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WEAVING BETWEEN THE LIVES: LIFE STORIES OF  
SEVEN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE  
TEACHERS IN DETROIT, 1865-1997

presented by

LINDA GAYLE RODGERS WILLIAMS

has been accepted towards fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy

degree in

Education

*Susan Florio-Ruane*  
Major Professor's Signature

May 2, 2006

Date

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WEAVING BETWEEN THE LIVES:  
LIFE STORIES OF SEVEN AFRICAN AMERICAN  
FEMALE TEACHERS IN DETROIT, 1865-1997

By

Linda Gayle Rodgers Williams

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Teacher Education

2006



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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WEAVING BETWEEN THE LIVES: LIFE STORIES OF SEVEN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE TEACHERS IN DETROIT, 1865-1997**

**By**

**Linda Gayle Rodgers Williams**

**This study is an examination of the narratives of seven African American female teachers who had extensive careers in the Detroit Public Schools over a 130 year period. Using the historical tools of biography and oral history, and the comparative method of case development, seven life history narratives were collected and analyzed and are presented as linked cases. African American female teachers are the focus of this research, and their stories are told from their point of view, augmented by a sociocultural framework that locates each narrative in the particular social, cultural, economic and technological reality of its time. This research alternates in scope between the external and personal experiences of Detroit's female African American teachers. On the external level, data and analysis reveals the cultural, economic, and historical settings within which seven African American women chose to become and remain teachers. Concurrently, this study offers a more internal analysis of the personal resources that the informants drew on or created in order to become and remain teachers. Each participant in this research revisited and delineated her own educational and learning processes, as well as the influence of family and community institutions such as churches and social clubs on their decision to teach and remain teachers or**

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administrators in a major urban school district. Of particular importance is the stream of time that flows through this study. Detroit's African American female teachers are viewed in this research as a collaborative community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that exists over time, and that has both recursive and transformative effects on the women who enter its ranks.

Narrative analysis, literary analysis, sociohistorical theory, and Black feminist thought were employed to pinpoint salient themes that arose across the narratives, as the women featured in this study negotiated the boundaries of race, gender, and class in their careers with the Detroit Public Schools. These themes included aspects of respectability, class distinctions, community activism and resistance, and family and social support.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on African American teachers and sheds light on what influenced African American women to become and remain teachers. In so doing, this study foregrounds the voice of the African female teacher in the political, social, cultural, and economic milieu of a large, urban school district.

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LINDA GAYLE RODGERS WILLIAMS  
2006

This work is dedicated to my parents,  
Gladys Mary Andrews Rodgers (1921-1999)  
and Jonathan Rodgers (1916-2003);  
and to my grandmother,  
Ethelyn Josephine Thompson Andrews (1888-1976).

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincerest appreciation is extended to my dissertation committee chair, Susan Florio-Ruane, for her confidence in my work, consistent encouragement, and critical feedback. I also want to thank all of my other committee members: Steve Weiland, Lynn Paine, Joseph Featherstone, and Patricia Edwards for not only their critical responses and suggestions for crafting this work, but also for their enthusiasm and support.

Appreciation is extended also to the faculty and staff of the Detroit Waldorf School, and especially to the 2006 Eighth Grade Graduating Class members and their parents. Our time together has made my life incredibly rich.

I am further indebted to my sisters and their families, Patricia Rodgers and Carol Rodgers Hill, whose continual loving encouragement made this possible.

I also express my deep gratitude to Candyce Sweda, whose patient reading of drafts, critical commentary, and care and support made it possible to continue my work.

Finally, I thank all of the teachers who participated in this study and who so graciously shared their life stories with me.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

‘We know about our teachers,’ snapped the voice at the other end of the line. ‘There is no story there.’ The administrator continued in an increasingly agitated tone: ‘We know how the population of Blacks increased and that resulted in having more Black teachers. What we need is research about these kids. Research about how to teach them in this ‘anything goes’ atmosphere – where a kid can cuss a teacher out and be back in school the next day. That’s where we need research.’

Detroit Public Schools Administrator, 2005

The above comment was part of a conversation I had with an official at the Detroit Public Schools in response to my application for access to the archives of the school system. Besides dismissing my request and in fact, my research project, the representative asserted a very basic explanation about why and how African American women became public school teachers in Detroit. The story assumes that the entry of Black<sup>1</sup> women into public school teaching in Detroit was just a function of demographics – as more African Americans moved into the city, more Black women became teachers. Furthermore, the admittedly beleaguered administrator thought that not only was there no story about African American women teachers in Detroit, she also thought that other research problems were more pressing – research that focused on the students in the system.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms, “African American” and “Black” are used interchangeably in this study.

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### **Background of this Research: The Primacy of Story**

The administrator offered an explanation, a story, and this is significant because this dissertation is itself, a story about stories. My intent is to closely examine the first 100 years of the sociohistorical relationship between the Detroit Public Schools and its African American teachers, as seen through the narratives of seven women who spent several decades as Detroit teachers. This project, then, is a weaving, a tapestry of stories with many threads composing and accenting its design. Narratives are the focus of this research, for it is through narrative that individuals and groups make meaning and sense of their lives (Bruner, 1991; Casey, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). Historical accounts of Detroit and the Detroit Public Schools are the stories used to form the structural warp threads of this tapestry, creating a context for the women's stories. The women's narratives shape the weft threads, the threads that fill the frame and make manifest the tapestry.

My intent is not to create another metanarrative, a story or explanation that holds a position of dominance and is legitimized by its institutionalization (Klein, 1995). Instead, I see this research as dialogic: the larger, academic narratives of progress and resolution converse with the smaller, "petit" narratives of the African American women who brought their stories to this research.

Stories are not individual creations, but cultural products borne out of the interaction of narrators and the cultural milieu within which they live. Stories circulate and fructify – they influence each other, their reporters, and the

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audiences for whom they are intended. Some stories, even simple explanations, take on the qualities of local knowledge available through individuals and the “organized body of considered thought” that Geertz refers to as “common sense” (1983/2000, p. 75) or that Bruner (1996) might refer to as “folk knowledge,” intuitive theories about why the world is the way it is.

Because this research is intimately involved with storymaking and the primacy of narrative, the administrator’s response is seen as a narrative event or episode that reflects the local or common sense knowledge of the narrator. As such, it helps to frame the questions that inform this study.

The administrator began with the assertion, “We know about our teachers; there is no story there.” But what do we exactly know about the African American female teachers who taught in the Detroit Public Schools? Furthermore, how do we know what we know?

There is a very small body of research specifically on Black teachers in Detroit. Jones’ (1970) study features interviews with several African American teachers who taught in a specific school in Detroit through the late 1950s. Reid (1996) highlighted Detroit’s earliest African American female teachers in a study that compared Black female teachers in three Midwestern cities, including Detroit. There have also been studies that documented the evolution of an African American urban teaching force in other cities, such as Franklin’s (1979) study on Philadelphia; Homel’s (1984) treatise on the Chicago Public Schools;



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and smaller studies such as McGruder-Chase's (1992) report on Buffalo, New York and Hughes' (1998) look at 19<sup>th</sup> century history of Albany.

Among life history accounts, Michele Foster's (1997) collection of interviews of Black teachers from across the country, and Casey's (1993) study utilizing life history accounts of African American activist teachers stand as the definitive texts of African American teachers describing their teaching experiences and circumstances. More recent scholarship on African American teachers documents specific instructional practices (see, for instance, Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Ladson-Bilings, 1994). Another recent strand of research examines all-Black school communities with a special focus on their African American teachers (Randolph, 2004; Walker, 1996). There are also some significant historical studies on the development of urban school systems that include some general comments of the African American women and men who taught in them (Anyon, 1997; Cremin, 1988; Cuban, 1993; Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

In addition to the above research on teachers, there has been an relatively recent surge of historical research focused on Detroit (see, for example, Arnett, 2003; Boyle, 2004; Darden, Hill, Thomas, & Thomas, 1987; Farley, Danziger, & Holzer, 2000; Katzman, 1973; Sugrue, 1996; Thomas, 1992; Thompson, 2001; Wolcott, 2001). Mirel's (1999) history of the Detroit Public School system remains the authoritative volume for understanding the economic, social and political milieu that surrounded the school system from 1907 to 1981.

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Little of the above research, however, deals directly with individual teachers who undertook their careers in the Detroit Public Schools. Furthermore, reading through the historical accounts of Detroit and its public schools, I did not get a sense of the individual teachers whose careers took place in this particular system. Hence, this research takes the concept of *place* and reviews the life histories of African American female teachers within a sociohistorical context that includes Detroit, a defined location, as its locus. This study then takes a slightly different approach from both general descriptions of the lives of urban teachers and the studies placing teachers and their lives in a fully a priori analysis of the question. Both approaches resort to extant models in defining their data, research questions, and analysis. In each case, the teacher is the most difficult to see. Her sense making is the least accessible information. My intention is to bring individual voices into the sociohistorical text, and thus, “read between the lines” to understand how human agency and identity was forged within the crucible of teaching in the Detroit Public Schools.

In response to the administrator, while academic research is certainly not the only source of knowledge, there is something to be said about the absence of Black women’s voices from the historical and social histories about Detroit and the Detroit Public Schools. Contrary to the administrator’s beliefs, I contend not only is there a story, but that there are multiple, tellable stories, located in a particular place across time, and that these stories must be told by African American women teachers themselves.

