the president of that university, or his confidential phone calls that begged her to "just take the diploma without the embarrassment of marching." In spite of the barrage of racial epithets and the debacle of endless slurs hurled at her, she remained steadfast in her response: "I'm not marching for you or your kind, but for my four Black children, the many others to come, and for my father who was never allowed to attend school."

Although she spoke those words in 1955 with the hopeful empowerment of the *Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case, her words still echoed in my mind as I received my diploma from this same institution 17 years later. Unfortunately, her early demise excluded her presence at this celebration. She would have rejoiced for the many minority graduates who may never know her name or the sacrifices that she made to integrate this institution. Her early death is another lesson that deserves to be heard at another time, as the sociocultural issues that African-American women face tend to manifest into physical and emotional ailments that often result in their premature deaths (Hudson & Stern, 2000). Nonetheless, my memories of the experiences we encountered at her attempts to participate in her college graduation formed lasting impressions on me about the power of education. Even as a four- or five-year-old, I wondered what could be so important that powerful Whites, living on the other side of town, would even know our names. Besides, since we had our own public schools, stores, and community businesses, we had so little contact with them. Still, I wondered in my own child's mind, "Why should they be concerned about one Black woman who wanted to get a degree and graduate?" After all, we were not crossing into their private neighborhoods where we knew that we [literally] needed to hold our breaths until we made our safe return to the "colored part of town."

These same feelings that I had while reading about my mother's *instigating attitude* at demanding to attend her own graduation resurfaced 30 years later when I received my first face-to-face mid-term evaluations from my university students. "Why," I asked, "didn't my credentials and life experiences merit the respect of these students?" Armed with 18 years of experience in urban public school classrooms and administration, a masters degree, and doctorate of philosophy in public school administration earned at another predominantly White institution, my mid-term evaluations were derogatory. Why I was surprised at my students' shocking critiques of my instruction, I do not know. Smith (1999) shares a similar experience from her students at a predominantly White university:

Given all of the other indicia of student hostility, students laid in waiting to tell me, and the institution, that I had done nothing to eliminate the presumption of incompetence in their minds. Their anger at my not being Mammy and being perceived as Sapphire controlled, as did their solidified authority, credential, and evaluative hostilities. (p. 183)

Many of my students had openly admitted that they had never been taught by an African-American. The majority of the students had also confessed that they had never attended high school classes with minority students. Yes, a few of my students admitted that they had *noticed* minorities in their high schools, but as they put it: "Those students were not in our high-academic classes or any of our organizations." Consequently, their experiences with minorities were limited to their perceptions formed by the traditional stereotypes that their families and communities held about people of color (e.g. poor, uneducated, troublesome, non-authoritarian figures).

My introduction to this class on teaching public school cultures included an overview of American public schooling. In my naiveté, I had no idea that their prior teacher education courses had not informed them about the influential dynamics that the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture held on American public schooling. This was the first unforgivable, uncorrectable mistake that I made during my first week with the class. Students actually turned their backs on me and talked during my instruction. One student literally grabbed handouts from me as I motioned them to return their papers by passing them down the

rows. Another brave soul thought he would be the class hero by challenging me on the WASP statement. He, with his lips curled tightly, spewed out--"I'm offended!" I had no earthly idea what he meant. I was still under the assumption that the university, which is located between two major urban centers, was honest in its attempts to adequately prepare future teachers for diverse and urban student populations.

Additionally, I assumed that this lesson, which was about educational commonplaces, would be a review from their previous teacher education classes and that the concept of the WASP's influence on public education was their charge for helping to de-racialize their future schools and classrooms. This student's comments provided an opening for several additional comments from the others. Some students peered at me with stone faces but made no comments. The follow-up that resulted from that group of hush-mouthed students was a confidential meeting they arranged with my department chair. Later, when my chair conferred with me, she honored the students' requests and did not divulge the students' names. I was more concerned about the mob mentality of this class and the exaggerations that the students shared with my chair than I was with knowing their names. As my chair gingerly debriefed the entire episode with me, rather than hear her assessment of their comments, my mind reflected back to another childhood memory.

For some reason, the event with the students in my class reminded me of an experience I had driving through Boomstown (real name not given) enroute to another city in Texas . There was absolutely no way to escape that racist city without driving through the main street of that town. Most African-Americans in Texas knew that the state troopers helped the city elders enforce their billboard which proudly announced: "Run N-----, Don't Let Sundown Catch You Here." Attached to this sign was a dummy replica a Black man clad in a pair of overalls and roped by its neck to the sign; the dummy's legs dangled in the wind. Unsurprisingly, since more than 5,000 African-Americans had been lynched across the nation prior to this period (Ginzburg, 1988), we knew that sign was not just a *friendly* warning.