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The administrator also felt that the explanation of why African American chose to teach or why they were chosen to teach is merely a reflection of their increasing presence in the city. Of course there is some truth to that supposition. In order to have a pool of candidates, the population must be there. Yet this piece of perceived knowledge simplifies a situation that is actually shown to be much more complex in the historical and political literature. Suffice it to say that an increase in the population of African Americans in urban centers throughout the Midwest did not automatically result in an increase of Black teachers (Dougherty, 2004; Tyack, 1974). By invoking this simplistic story, the administrator reified a metanarrative, a vague, general explanation of the experiences of women whose voices are often left out of the historical record.

Like metaphors, metanarratives are simplifications that are shared and enduring in part because they make it possible to shorthand complex ideas. They assume agreement or at least acceptance on the part of their listeners and they also assume a universal understanding. McVee (1999) found that the less we know about a topic, the more likely we are to use the metanarrative and conversely, the metanarrative depends on and perhaps is premised on the idea of speaking about others and then thinking, therefore, that they are known.

### **The Study's Purpose**

The purpose of this study, then, is to recover the stories of African American women who became teachers in Detroit. Through an analysis of the

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narratives of seven teachers who taught in Detroit from 1865 through 1996, I seek to reveal the stories of how these women negotiated boundaries of gender, race, and class in order to realize their goals of becoming teachers and administrators in the Detroit Public Schools.

In keeping with historian Darlene Clark Hine's (1994) call for "researchers to deeply penetrate the internal world of African American women," the intent of this study is to also understand the personal and social resources that African American women drew on or created in order to become and remain teachers or administrators in the Detroit Public schools. Where possible, participants in this study were asked to revisit and delineate their own educational and learning processes, as well as detail the influences of family and community institutions on their decision to teach and their construction of teacher identity. Hine (1994) instructs, "... the Black woman's voice and experience [should be] researched and interpreted with the same intensity and seriousness accorded that of men." Using oral histories, autobiographies, biographies, court records, church histories, club minutes, scrapbooks, photographs, diaries, and histories of institutions, Hine calls on researchers to "properly 'squeeze and tease' these sources to light up that inner world so long shrouded behind a veil of neglect, silence and stereotype." (pp. 106-107) It is precisely this veil of neglect, silence and stereotype that this research seeks to lift.



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This information is important for two reasons. First, there has been a serious decline in the number of Black males and females choosing to be teachers and this research may help to further gain insight into that issue. Secondly, as stated above, the absence of African American female voices from the sociohistorical record is of some concern. What those voices can contribute may be of assistance with both the retention of Black teachers, and with helping present-day African American teachers increase their success with students.

### **The Shortage of Black Teachers**

Over the past three decades, the research literature has noted a national decrease in the numbers of African American teachers (Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Irvine & Hill, 1990; S. H. King, 1993; Nettles & Perna, 1997; Pasch, Krakow, Johnson, Slocum, & Stapleton, 1990; Perkins, 1989; Tillman, 2003; Toppo, 2004; Wilder, 1999). African American participation in the national teaching pool declined from 12 percent in 1970 to 6.9 percent by 1986 (King, 1993). Although there has been a slight increase in the number of African American educators over the past 20 years, current figures show that only about 7.5 percent of all public school teachers are African American (while nearly 16.5 percent of U.S. students are Black (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Nettles and Perna (1997) warn that nearly half of the nation's schools lack minority teachers and that many African American students (as well as other students) will complete their elementary education without ever having been taught by a single African American teacher.

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Various factors have contributed to the decline in the percentage of African American teachers, including school desegregation, alternative opportunities available in other occupations (especially business and the military), and the impact of teacher competency examinations (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005; Hudson, 1994; King, 1993; and Perkins, 1989). King (1993) further warns that not only are there few African Americans and other individuals of color pursuing a career in teaching, she also states that African Americans, particularly those who teach in urban schools, tend to be among the first to leave the profession. We have best a conjectured literature about why these teachers leave. But as is the case in most studies of teacher behavior, we do not know about their leaving from the teachers themselves. What is more, we focus on a marginalized group in ways that further marginalize its members (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Leaving and staying are social as well as individual moments of choice. Therefore it is important to learn from the teachers not only why they may have left, but why they stayed. This research can contribute to those questions as the women interviewed had urban teaching careers that spanned decades. Their experiences may assist teacher educators and districts to find ways to retain a Black teaching force.

### **Giving Voice**

Besides providing information for recruiting and retaining Black teachers, this study serves the first purpose by bringing teachers into the study of

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their own professional lives – historically, ideologically, politically. Because the research seeks to give voice to a group that has been historically marginalized in educational history and thought, it amplifies our understanding of a teacher’s decision to enter, stay or leave teaching, and challenges the easy explanation or metanarratives that tell, but do not describe in helpful ways. And, concomitantly, we find that it is often the experience of being spoken about and being spoken for (Delpit, 1996) that isolates and marginalizes teachers.

The teachers in this study had longevity in their careers. They also had chosen multiple platforms from which to teach others about their profession. This project allows us to move beyond speculation about the endurance, combined with a healthy sense of identity, that may have empowered teachers and therefore encouraged them to stay.

### **Research Questions**

This project proceeds from two major standpoints. As a critical theorist, I sift through the accounts wearing both sociocultural and sociohistorical lenses, seeking the influence of culture and context on the development of the Black teachers highlighted in this study (see, for example, Cole, 1996). As a narrative researcher, I unpack stories, looking to see who is telling the story, who benefits from the story, and what type of story is being told (see, for example, Casey, 1995; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Since a

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from the story, and what type of story is being told (see, for example, Casey, 1995; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Since a story is both a speech event and a presentation of self, both standpoints inform each other. The narrative standpoint helps me to remember that each individual is composing a life story and the very act of composition, of making stories, is an act of not only self-revelation, but also of self-identification and self-development. My critical standpoint keeps me awake to which stories are being told and how the author is choosing to represent herself. It also alerts me to which stories are silenced -- in my company and for the record -- in the course of the speech event I have asked each informant to join with me (Bauman, 1986).

These combined perspectives lead me to the general questions that guided this research:

1. Under what social, economic, and historical circumstances did seven individual Black women enter teaching in Detroit?
2. What strategies, resources, and capacities did the African American female informants use to negotiate the boundaries of race, gender, and class in their careers as teachers and administrators in Detroit and how did these change over time?
3. What do teacher narratives tell us about how African American women construct professional and personal identities within an urban school system over time?



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Of particular importance is the stream of time that flows through this study. Detroit's African American female teachers are viewed in this study as a collaborative community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that exists over time, and that has both recursive and transformative effects on the women who enter it. As such, data analysis will attend to both the similar and dissimilar experiences of the subjects over the decades they participated as teachers and administrators in the Detroit Public Schools.

### **How this Study was Conducted**

This study is influenced by theory and method from three fields: history, ethnography, and literary analysis. It uses the historical tools of biography and oral history, and the comparative method of case development to collect, study, and represent as linked cases the narratives either told to me by my subjects, or written by me from artifacts of the teaching lives of non-living subjects (e.g., Fannie Richards, Gladys Roscoe). As such, my study focuses on the narratives of seven African American female teachers who cumulatively taught in Detroit, Michigan, between 1865 and 1997. The oldest woman in the study for whom I have primary data was born in 1894; the two youngest women interviewed were born nearly forty years later, in the mid-1930s. All but two of the subjects in this study were migrants to Detroit, coming from Southern or Midwestern towns or cities.

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Data was collected for this project through life story interviews and archival research. Life history interviews were conducted with five of the retired teachers who appear in this study. Archival research revealed a published biographical account about the first African American teacher (in which she was one of the contributing authors), and a taped interview with the second oldest subject in the study, which was made nearly fifteen years before her death in 1994. Data was also collected from public records obtained about the Detroit Board of Education, as well as other historical and social documentation that helped to contextualize the participants' subjective experiences within the general history of Detroit and its public schools.

Data from interviews and archival research were transcribed, re-listened to, and re-read. The stories were analyzed for content and through methods of narrative analysis described more fully in Chapter Two. Salient themes arose across sections of the stories, as well as issues that embraced all of the narrative texts. Data and was constantly compared, coded and re-coded.

As this study is based on narrative accounts of individual informants, no universal claims will be made about the data. Rather, a more emic description is sought that accounts for the personal and cultural resources the informants used to become and remain teachers and administrators in the Detroit Public Schools.

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## **Overview of Dissertation**

Chapter Two frames the questions and focus of the research in terms of related research and the two major theoretical orientations helpful in the conception and design of the study: Cultural historical theory and Black feminist thought. It also describes the process of data collection and analysis. While methods and procedures are highlighted in terms of the aforementioned theoretical perspectives, narrative is further explicated as a key construct that helped gather, review, analyze, and report the study's data.

Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six are blurred genre that combine the narrative vignette with the expository text of a research report to do three things:

- 1) Organize the data to both illustrate and provide evidence for my analyses of the life stories' key themes (agency, class, etc.);
- 2) Preserve in the vignette form the words and texts of the women who shared their stories or those stories I constructed out of secondary source material – especially regarding the path to teaching and the sustainability of careers in the Detroit Public Schools.
- 3) Show the historical scope of the periods during which the teachers served, highlighting differences, patterns, and moments of transformation as well as accounts of themselves.

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In Chapter Seven, interpretation, analysis and discussion of the data is focused on themes that arose in the data which include issues of race, class, and gender as discussed in the metaphors and narrative forms the women used.

Chapter Eight is a concluding summary that ties together several key issues regarding narrative study, what the narratives tell us about becoming teachers, and implications for future research.