Thankfully, my chair had met the whole incident (with the resistant students) in a calm and supportive manner. She offered to attend the next class session, but I rejected that offer on the basis of feeling that I needed to gain the students' confidence and respect. I had hoped that I could help them rise above their limited attitudes and beliefs. But the whole incident quickly snapped me into the reality of time, space, history, and the effects that the students' evaluations would have on my promotion and tenure opportunities. But part of my reality included the shocking reminder that I was no different from any other minority, particularly Black female faculty, in a predominantly White university. Nor were there any differences in time, space, or location of racist behavior. Simply put, *I'm an endangered species; I sing no victim's song. But I know where my voice and soul belong .*

All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go--Except Where My Voice Belongs

As any other human being would do, I sought to overcome feelings of rejection with a sense of belongingness. I needed the comfort and strength of something familiar. I knew that after this incident I would always fear being patronized by my co-worker and superiors. It did not matter that by the end of the semester I felt that most of my students had understood and learned to appreciate my methods in delivering the course objectives. The only thing that mattered at that time was the shocking reality of my life: with 18 years of successful public school experience, a doctorate in educational administration, awards from international and national contributions, I still needed to prove my competence. As Brunner, Simms, and Peyton-Clair (2000) concur, "You get tired as a person of color - qualified and competent - especially as a woman of color, having to engage daily in the mental and emotional battle of legitimizing yourself to others" (p. 541).

I wondered how successful I might have been if I did not have the constant challenge of "legitimizing" myself. My earning a Ph.D. degree in Educational Administration with an emphasis on urban school superintendency from one of the nation's top superintendent preparation universities had only resulted in

three occasions where I was a finalist for a superintendency. The old clichés "not a fit," "over-qualified for our little district." and "you really wouldn't be comfortable here" became familiar reminders that neither my past success as an administrator nor my degrees could break through the barriers of race and gender. Nonetheless, this incident with those students taught me to constantly provide my students with lots of nurturing articles, books, studies, and interactive activities. I actually learned to lovingly correct their stereotypical comments about race and socioeconomic status of others. My decision to do this was later confirmed when I read Liston & Salim (2002) who argue that

When examining race in the university classroom we need two types of pedagogy: we need a pedagogy of discomfort and a pedagogy of attentive love. A pedagogy of discomfort engages students and teachers in an examination of their assumptions, beliefs, locations in a racist society. When we practice a pedagogy of discomfort, pain and anguish surface. A pedagogy of attentive love recognizes this pain and attempts to connect students with the classroom material. Attentive love focuses on seeing students and ourselves (as teachers) more clearly. Both approaches are needed. It is not an easy story to tell but we think the telling is important. (p. 239-240).

Certainly, telling the story is as much a healing process for teachers who either choose to entertain class discussions on topics that delve on oppressive content or teachers whose course curricula include oppressive research. Simply put, teaching from the perspective of critical theory is a challenge for any teacher, but it is a double challenge for minorities. One reason for this is because when such courses are taught by any *non-traditional* professor (meaning female and/or minority), the threat of student resistance increases to greater levels (TuSmith, 2002). So, only their final evaluations will judge the success of my efforts.

Still, I had the human need to feel accepted and appreciated. So, when I received an out-of-state call from the school district that I had previously declined, I verbally accepted their offer to design a special school for their students. It took several weeks for me to finally accept their offer because I resented the thought of running from the hurt. Thankfully, my dean had agreed to make this public school project a special research leave so that I could return to the university at the end of one semester. Besides, I loved the opportunity the university provided for me to write and research. I had come to the university convinced that I would make a better contribution by helping to influence future teachers and administrators. I really thought that my many years of urban classroom teaching and supervision would make a difference. But as I drove through this beautiful, quaint college town, attempting to make a decision, I was distracted by the Confederate flag flying from a passing truck. I drove past a company that employs many of the city's residents. There, on the meticulously manicured lawn, stood the company's logo—a design that included the Confederate flag. The psychic, symbolic nature of that flag reminded me that very little had changed in my or my mother's time. Just as she was all dressed up (for graduation) with no place to go, so was I. I sped home to call the superintendent's office. When I heard the familiar voice I said, "I'll accept your offer." I knew within my heart that this district had more challenges than I wanted to face at this point in my life. But, I thought, "At least I'll have a voice (a platform to address the possibilities for change), and I know where my voice belongs."