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## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL, METHODOLOGICAL, AND ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES

*We need to uncover and (re)write our own multistoried history,  
and talk to one another as we are doing so.*

*--Gloria T. Hull*

#### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Professor and researcher Gloria Hull captures the intent of this interpretive research, which is to explicate the narratives of seven African American women who became teachers and administrators in the public schools of Detroit over a seven decade period. As a result, this work is located at the confluence of several ongoing “conversations” in contemporary qualitative research. Over the last twenty years, research paradigms have begun to “blur” (Geertz, 1983/2000) and theoretical perspectives inform one another rather than compete with each other (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). This is especially true in this analysis. The theoretical frameworks discussed below are used in this study as lenses, not prescriptions. I am interested to see how these perspectives might help to interpret the women’s experiences. The women’s stories remain primary in this research, and it is not my aim to prove, disprove, construct, or deconstruct a theoretical framework. In fact, it is important in this study that the women’s voices are not masked or pushed by the theoretical constructs. Rather, theory is used here to illuminate the women’s experiences and to guide my analysis of the data.

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## **Cultural Historical Theory**

Cultural historical theory provides an overarching backdrop within which to examine life stories. In addition, critical theory, including feminist and Black feminist thought, center the women's voices within this cultural historical framework. I picture these two perspectives in dialogue throughout this research project as I seek for ways to make visible the cultural historical contexts within which individuals (in this case, African American women) construct, try-on, assume, and transform teacher identities.

The starting point for examining cultural historical theory is Vygotsky (Cole, 1996; John-Steiner, 1999). Vygotsky was among the first to recognize that learning or intelligence arises first outside of the human being through interpersonal relationships in the social environment. The second site of activity occurs in the inward "sounding," in the internalization of the interaction. Vygotsky's theory was in contrast to previous theories that saw all human learning as external and all development as internal (Palinscar, 1998).

Wells (2000) helps to explain more about how human beings learn in social contexts according to Vygotsky's theory.

Human beings are not limited to their biological inheritance, as other species are, but are born into an environment that is shaped by the activities of previous generations. In this environment, they are surrounded by artifacts that carry the past into the present (Cole, 1996), and by doing so, mastering the use of these artifacts and the practices in which they are employed, they are able to assimilate the experiences of humankind (Leont'ev, 1981, p. 55).

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In other words, human beings bring both their biological inheritance and their cultural inheritance (in the form of cultural artifacts and practices) to every experience. This interaction forms the basis for human development and growth.

Extending this view into activity, societies are composed of over-lapping “activity systems,” with associated communities of practices (Wells, 2004). These spheres have a continuity that supercedes the longevity of the individuals who interact in them; but it takes the actions of individuals to maintain and sustain these systems. As Wells (2004) points out, these “activity systems” are continually recruiting and apprenticing new members.

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work on situated learning theorizes how human beings apprentice into learning communities or activity systems. A person’s identity, values and skills are shaped by their participation in activity systems that can be seen to arrange themselves in widening concentric circles involving family, school, work, etc. Wells (2004) notes:

From this perspective, who a person becomes depends critically on which activity systems he or she participates in and on the support and assistance he or she receives from other members of the relevant communities in appropriating the specific values, knowledge and skills that are enacted in participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The interplay of the individual and culture would be seen only as productive and reproductive, however, were it not for the consideration of the agency of the individual. An individual is theoretically unlimited in terms of possible responses or actions within any activity system. The potential for

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transformation (rather than reproduction) depends on the unique, novel, creative and improvised responses of the individual participants, which of course impact the slow, but perceptible change in cultural historical conditions. Theorists have pointed out, however, that agency, too, is socially constructed. Bourdieu (2000) employed the concept of *habitus* to denote intentional action that is socially constructed:

The notion of habitus restores to the agent a generating, unifying, constructing, classifying power, while recalling that this capacity to construct social reality, itself socially constructed, is not that of a transcendental subject, but of a socialized body, investing in its practice socially constructed organizing principles that are acquired in the course of a situated and dated social experience (p. 136-137)

Ratner (2000) agrees as he sees that agency must adapt to and promulgate social patterns in order to sustain common, stable, predictable social life. In his opinion,

Qualitative social change is possible, however, only if individuals are socially oriented to cooperate in mass movements to transform the social organization of activities and associated cultural concepts (p. 414).

Emirbayer & Mische (1998), however, open up the possibility that individual agency, although socially constructed, still has the potential of transforming environments.

. . . agency is the temporarily constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (p. 970).



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Cultural historical theory, therefore, is an important tool for looking at the women's narratives in this study. The Black women in this study participated in communities of practice shaped by local and not-so-local historical contexts, and I hope to make visible their learnings and their agency as they pursued and developed careers within the Detroit Public Schools. What became clear in the interviews were the various activity systems that formed concentric communities around each informant, and also how each chose to enter or not enter those learning communities. Furthermore, the span of time covered in this study also locates the slower changes in sociohistorical and cultural historical conditions that, in turn, had an effect upon the women as they entered the Detroit Public Schools at different points. Finally, collective and individual agency was apparent in the life histories of the informants as they approached boundaries related to gender, race, and class.

### **Bridging Cultural Historical Theory and Feminist Theory**

John-Steiner (1999) found that creating a dialogue between cultural historical theory and feminist theory was possible and that the effort was long overdue. She argues that feminist and cultural-historical theory share the notion "that humans come into being and into maturity in relationship to others. Through interdependence we achieve competence as well as connection." (p. 2) She notes that the study of human activity "is a contentious field, deeply divided between those searching for universal features of the mind, and

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those who see human activity grounded in historical and cultural experience” (p. 1). While “analytical primacy” is given to individuals as agents, Wertsch (1998, in John-Steiner, 1999), cultural historical and feminist theories locate agency within contexts and in the interdependence of individuals. This tension does not preclude agency, but differently stresses the contexts in which it is possible and the idea that not even the apparent “lone ranger” acts in isolation. John-Steiner then goes on to show further connections between cultural historical theory and feminism, including an emphasis on how social and individual practices affect how a person participates in activity systems; positionality among multiple relationships, practices, and responsibilities; the relation between voice and dialogue; identification, and resistance (John-Steiner, 1999). These themes are carried further in the following discussion about a specific strand of feminist theory and how it influences this study.

### **Critical Social Theory**

Although cultural historical theory is the major backdrop to this study, Black feminist thought provides more tools with which to consider the women’s experiences in this study. While incorporating the multiple voices and local emphasis of constructivist perspectives, as well as the contextual focus of sociocultural paradigms, Black feminist thought also centers African American women in the production and construction of knowledge.

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To arrive at Black feminist thought, however, it is necessary to give a nod to critical social theory, from which Black feminist thought is derived.

Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) interpret critical social theory as being

concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system. As an epistemological map, it does not determine how we see the world but helps us devise questions and strategies for exploring it (p. 281).

Critical social theory thus provides an appropriate background for thinking about the narratives of the seven women in this study. Applying a critical lens will assist in asking questions about the various strategies these African American women employed amid the competing power structures in order to become teachers and administrators in the Detroit Public Schools.

The fact, however, that all of the informants are female and African American, raises important questions about how to theoretically approach their experiences. Critical feminist theory addresses the mutually reinforcing tenets of capitalism and patriarchy, and acknowledges the role racism plays in contributing to hegemonic structures such as schooling (Weiler, 1988). Another related perspective, critical race theory (CRT), as described by Ladson-Billings (2000) centers racism in the discussion:

CRT begins with the notion that racism is 'normal, not aberrant, in American society' (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv), and because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of the U.S. social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this society. (p. 264)

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Indeed, Black feminist thought and critical race theory, offer specific emancipatory perspectives on Black women's experiences. Both share a commitment to social justice, social action, and an understanding of the interaction of race and racism with other forms of subordination. Both seek to challenge dominant ideologies through a transdisciplinary perspective and the privileging of experiential knowledge (Collins, 2000; Delgado Bernal, 1997; Ladson-Bilings, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

### **Black Feminist Thought**

What distinguishes Black feminist thought from critical feminism and critical race theory, however, is the centering of Black women's voices in the development of an epistemology of knowledge, the production of knowledge and the purposeful action which takes place in gendered, racialized and class-conscious spaces. Collins (1989) speaks to why a Black feminist discourse is necessary:

African American women have been neither passive victims of nor willing accomplices to their own domination. As a result, emerging work in Black women's studies contends that Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression. Two interlocking components characterize this standpoint. First, Black women's political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups. The unpaid and paid work that Black women perform, the types of communities in which they live, and the kinds of relationships they have with others suggest that African American women, as a group, experience a different world than those who are not Black and female. Second, these experiences stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality (p. 746).



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Using the lens of Black feminist critical social theory to focus on the experiences of the women in this study is not a separatist act, nor is it intended to indicate self-absorption or valorization of Black women. Rather, it speaks to the importance of self-definition. Collins (2000) explains, "Far from being a narcissistic or trivial concern, this placement of self at the center of analysis is critical for understanding a host of other relationships" (p. 112). Understanding these relationships is what contributes to self-definition and Collins concludes, "When Black women's survival is at stake, creating independent self-definitions becomes essential to that survival" (p. 112). Richardson (2003) concurs when she reminds us that Black females must struggle for self-determination and self-definition against the negative and distorted cultural images that surround them.

Using Black feminist thought, however, as a lens through which to view the data brings two other considerations to the fore. One is the risk of overgeneralizing the data and missing within-group variations. Thus, it is important in this study to use multiple informants who enter the Detroit Public Schools at different times and to listen and record their stories carefully and critically. The other consideration is the possibility of essentializing the data to such a degree that its applicability to other groups of teachers is limited. There is a body of interdisciplinary research that has begun to do comparative case analysis within and across migrant and immigrant workers and teachers (see,

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for instance, Florio-Ruane & Williams, 2004; Foner, 2000; Friedman-Kasaba, 1996; Perlmann, 1988). As will be shown in the following discussion, Black feminist thought is located very much in the praxis, in the activity of knowledge production and social action as exhibited in the aforementioned research. As such, it helps to build alliances between Black women and other groups. It also provides a way for other marginalized groups of women to think about the contexts and responses which constitute their daily lives.

Collins (2000) describes six basic attributes of Black feminist thought that help to both align it with critical theory, and also distinguish it from other critical social theories. These six attributes are: 1) the dialectical relation between multiple jeopardies and Black women's responses that creates both individual and collective wisdom; 2) diverse responses to common challenges; 3) the dialogical relationship between action and thought; 4) the role and contributions of Black female intellectuals; 5) the acknowledgement that Black feminist thought is dynamic and changing, and 6) its relationship to international endeavors for social justice. Each of these attributes helps to build a multifaceted theory that accounts for the ways African American women make sense of their lives and resist hegemonic social structures. An explanation of each aspect follows.

**Multiple jeopardies and Black women's responses.** The intersectionality of oppressions is part of the interpretive framework that informs critical theory, generally, and more specifically, Black women's critical social theory.

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The notion of “multiple jeopardies” was first theorized by King (1988) in a groundbreaking article that contextualized Black feminist ideology. Beal (1970) had originally used the term, “double jeopardy” to describe the “dual discriminations of racism and sexism that subjugate Black women” (D. K. King, 1988, p. 46). King goes further to show that “the triple jeopardy of racism, sexism, and classism is now widely accepted and used as the conceptualization of Black women’s status” (p. 46). King, however, asserts that the concept of “multiple jeopardy” is much more adequate, because it takes into account how race, gender and class are interdependent aspects of a Black woman’s identity; one factor cannot be emphasized at the expense of how all the factors interact with each other. “The modifier, ‘multiple’ refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions, but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well,” (p. 47). While King notes how simultaneous oppressions can be analyzed and categorized, it is the complex relationships of these oppressions that has the most currency for accurately describing Black women’s lives.

In the interactive model, the relative significance of race, sex, or class in determining the conditions of Black women’s lives is neither fixed nor absolute but, rather, is dependent on the sociohistorical context and the social phenomenon under consideration (p. 47).

King goes on to offer a critique of monistic liberation perspectives, perspectives where only one oppressive condition is emphasized. Focused on racial solidarity and liberation, feminism, or class liberation through trade unionism and

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anti-capitalistic politics, these movements have often ignored the struggles of Black women. Noting the limitations of any monist perspective, she concludes:

Given the inability of any single agenda to address the intricate complex of racism, sexism, and classism in Black women's lives, Black women must develop a political ideology capable of interpreting and resisting that multiple jeopardy (p. 69).

Collins (2000) further describes the dialectical relationship between intersecting oppressions and Black women's activism. "As long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed" (p. 22). The result, Collins asserts, is the creation of both individual and collective wisdom, ways of knowing and ways of resisting the negative impact of a hegemonic culture.

**Diverse responses to common challenges.** Given, that African American women "as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female," a distinct consciousness can arise "concerning our own experiences and society overall" (Collins, 2000, p. 23). This consciousness arises both individually and as a collective, group-based, standpoint. Collective knowledge coalesces around four core themes including 1) the legacies of struggle against violence, especially sexual violence; 2) intersecting oppressions; 3) the replacing of derogatory images with self-defined images; and 4) the belief in Black women's activism as mothers, teachers, and community leaders (Collins, 2000, p. 27). This collective knowledge, however, does not imply that



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a homogenous Black woman's standpoint exists. Individual women respond to experiences differently, based on their own experiences and the social and cultural environment within which they live. Collins shows that a Black women's group standpoint "eschews essentialism in favor of democracy" as it both "recognizes and aims to incorporate heterogeneity in crafting Black women's oppositional knowledge." (p. 28)

**The dialogical relationship between action and thought.** Collins (2000) found that "U. S. Black women's collective historical experiences with oppression may stimulate a self-defined Black women's standpoint that in turn can foster Black women's activism" (p. 30). This relationship, between collective experiences and group knowledge, is defined as a dialogic relationship; action informs theory and theory informs action.

This relationship is especially salient as Black feminist thought seeks, through *rearticulation* to give African American women "a different view of ourselves and our worlds" (Collins, 2000, p. 32). Omi and Winant (1994) define rearticulation as

a practice of discursive reorganization or reinterpretation of ideological themes and interests already present in the subjects' consciousness, such that these elements obtain new meanings or coherence. This practice is ordinarily the work of 'intellectuals.' Those whose role is to interpret the social world for given subjects – religious leaders, entertainers, school-teachers, etc. – may on this account be 'intellectuals' (p. 195).

Collins (2000) adds that the process of rearticulation is crucial to stimulating a new consciousness.

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Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African American women and stimulate resistance (p. 32).

The process of rearticulation is the province of Black female intellectuals, women who come from varying educational backgrounds, social classes, and ages, as Omi and Winant alluded to above. Their role is critical to the development of Black feminist thought.

**The role and contributions of Black female intellectuals.** Collins acknowledges that just because Black feminist thought exists, “does not mean that African American women, academic or otherwise, appreciate its content, see its significance, or recognize its potential as a catalyst for social change” (p. 33). It is essential for Black women intellectuals from “all walks of life” to continue to ask questions and work with other African American women to investigate “all dimensions of a Black woman’s standpoint.” Collins sees Black women intellectuals as central to Black feminist thought for four reasons. First, there is the “unique angle of vision concerning Black womanhood” available to African American women. Ladson-Billings (2000) traces this “angle of vision” back to Du Bois’ (1903/1989) notion of double consciousness:

One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 45)

Ladson-Billings (2000) sees this concept

not as a pathetic state of marginalization and exclusion, but rather as a transcendent position allowing one to see and understand positions of inclusion and exclusion—margins and mainstreams. (p. 260)

This sense of “double consciousness,” (which is applicable to all those “constructed outside of the dominant mainstream” (p. 260)) allows one to obtain a special vision and obtain “critical insights into the condition of our oppression” (Collins, 2000, p. 35).

Knowledge construction, then, takes place on two levels. “Taken-for-granted” knowledge is the common-place knowledge “shared by African American women growing from our everyday thoughts and actions” (Collins, 2000, p. 34). This concept is similar to Geertz’ “local knowledge.”

A more specialized type of knowledge, feminist scholarship, has historically been produced by those who have had greater access to resources such as literacy and education. Collins describes the taken-for-granted and more specialized scholarship knowledge as interdependent, and points out that there is a long tradition of such scholarship being joined with activism. For example, the Black women’s club movement at the turn of the last century could be considered a site for the production of specialized knowledge, as well as activism. The Black Housewives League that operated in Detroit in the 1920s and 1930s (Wolcott, 2001) was a site of both taken-for-granted and more specialized knowledge and is another example of the interdependency of both kinds of knowledge.

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A second contribution of Black female intellectuals is their investment in the struggle and the community for which they work. "Black women intellectuals both inside and outside the academy are less likely to walk away from Black women's struggles when the obstacles seem overwhelming or when the rewards for staying diminish" (Collins, 2000, p. 35). Remembering that intellectuals come from all walks of life, Collins writes, "For most Black women, engaging in Black feminist research and scholarship is not a passing fad – these issues affect both contemporary daily life and intergenerational realities" (p. 36). As a Black feminist researcher and educator, I am interested in the structural, cultural, and historical forces that encourage (and discourage) African American women from becoming teachers. I am personally invested in this issue because not only does it affect the community in which I live, it ultimately affects our education system, and the public at large. This matter is related to larger issues of equity and justice and deserves to be investigated.

The third role of Black female intellectuals is to "push the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one's own agenda is essential to empowerment" (Collins, 2000, p. 36). This aspect is affirmed by King (1988), who says it even more forthrightly as she contends that Black women are *self*-determined and as such, are empowered with the right to interpret their own reality, define their own objectives, and continually establish and reestablish their priorities.

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Collins (2000) describes the fourth contribution of Black female intellectuals as crucial. She writes, "Black women intellectuals are central in the production of Black feminist thought because we alone can foster the group autonomy that fosters effective coalitions with other groups" (p. 36). Collins reminds us that Black women intellectuals are a "highly diverse group," and that the type of "intellectual leadership envisioned here requires collaboration among diverse Black women to think through what would constitute Black women's autonomy" (p. 36). Coalitions must be built with other groups seeking social justice and points of connection can be bridged. Otherwise, Black feminist thought leads to separatist, instead of autonomous, communities. Black women's social critical theory cannot become isolated from other critical theories that seek reclamation and self-determination. Here, too, the practice must become dialogic in order to "create possibilities for new versions of truth" (Collins, 2000, p. 38). This call for collective action is in step with Ratner's (2000) view as to how socially constructed agents can affect change on the larger historical stage.

**Black feminist thought is dynamic and changing.** The fifth distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is that it is responsive and dynamic within the changing sociohistorical contexts within which its adherents participate. Different times call for different responses and as social conditions change, new analyses of such change must be made, as well as new active responses. This

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point is especially visible in the present study, as the informants described their responses to conditions and challenges bounded by time.