A Glimpse into the Familiar Past

I Sing No Victim's Song

Two days after my verbal acceptance, the district had arranged for my travel and site visitation. I was picked up by an associate superintendent who informed me that the district was hosting a community forum on the *Brown versus Board 50 th Anniversary* commemoration. We went directly to the forum from the airport. While enroute, she reviewed my schedule of events which included an 8:00 a.m. assembly with my future student body. All 650 students would be bused to the high school where they would be temporarily housed the next year. Next on my schedule would be a tour of the high school and a meeting with the principal, an

associate superintendent, and later the superintendent. The following day included an early morning meeting with teachers who would become my staff for the special project. But the assembly with the prospective students would be first.

The assembly with the students went considerably well. Of the 650 students, approximately 70% were Black and Hispanic. The first group of students entered the auditorium in an unruly manner. One student attempted to climb over his seat to the next row. I stopped him in his tracks. Although their teachers (about 90% White) escorted them, many of the teachers seemed hesitant to correct the students. This setting reminded me of the many White females in my teacher training class. Some of whom were participants in criticizing me for my discussions about the cultural mismatches between their White, middle-class, Protestant values and the lived realities of urban minority youths. Although the aspiring teachers in that class resented my truthful instructions, I stood before their Black and White counterparts who had little control over their urban students. The more the teachers ignored their behavior, the rowdier the students appeared. Finally, after stopping a boy from climbing over the seat, the principal and assistant superintendent decided that this was "unacceptable behavior" and dismissed the students to return in an orderly fashion. Needless to say, both assemblies went well after that incident. These students, no different than any adolescents, only wanted the adults to act as though they were in charge, and to require them to do what they were taught to do--cooperate.

I noticed that the principal watched every move I made during the first assembly. He also listened intently to every word that I spoke as I shared the expectations and plans for the program with the students. So it was no surprise that he repeated a part of my speech while speaking with the second group. Then, he introduced me to speak, forcing me to quickly rethink another speech to give. He literally gave mine already. I recovered from that shock quickly enough to rehash his statements with comments such as, "Yes, as Mr. X said, etc." This act of my *invisibility* (on his part) was a familiar experience for me. As I reflected over the incident, I decided that it did not matter that he (the principal) was Black. His *power-over* attitude, which had been accorded to him by the traditional role of male-administrator, served as his cushion of comfort. Here, the term *power-over* has been adopted from the work of Brunner and Shumaker (1998) who state,

In the "power over" conception, power is a property of individuals or groups, and such people have power if they have positions atop hierarchically structured communities and organizations if they achieve control over their policies and programs. To attain such control, people draw upon various power resources at their disposal, issue unilateral commands, and often employ coercion to attain obedience from subordinates. (p. 32)

Recognizing his use of this tactic, I rethought my speech and presented a different angle, adding newer thoughts and ideas. I knew that I could not allow myself to become victimized by his attempts to silence me. I also knew that without my backup plan, his traditional (mannish) competitive nature threatened my visibility.

Gender and Race Invisibility

If you can't see me, maybe you can hear my voice

What a refresher! I had barely set my foot in the door and was already reminded of the gender and race *invisibility* struggles in public school administration. Franklin (1999) uses Ralph Ellison's (1952) classic novel, *Invisible Man*, to elaborate on the physical and psychological affects that African-American men and women experience when encountering invisibility. Franklin defines invisibility as "an inner struggle with the feeling that one's talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognized because of prejudice and racism" (p. 761). Women, as do other minorities, often experience a measure of invisibility as a result of gender bias. The issue of invisibility is exacerbated by race and gender for African-American

women, and has been particularly noted in public school administration (Blount, 1998; Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1987). Although it had only been a year since my last position as a school administrator, the experiences were quickly coming back.

I reflected over an incident that I had experienced a couple of years prior to my coming to the university. I was sitting at a conference table with my former superintendent, two male principals, and two female associate superintendents. I was the only African-American in the room. I had just successfully designed that district's newest magnet school and had a waiting list of over 150 students seeking to enroll. In addition to the many newspaper articles detailing the program's success, my program had been featured on a public television network. But, as I sat at the conference table, the superintendent asked the man sitting next to me questions that should have been directed to me. After two or three of his misdirected questions I finally said to him, "Sir, are you speaking to him or to me? You appear to be asking him questions about my program, and he doesn't know the answers." I half smiled and interjected, "I don't suppose that I'm invisible, now."