**The relationship of Black feminist thought to international endeavors for social justice.** Black feminist thought embodies the struggles of African American women, and as it does so, it partakes in worldwide struggles for social justice. This viewpoint of Black feminist thought is essentially humanist (Collins, 2000, p. 42) and is a part of critical social theory. As such, it is part of an international coalition of individual struggles seeking self-determination and freedom. The universality of struggle is a powerfully uniting force, and Black feminist thought seeks to inspire its adherents to participate as fully as possible in the struggle for its own and others' autonomy.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

Black feminist thought, critical feminism, and critical race theory, like all critical theories, interrogate social systems, including the social systems in which research is conducted. They challenge orthodox perspectives and knowledge production by assuming certain positions with regard to the role of the researcher, the aim of research, and the products of research.

Black women's critical social theory assumes an activist role on the part of the researcher; the role of the researcher is to resist oppression and empower Black women to work toward social justice (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2000). This activist role of the researcher is further reflected in epistemological challenges

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that are part of the interpretive framework of Black women's social critical theory. Dillard (2000), for instance, describes an "endarkened feminist epistemology" that disrupts the mythology of the "detached" researcher and includes a more "African-centered cultural researcher."

This *necessitates* a different relationship between me, as the researcher, and the researched, between my knowing and the production of knowledge. . . . a more useful metaphor . . . is *research as a responsibility*, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry (Dillard, 2000, p. 663) (emphasis in the original).

This stance of responsibility includes standing with subjects instead of outside of their experiences. The researcher's voice blends with the "researched" and the project becomes one of co-construction and inclusion, of dialogue and conversation.

By including the voice of the researcher in the research, Collins (2000) acknowledges that she "runs the risk of being discredited as being too subjective and hence less scholarly" (p. 19). Nevertheless, she sees the greater vision in her work by identifying her position as a participant in and observer of Black women's communities:

But by being an advocate for my material, I validate epistemological tenets that I claim are fundamental for Black feminist thought, namely, to equip people to resist oppression and to inspire them to do it (p. 19).

Tillman (2002) notes the researcher's co-constructive role in her argument for culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans.

. . . interpretive paradigms offer greater possibilities for the use of alternative frameworks, co-construction of multiple realities and experiences,

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and knowledge that can lead to improved educational opportunities for African Americans. (p. 5)

One purpose of this research is to empower through uncovering, remembering. "Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting," states bell hooks (1990, p. 185) By actively and critically engaging in an exploration of the lives of Black female teachers, I hope to contribute to the knowledge of how African American female teachers resisted the hegemonic structures that operated through racism, sexism and class prejudice, and established their own professional identities.

#### **When Some Identity Markers are Shared**

Ladson-Billings (2000) determined that the identity of the researcher has a definite impact on the research undertaken:

I assert that along with the gender of the knower, the race, ethnicity, language, class, sexuality, and other forms of difference work to inform his or her relationship to knowledge and its production. (p. 266)

Shared characteristics, however, do not guarantee an emic knowledge of a particular group or community (Foster, 1996; Ladson-Bilings, 2000). More exactly, both Foster (1996) and Ladson-Billings (2000) allude to the fact that boundaries of group membership are, in and of themselves, necessarily fluid because they are social constructions developed in response to social, cultural and historical conditions. While Foster found her Black femaleness an asset in many of her interviews with Black teachers across the country, she also acknowledged that other characteristics got in the way:

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Thus, I was both insider and outsider, a Northerner when I interviewed Southerners, an urban resident when I interviewed rural residents, a younger person when I interviewed the older teachers, a woman when I interviewed men. Often I was positioned as an outsider in several dimensions at the same time. These characteristics shaped the interview in some immediately obvious and not so obvious ways (p. 219).

Foster's experience is reflected in my own. My identity as an African American female teacher contributes to the multiple realities and voices heard in this study. Bounded by my own socially constructed identities, my perspectives are shaped by my personal experiences as a student of African American female teachers, a daughter and niece of African American teachers, and by my own professional life as a teacher. Perhaps because I was close in age to my interviewees' daughters, the women often took on the stances of elders, couching their experiences in stories that were meant to be instructive and enlightening. Our interviews were more like informal conversations and sometimes I relied on memories of stories I had heard from my mother, aunts and grandmother about growing up in Detroit to prompt further vignettes from the respondents. At other times, I spoke about the experiences of family members or community members who would have been familiar the informants. The role as co-constructor of knowledge is contained in my own identity markers, including age and family connections.

### **The Role of Theory in this Research**

Not many of the women I interviewed would necessarily call themselves Black feminists. Collins (1993) notes, "To look for Black feminism by searching for U.S. Black women who self-identify as 'Black feminists' misses the complexity of how Black feminist practice actually operates (p. 31). Yet, I would contend that Black feminist practices are certainly apparent amongst my informants as they realized their goals of becoming teachers and administrators in the Detroit Public Schools.

A Black feminist perspective helps to contextualize the decisions the women made concerning their educational careers. Gordon (1990) emphasizes the necessity of an African American epistemology for educational theory and practice. She observed that the discourse of an African American perspective is marginalized in the dominant educational literature. The available research, she writes,

emphasized problems or pathology – cultural deprivation, adjustments, pluralism, interpersonal relationships, and tensions – associated with Black people. Focusing primarily on problems distracts and detracts from the cultural knowledge, theories, paradigms, and so on of the group under study (p. 89).

Gordon further notes that despite the "enormous body of literature written by African American scholars . . . the academy gives little credence or visibility to this work in preservice and inservice discussions" (p. 90).

In response, Gordon calls for an African educational theory informed with African American epistemology which she defines as:

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the study or theory of the knowledge generated out of the African American existential condition, that is, of the knowledge and cultural artifacts produced by African Americans based on African American cultural, social, economic, historical, and political experience.

In other words, as a Black critical feminist thinker, Gordon centers African Americans in the production of knowledge about and for African Americans. She traces this framework historically, and shows how “cultural and intellectual communities emerged that encouraged social theorizing and the production of culture and cultural artifacts, including literature, music, religion, and art” (p. 91).

The African-American women interviewed for this study were also part of cultural and intellectual communities and understanding their experiences is crucial to understanding their development as teachers and administrators in the Detroit Public Schools. “Reclaiming one’s culture (cultural history and knowledge) is an essential aspect of an authentic being,” states Gordon and she issues a further call to scholars:

The intellectual and cultural communities must set the stage for the debates to follow, unearthing and studying the cultural artifacts and historic traditions that have become obscure. They must analyze this cultural knowledge and situate it in the struggle against domination and the struggle for authentic being (pp. 98-99).

By “unearthing and studying the cultural artifacts and historic traditions” that are evident in the lives of the women included in this research, it will become apparent what personal, cultural, and social resources enabled these women to proceed as they did. Black women’s critical social theory and cultural historical

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theory provide the standpoints from which observations can be made and enables us to co-construct representations that are recognizable, coherent, and credible.

Therefore, I employ cultural historical theory to give a backdrop to the shaping of these women's lives, and Black feminist thought to help understand how the informants interpreted their lives, their times, their choices, and thus framed the decisions that allowed them to survive and thrive as teachers and administrators in the Detroit Public Schools. Simultaneously, this approach may divulge a very different narrative about the eighth player in this story, the City of Detroit, and how it functioned to assist the women in their development as teachers.

### **Methodological Perspectives: Collecting Life Histories**

This research is a study of the lives of seven African American women who became teachers and administrators in the Detroit Public Schools. In keeping with cultural historical theory and Black women's critical social theory, research methods were employed that foreground African American women's experiences and voices within the context of a particular place (Detroit) and a particular site (the public schools.)

Life history or narrative research has a long and varied history within the social sciences, and particularly within the field of education (Carter, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). Carter (1993) acknowledges that "story

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has become, . . . more than simply a rhetorical device for expressing sentiments about teachers or candidates for the teaching profession. It is now, rather, a central focus for conducting research in the field.” (p. 5)

The Personal Narratives Group (1989) recognized that women’s narratives were an enticing portal through which to explore the dynamics between an individual and society and the construction of gender:

Traditional explorations of social dynamics have tended to emphasize either the constraints of social structure or the power of individual agency. Only recently have social theorists begun to undermine this polarity. Our reading of women’s personal narratives suggests the need to understand the dynamic interaction between the two. While social constructions of gender impinge on the individual, they are themselves shaped by human agency. A paraphrase of the often-cited phrase from Marx may illuminate this claim: Women make their own lives (and life histories), but they do so under conditions not of their own choosing. (p. 5)

Including the constructs of race and class in this analysis broadens its critical focus and makes the above statement much more relevant to the present study.

Narrative research is similar to case studies, oral histories, and ethnographic accounts. The approach undertaken in narrative research, however, is distinguished by what Reissman (1993) calls:

. . . an interpretive thrust, or ‘how protagonists interpret things’ (Bruner, 1990, p. 51, cited by Reissman), and we can go about systematically interpreting their interpretations. Because the approach gives prominence to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity.” (p. 5)

Narrative research is in keeping with the theoretical orientation of this project. Through life stories, the voices of the women in this study remain



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central and the co-creation of knowledge is a constant feature of this type of work.

### **Data Collection**

The nature of this project required that I collect data from several sources. Primary data is the collection of in-depth interviews with seven women. The interviews took place between January, 2004 and October, 2005. In order to be considered for this study, potential interviewees had to be retired from the Detroit Public School and had spent at least 15 years in the classroom or as an administrator. I tried to locate women who had begun teaching in each decade from 1920, on. My method for finding interviewees would best be termed the “snowball” method, where one interviewee would refer me to another, and so on. Two women I interviewed began teaching in the 1930s, one in the 1940s, two in the 1950s, one in the 1960s, and one in the 1970s. I used five of these interviews in this present study. Data from the youngest women interviewed so far will be used in another study that looks at women who entered the Detroit Public Schools after 1960. Appendix A is a timeline that shows the length of the career of each of the seven women featured in this study.