The superintendent resented my speaking up, but since I had already observed how the two other females sat and literally hung their heads at this insult, I knew that I could not depend on them to validate my presence or my comment. Why would they? Either they felt themselves exempt by race, or they chose to appear androgynous for the sake of job security. But, because I had ignored him the first time that he had overlooked my presence at the table, I was determined that if he repeated this act of ignoring me again, I would bring it to his attention immediately. As an African-American female administrator, I felt that if they pretended not to see me, I would make them hear me. And I had the success of the program as my personal empowerment. I learned then that one must know where her voice belongs, especially in such *power-over* environments as the educational community. Reflections of my past public school administrative experiences made me realize that the challenges and oppositions found in higher education may be a bit more hopeful.

Strong enough for a Man; Made for a Woman

Power to.

I snapped from that reflection to return to the setting of the school visit. I looked forward to meeting and speaking with the teachers, and I had spent several hours the previous evening refining my presentation. My investigation of the existing school included student scheduling reports, recommended course offerings, aligning staff qualifications with student needs, and compiling this information with the prospective students' general accountability data. I arrived at the school ahead of the first student bus. I was immediately called to attend a meeting with one of the associate superintendents. As it turned out, she did not approve of my presenting to the staff. She was angry that she had been left out of the process by another associate. I knew nothing about this. I had spoken several times to the other associate and the superintendent of that district, but had no idea that there was opposition energy among the staff. It did not matter that 650 minority students were looking forward to this project. Nor did it matter that a group of teachers were motivated and excited by my original proposal and ready to work. The bottom line was the usual job-protecting gimmicks and political conflicts that often stand in the way of student achievement. Unfortunately, many high-poverty, minority schools in urban centers are often linked to unique political conflicts that present systemic impediments. Although political conflicts among minority public school administrators is seldom talked about, Henig, Hula, and Pedescleaux (1999) concur that

African-American educators in Black-led cities share perceptual, ideological, and communal bonds with elected officials, parents, and other important community actors, including the Black churches that play a pivotal role in shaping the political life in many inner-city areas. These bonds help to account for the fact that community mobilization around school issues often takes the shape of protecting jobs and their incumbents instead of demanding higher levels of performance and structural change. (p. 27)

Indeed, this district missed what I believed to have been an opportunity for a higher level of performance, and an opportunity for potential structural change. Nonetheless, with the defensive, derogatory response that I received from this administrator, I immediately knew that this was not the place for me.

I returned to the university with a strong sense of determination, and was grateful that my dean had arranged for my work with that district to serve as research and field experience. After that brief encounter with the public school offer, I realized that it would be difficult for me to ever return to a career as an education administrator. At least I would try to remain in higher education until I could make a significant impact on future educators from the university's teacher and administrator training programs. One of the biggest challenges to this decision was learning to accustom myself to the incongruence between research, daily realities, and conflicting cultural communications.

Conclusion

In spite of oppositions and challenges that I have met in higher education, I am determined to be as successful in this profession as I was in public school administration. And since there is very little difference in the way in which both careers enact racism, classism, and gender, I accept this challenge to forge new territories. I refuse to become weakened by student resistance and the self-defacing experience brought on by rejected publications, especially articles that expose social justice and emancipatory issues. These experiences are familiar characteristics of gate-keeping, preserving the honor of the so-called canon, and sophisticated Jim Crow policy enforcement. Yet, my experiences are no more unique than those of other educators of color, especially those who struggle to maintain their existence at predominately White institutions.

I have shared the affects that race, gender, and class have had on my dual careers. By no means does this imply that racism is equivalent to gender or class issues; there is simply no comparison. In her poem, *For my People*, Walker (1992) referred to racism as "the unseen creature that towers over us omnisciently" (p. 20). Racism is an ever-present shadow that effects generations of families, while leaving its victims constantly functioning in a reactionary mode. Worse, racism creates internal hostility, nervousness, and defensive behavior. But racism is not personal, it *is* America's problem. Racism has been institutionalized in the educational system; of this, I am sure. My lived experiences in K-12 education and higher education career affirm this.

Each racist experience heightens my respect for my elders' efforts to remain hopeful. Their determination to forgive the wrongs of racism is a lesson in love that should be modeled by us all. My experiences also give me a deeper sense of empathy for our children. If my experiences with K-12 schools and higher education have been difficult for me to bear, how stressful this must be for the youth. No wonder many of them underachieve and drop-out of schools. This thought forever reminds me that my main responsibility is to "speak out" (resist silencing), "be seen" (resist invisibility), and "teach the truth" (regardless of political tactics: e.g. derogatory evaluations, tenure/promotion politics, and other gimmicks that control scholarship).

From the "Sistah Anthem of Solidarity" specifically inspired by Alice Walker's book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, sung by Dianne Reeves, lyrics by Jeanne Pisano

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