Interviews all took place in the informants’ homes over a four to five hour period, sometimes in two sessions, sometimes in one. I created a Data Collection form (Appendix B) to organize chronological information and filled

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this out during each interview. I also used a loosely structured Interview Protocol (Appendix C) to get the conversation started. I found, however, that it was much more advantageous to let the informant direct the flow of conversation and name the incidences and experiences that were important to her. Each interview was taped and I took corresponding notes. After each interview, I entered field notes into my record. I also transcribed the interviews as soon as possible so that I could work with the texts. Listening to the tapes more than once was helpful for recalling how each women spoke and what she emphasized.

In addition to the taped interviews, I also came across a set of untranscribed tapes in the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library. These tapes documented an interview with Gladys Roscoe, an African American woman who taught in Detroit Public Schools from 1914 through 1964. The tapes were made by an archivist at the library, and to my knowledge, had never been transcribed. I was allowed to transcribe these tapes on the library premises, but I was not allowed to copy them. The tapes revealed much about Mrs. Roscoe's career in the Detroit Public Schools, as well as reflections about Detroit and its history. Since these tapes were a public record, no permission was necessary to use them. I have attempted, however, to contact her daughter who might be able to help corroborate and clarify certain portions of the tape. My attempts, so far, have been unsuccessful.

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Another text discovered was a self-published autobiography of Millicent Wills, a Detroit teacher who taught from 1944-1972 (Wills, 1977). Miss Wills was an immigrant to Detroit from British Guyana and actually published another book in addition to the autobiography, a documentation of her travels around the world (Wills, 1973). The autobiography includes a review of her life as a teacher in the Detroit Public Schools and how her immigrant status impacted her employment. While I do not include Miss Wills story in the overall presentation of the data, her experience helped me to broaden my perspectives and interpretations of the women depicted in the study.

The final person I included in this study is Fannie Richards, Detroit's first African American teacher. Information on her included a semi-autobiographical article published in 1916; newspaper clippings commemorating her retirement and death; various short articles from the Detroit Public Library archives, and the research notes of a local historian. Miss Richards' story was included because, in many ways, it foreshadowed the future careers of teachers who came after her, and it made possible a glimpse of Detroit before the impact of great industrial and population expansion.

Data from the interviews was triangulated with other archival data including newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, yearbooks, and Detroit Public School publications that were available in local research libraries. U.S. Census reports, funeral programs, club minutes, programs from various events, and directories were also consulted. In addition, historical data was obtained from several

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published sources. Histories of the Detroit Public Schools and Wayne State University (Hanawalt, 1968; Mirel, 1999; Moehlman, 1925/1974) were used to create the historical surroundings in which the women's lives were situated, as well as other historical and sociological texts documenting Detroit's turbulent years of the last century.

### **Analysis of the Data**

This study is not only an exploration into the lives of Black female teachers in Detroit, it is also an exploration into Black women's use of narratives. The Black women who participated in this research told stories, relied on rhetorical strategies and tropes, and demonstrated how these stories sustained self-affirmation, self-determination and helped to established professional and cultural identities. In the following chapters, their stories are often reported as they were transcribed in order to capture the narrative experience. In addition, the stories were interwoven with historical and cultural sources which served to contextualized and in some cases, helped interpret the women's experience.

### **Narrative Analysis**

Interpretation of life histories can follow many different paths. When beginning to work with personal narratives, The Personal Narratives Group (1989) soon realized that its academically diverse group of members spoke in two distinct languages: One group, the social scientists, emphasized social



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structure and human agency, while those schooled in the humanities tended to focus on “textual interpretation and narrative structure” (p. 10). Indeed, narrative analysis has come to encompass a wide range of approaches used in fields as distinct as law, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, medicine, education, and many others.

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) developed a model for the classification and organization of types of narrative analysis, using examples from their own research. They created a matrix that accounted for the two main independent dimensions that emerged: “those of a (a) holistic versus categorical approaches and (b) content versus form” (p. 12). The first dimension, holistic versus categorical, refers to the actual “unit of analysis, whether an utterance or section abstracted from a complete text or the narratives as a whole” (p. 12). The authors illustrate how researchers work within this dimension:

In working from a categorical perspective, as in traditional content analysis, the original story is dissected, and sections or single words belong to a defined category are collected from the entire story or from several texts belonging to a number of narrators. In contrast, in the holistic approach, the life story of a person is taken as a whole, and sections of the text are interpreted in the context of other parts of the narrative. The categorical approach may be adopted when the researcher is primarily interested in a problem or a phenomenon shared by a group of people, while the holistic approach is preferred when the person as a whole, that is, his or her development to the current position, is what the study aims to explore (p. 12).

The second dimension, the distinction between the content and the form of a story, “refers to the traditional dichotomy made in literary reading of texts”

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(p. 12). At one end of the spectrum, readings focus on the explicit content of the account – the who, what, where, when, why, and how – as seen from the position of the storyteller. Sometimes analysis of the story or parts of the story, digs for more implicit meanings through examination of what certain sections convey, or what a certain image used by the narrator symbolizes” (p. 13). At the other end of the spectrum, the authors continue,

some readings ignore the content of the life story and refer to its form: the structure of the plot, the sequencing of events, its relation to the time axis, its complexity and coherence, the feeling evoked by the story, the style of the narrative, the choice of metaphors or words (passive versus active voices, for example), and so forth (p. 13).

A researcher may choose to focus on the form of the life story

because it seems to manifest deeper layers of the narrator’s identity. In other words, as the formal aspects of a story are harder to influence or manipulate than its contents, form analysis may be advantageous for some purposes (p. 13).

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber discuss the four modes possible for reading a narrative: holistic-content, holistic-form, categorical-content, and categorical-form, based on the intersection of the content-form and holistic-categorical continua. I created Figure 1 (on the following page) in order to visualize the aforementioned dimensions on an intersecting matrix.

Figure

<b>CATEGORICAL</b> defined categories are constructed and parts of	

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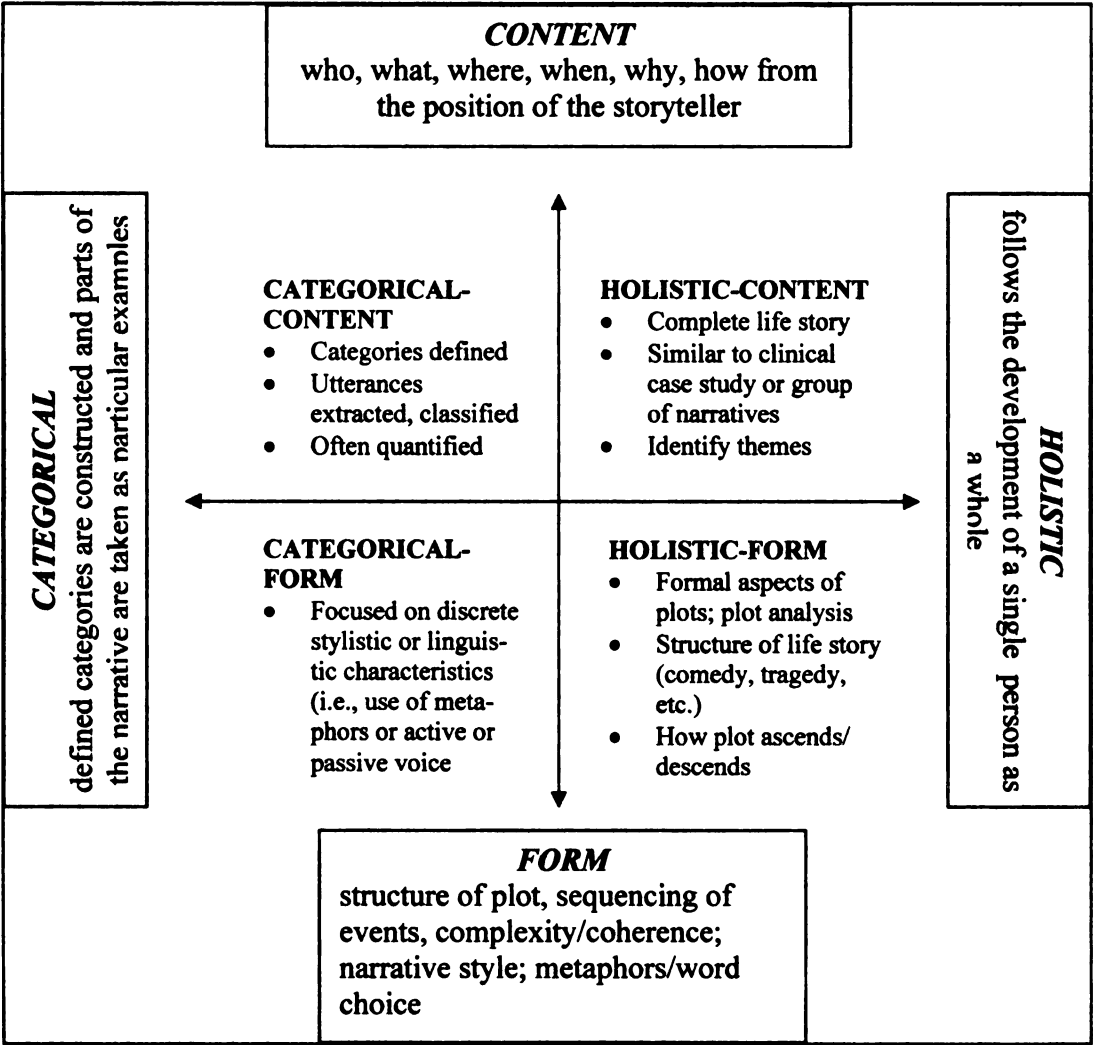
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**Figure 1. Dimensions of Narrative Analysis**



Adapted from: Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998

The holistic-content mode of analysis relies on a complete life story of an individual “and focuses on the content presented by it” (p. 13). This is the mode traditionally used in clinical case studies. Lieblich’s (1993) study of a Russian immigrant to Israel is given as an example of this holistic-content type of reading and analysis. There, Lieblich focused on a single theme – change – as manifested in her subjects adjustment to life in a new land. The holistic-

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content mode of reading and analysis is not limited, however, to single case study. The authors also cite Bateson's (1989) text, Composing a Life. In this literary work combining "stories, conversations, and impressions," Bateson tells the stories of five women, including herself, who have careers in the creative arts.

The holistic-form reading of a narrative focuses on the formal aspects, the plots or structures of a complete life story. In this type of analysis, the researcher looks for what type of story is being told (a comedy or a tragedy) and whether or not the form of the story ascends or descends, or follows some other form. The authors quote Gergen and Gergen (1988) who assert, "every story, whether oral or written, can be formally characterized by the progression of its plot, which can be discerned by 'plot analysis.'

The categorical-content approach is more familiar as "content analysis."

The authors explain:

Categories of the studied topic are defined, and separate utterances of the text are extracted, classified, and gathered into these categories/groups. . . . Categories may be very narrow, for example, all sections in which narrators mentioned a certain political event that occurred in their lifetimes, or broader, when all sections referring to political events are withdrawn from the texts for analysis (p.13).

The research in this type of approach is often quantified. The authors cite Feldman, Bruner and Kalmar's (1993) study where the investigators presented stories to subjects from three different age groups and asked interpretive responses. The frequency of certain words was counted and compared across



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age groups. Another study cited by the authors (Schulman, Castellon, & Seligman, 1989) used a broader category or unit, namely, “‘event-explanation units,’ in which narrators provide attributions to various events in their lives” (p. 17). The units were then analyzed according to three scales one of the authors developed.

The categorical-form end of the spectrum focuses on “discrete stylistic or linguistic characteristics of defined units of the narrative” (p. 13). Researchers may focus, for instance, on what kind of metaphors are used by the narrator, or how frequently she uses active or passive utterances. “Defined instances of this nature are collected from a text or from several texts and counted, as in the categorical-content mode of reading” (p. 14). Among several examples, the authors cite Linde’s (1993) study where she analyzed 13 interviews on choice of profession, focusing on the different ways the storytellers created coherence in their stories. “In this part of her work, Linde focused on the morphological and discourse levels of the texts rather than the stories in their entirety, and on the form rather than on the contents” (p. 18).

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) acknowledge that the model “has created dichotomizations that should now be softened or retracted” (p. 169). They accomplish this by noting,

Preferably, the reader should conceive of the model as consisting of two continua. At the ends of each one are rare but very clear examples of an either-or nature, while most proposed reading methods would consist of more balanced mixtures (p. 169).

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Accordingly, analysis is approached from two standpoints in this study. As in many previous studies utilizing teacher narratives (Casey, 1993; Foster, 1997; Gitlin & Myers, 1993; Goodson & Cole, 1993), interview data was culled for relevant narrative content. This content was compared, contrasted, and triangulated with various data from other sources in order to develop a larger narrative about the women's experience as employees of the Detroit Public Schools. This is in keeping with Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's (1998) holistic-content mode of reading narrative. I held concepts of race, gender, and class, as well as agency in the back of my mind as I reviewed the data. However, other themes arose in the data, and became the themes I followed more closely and are reported throughout the narratives and in Chapter VII. Polkinghorne (1995) refers to this way of working with narrative as "narrative analysis," where researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize or configure them by means of a plot into a story or stories. That is what I have attempted to do as I wove the life stories into the historical record.

The interview texts were also reviewed according to the constructs of narrative analysis advocated by Reissman (1993) and Dougherty (1999). This approach is similar to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's (1988) "holistic-form" and concentrates on the forms of narrative the women used in telling their stories. Polkinghorne (1995) relates this way of looking at narratives as "analysis of narratives," where researchers collect stories as data and analyze them with paradigmatic processes. The paradigmatic analysis results in

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“descriptions of themes that hold across the stories or in taxonomies of types of stories, characters, or settings.

By attending to both the content and the form (and to some extent, the functions) of narrative, it is the intent of this study to provide as broad an analysis as possible of the seven subjects of this study and their careers with the Detroit Public Schools. Using this approach, I found that expected and unexpected themes arose within and across the narratives and I now turn to the women’s stories to see how this occurred.

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## CHAPTER III

### THE BEGINNINGS: MAINTAINING RESPECTABILITY

*Nearly every woman thus educated dedicated herself to the work of teaching. To these women the colored race is almost wholly indebted for the general intelligence that was found among the colored people of the North and that enabled them to be leaders in the early days of freedom. The colored women who laid the foundation of Negro intelligence in the Northern states form an interesting group. Among those deserving of more than a mere mention are Mrs. Fannie Jackson Coppin, . . . Mrs. Mary A. Shadd, . . . Mrs. Charlotte F. Grimke, . . . and Miss Fannie Richards of Detroit, Michigan.*

*—Fannie Barrier Williams, 1912*

In these next four chapters, I bring selections from the narratives of the seven informants by interweaving their stories with Detroit history and the history of the Detroit Public Schools. My intention is to provide both an emic and etic view of the teachers' lives by shifting the lens between the background historical view and the foregrounded lives of the teachers. Through the life stories of Fannie Richards and Gladys Roscoe, this present chapter is a close examination of the first 75 years of the historical relationship between the Detroit Public Schools and the African American female teachers who taught within its schools.

#### **Birth of the Relationship:**

#### **Fannie Richards and the Detroit Public Schools**

In the spring of 1865, Miss Fannie Richards, an elegant and poised African American woman with butternut colored skin, walked into the offices of



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Williams D. Wilkins, a businessman and member of the Detroit Board of Education. Armed with a certificate of completion from the Toronto Normal School and with experience teaching in her own private school for colored children, Miss Richards inquired about possible teaching positions available. She had recently learned that the new Colored School No. 2 was slated to open in the fall and she hoped to be the school's teacher. Miss Richards was taken to see Superintendent Duane Doty who allowed Miss Richards to file an application and sit for the upcoming teacher examinations. Miss Richards placed first among all the other examinees and was offered a position as teacher at Colored School No. 2, making her the first African American teacher employed by the Detroit Public Schools (Hartgrove, 1916).

The birthing story is always a critical incident in any narrative and is so in this account of the Detroit Public Schools and its African American teachers. The story, in some ways, is anticlimactic. Even though Miss Richards was "armed" with credentials, and supposedly ready to "do battle" to acquire a position, she evidently was received without rancor. Her high score on the teacher's examination confirmed her qualifications and her entrance into the ranks of public school teaching in Detroit proceeded relatively unfettered.

Miss Richards' smooth entrance into the Detroit Public Schools was based, however, on at least three factors: 1) there was little mainstream public concern about the education of children of color, so Miss Richards' placement more than likely went unnoticed; 2) her family's place in the social hierarchy of

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the city; 3) the fact that she was the sister of John D. Richards, a major politician known in both Black and White circles.

When Miss Richards applied to teach in the public schools of Detroit, she was 23 years old, the youngest member of the esteemed Richards family. Like many northern cities around the time of the Civil War, Detroit had a small, but visible African American population. Fannie Richards belonged to the upper echelon of the Black community; her family was considered to be among the “Cultured Colored 40,” a name that the press bestowed upon the several African American families of means within the city. Many of these families had migrated from long-standing free Black settlements in the South, located mainly in Virginia. As laws in the South became more restrictive for even free Black families during the early 1850s, these families had sought more politically hospitable climates and moved North. Along with the Richards, other notable families from Virginia included the DeBaptistes, the Lees, the Cooks, the Williamses, and later the Pelhams. The Thompson, Cole and Shrewcraft families also joined from other states (Reid, 1996; Katzman, 1973; Osterberg, 2003).

Reid (1996) explains what was especially significant about these families:

- 1) they came from communities with histories of freedom and the resulting higher status that bore;
- 2) they had capital which allowed for the purchase of property, the education of children and/or opening a small business; and

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- 3) they had a history of exclusion from education and a willingness to agitate to obtain it (p. 94).

These families composed a very small segment of the African American population at the time, but their resources included social and economic capital, and a commitment to education. Their willingness to take an oppositional stance, especially on educational issues, was well noted in Hartgrove's 1916 article that profiled Fannie Richards and her mother.<sup>2</sup> While in Virginia, the Richards utilized clandestine schools, sent age-ready sons out of state, and secretly tutored some of the children in an effort to guarantee the literacy and further education of their 14 children, of whom Fannie Richards was the youngest.

The Richards family migrated to Detroit when Miss Richards was about 10 years old. She attended the a small private school run by Second Baptist Church, the central institution of the burgeoning Black community. Because Miss Richards' mother had family connections in Toronto, Miss Richards was sent to that city for its better educational opportunities (Hartgrove, 1916). A later newspaper article reported that she graduated from the Toronto Normal School (Detroit Tribune, 1922). Returning to Detroit, Miss Richards either opened or joined the faculty of a small private school for African American

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<sup>2</sup> This article appeared in the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Negro History* and was written with the assistance of Miss Richards, Robert Pelham, and Carter G. Woodson.

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children before she heard about the opening at Colored School No. 2<sup>3</sup> (Reid, 1996; Katman, 1973, Roscoe Transcript, 1977).

The Detroit Public Schools were officially established in 1842, a few years before the Richards family came to Detroit. At the time of the organization of free public schools, a separate district was established in the form of Colored School No. 1. However, many families were dissatisfied with the inadequate teachers there, and so they continued to send their children to the private school organized at Second Baptist Church. This had the effect of essentially closing Colored School No 1. Unfortunately, the private school dissolved when the minister, Rev. William Monroe, left Second Baptist Church to establish St. Matthews Episcopal Church. Eventually, in 1860, Colored School #1 was reopened under the leadership of an experienced White principal, John Whitbeck (Katzman, 1973).

By 1860, Detroit's 1,400 Blacks made up about 3.1 percent of the city's population (Metzger & Booza, 2002). (See Appendix D for a chart depicting the White and Black population of Detroit over a 130 year period.) African Americans were restricted to three adjacent wards on the city's near east side, generally marked by older and sometimes inadequate housing. The neighborhoods were mixed, however, with native Whites and foreign-born immigrants

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<sup>3</sup> Gladys Pelham Roscoe, an informant of this study, reports that it was Miss Richards who assisted Delia Pelham Barrier at a private school. Mrs. Roscoe claimed that Delia Pelham Barrier was in fact, Detroit's first female African American teacher.



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composing the clear majority (Katzman, 1973; Osterberg, 2003). The 1860 Federal Census indicates that Fannie Richards lived with her mother, Maria, brother, William, who was a barber, and an adolescent niece. It also indicates that a boarder lived in the home, a male teacher. Within their block, they were the only family of color, indicated as “Mulattoes” on the census record (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1860).

Colored School No. 2 was established in 1865 as a response to more secure working class and middle-class Black families moving northward as the city spread north of the river. But the Black community, in general, was not satisfied with the quality of the schools, nor the fact that the schools were segregated. Many families lived too far away from either building to make attendance feasible. In addition, the Detroit Board of Education offered only six years of schooling for African American children, compared to twelve years of education offered for White children (Katzman, 1973). Agitation for integrated schools began in the fervor resulting from the nationwide movement for African American rights that was encouraged by “the rhetoric of the Civil War” (Reid, 1996, p. 79). Many African Americans in Midwestern cities began petitioning their legislatures to integrate schools.

The Michigan legislature outlawed segregated schools in 1867, but the Detroit Board of Education refused to comply with the law. It took the campaigning of the Black community with the help of radicals in the Republican Party to force the Detroit schools to observe the law. Central to this political

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protest were Fannie Richards and her older brother, politico John D. Richards who were among several financial supporters of the lawsuit filed against the Detroit Board of Education (Pebbles, 1981).

John D. Richards was known as the most influential African American in the city at the time. Eleven years older than his sister, Fannie, John D. Richards had been educated in the segregated, but well-regarded schools of Washington, D. C. A barber, he served as a sutler in the 102<sup>nd</sup> United States Colored Infantry during the Civil War and was later instrumental in establishing the alliance between the Detroit's Black elites and the Republican Party. John D. Richards was an accomplished orator and often shared the platform with Republican speakers at public events. Besides being a barber, he also served as a census clerk, and was elected Wayne County coroner in 1880 (Katzman, 1973; Osterberg, 2003). It was John D. Richards' reputation that probably eased Fannie Richards' entry into the Detroit Public Schools, and it was also his influence that allowed her to join him in the fight against segregated schools – with apparently no interference from the Board of Education. (Katzman, 1973; Osterberg, 2001)

John Bagley, a wealthy, White industrialist who later became Michigan's 15<sup>th</sup> governor, saw the lawsuit to fruition. An excerpt from the *Detroit Tribune* story of May 12, 1869 shows how Fannie Richards figured prominently in the dramatic culminating event in this saga:

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The young Negro teacher of Colored School No. 2 kept glancing toward the railroad tracks outside her classroom window. A week had passed since the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that Joseph Workman's son could not be legally segregated from other Detroit school children. As the afternoon train finally passed, Fannie Richards and her pupils cheered as they saw John Bagley's white handkerchief waving from the train window. This was a prearranged signal that meant that the court had abolished segregated schools in Detroit. (Quoted in Peebles, 1981, p. 30)

As a result of her desegregation efforts, Fannie Richards and her pupils were transferred to the integrated Everett School where she taught for 44 years (Hartgrove, 1916; Peebles, 1981; Reid, 1996).

### **Respectability: The Aims of the Elite**

Miss Richards and the elite class of which she was a part saw integration and assimilation as essential goals to be realized in the antebellum atmosphere of the industrialized north. In an interview granted upon her retirement in 1915, she recalled her experience with her colleagues at the Detroit Board of Education:

For years before I came into the system, you know, there had been separate schools for the colored and the white children, but though I was the first colored teacher in Detroit I never felt the least discrimination against me. So kindly were all the teachers with whom I worked and the children whom I taught that I actually had to look in the glass to realize that I was colored.

This statement reveals that Miss Richards aspired not only for integration, but a certain "racelessness" that is congruent with the ideas of "bourgeois respectability" in the African American community (Katzman, 1973; McHenry, 2002;

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Shaw, 1996; Thomas, 1992; Wolcott, 2001). Bourgeois respectability assumed the evolutionary progress of Blacks and relied on a belief in education as a means to upward mobility, integration, and eventual assimilation of at least the elite class of African Americans. Membership in this elite class often depended on the acceptance of the “rules” of bourgeois respectability, which included emulating the majority (native-born White urban middle-class and upper-class culture) and making sure all public displays of respectability conveyed the attributes of the genteel (nothing garish, “loud” or “country” was permitted). The Black elite also presented a cohesive Black identity publicly, keeping criticisms of the Black community private. Members of this elite class of African Americans were often of mixed parentage (“mulattoes”) or at least light-skinned. They tended to associate and marry within their class, and they usually belonged to one of the more “dignified” religious organizations, such as St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church.

Fannie Richards was a member of the Black bourgeoisie, and as such, a measure of her self-assessed accomplishment was reflected in her assimilation - when she could forget she was “colored.” The same newspaper interview later described Miss Richards as having the “eyes of a devoted Mammy.” Reid (1996) asserts that Fannie Richards “provided the perfect symbol for a liberal integrationist movement: African American, yet non-threatening in appearance and demeanor” (p. 82) I would add that Miss Richards’ presence was also reassuring. Although she was a professional, working woman, she fulfilled a



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familiar feminine role in caring for other people's children, a role that Black women had assumed, as "Mammy," throughout enslavement (Casey, 1993).

Miss Richards and her cohort should not be dismissed, however, as insensitive to the needs of the general Black community, or ashamed of their race. It was often the Black elite that stood in the forefront in battles against racism, as evidenced in the school desegregation struggle. Miss Richards and her peers were also leaders in providing humanitarian work among the urban poor, including African Americans. As important as her employment as a teacher was, Miss Richards was also celebrated in the African American community for being one of the founding members of the Phyllis Wheatley Home for Colored Aged Women. She was also a member of the Original Willing Workers and the Michigan State Association of Colored Women. In addition, it was Miss Richards' club work that more than likely inspired her to set up the first kindergarten experiment in the Detroit Public Schools. At the time, kindergartens were seen as a way to provide social and moral uplift for the poor, both immigrant and migrant, goals that were consistent with the emphasis on the motto of the Black women's club movement, "lifting as we climb" (Dombkowski, 2002; Lemert & Bhan, 1998; Shaw, 1996; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Miss Richards was proud of the accomplishments of her race and proud of her success in teaching children of many persuasions. In the article commemorating her retirement, Miss Richards commented:

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I loved my boys and girls, Negro, Jew and German, as they came to me in the many changes that 44 years in one district will bring. The mixture was interesting to watch in the classroom, for while the Jewish children led in arithmetic, and the German children were the best thinkers, the colored children were the best readers, almost orators, I might say. The colored boys and girls had the feeling and the voices for expressive reading and no one takes keener pleasure in the progress that the Negroes have made in an educational way in Detroit than I have. ("Colored teacher loved children and enjoyed 44 years in service", 1915)

Miss Richards' positive statements about the children she taught is also a record of how racialized the culture was in American cities at the time. It was not uncustomary to attribute ethnicity to all immigrants, and often these ethnic labels were seen as racial ones, and often not in a negative light (Washington, 1920).

This statement is also a testament to Miss Richards' accomplishments as a "new woman of color." Another Fannie, activist and reformer Fannie Barrier Williams, illustrates this point clearly. Mrs. Williams was chosen to speak before the mostly white audience at the first World's Fair, held in Chicago in 1895, an event fraught with racial tensions and misrepresentations. In this environment, Mrs. Williams addressed the status and intellectual progress of colored women, encapsulating the work of the African American female teacher in these words:

... In 25 years and under conditions discouraging in the extreme, thousands of our women have been educated as teachers. They have adapted themselves to the work of mentally lifting a whole race of people so eagerly and readily that they afford an apt illustration of the power of self help. These women have not only become good teachers in less than 25 years, but many of them teach everything required in the best high schools of the country. A remarkable evidence of their pro-

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gress as teachers is the fact that many of them are the prize teachers in the mixed schools of nearly every northern city . (Williams, 1912 in Deegan, 2002)

While perhaps thousands of African American teachers taught mostly in segregated schools in Southern states, Mrs. Williams characterized the presence of “prize” teachers in northern cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Detroit, and later publicly included Fannie Richards among those noted (Deegan, 2002).<sup>4</sup>

Miss Richards’ employment as a teacher was therefore a conscious social and political act. During the age of the “new woman of color,” African American women with financial, educational and social resources were committed to developing a new image of the African American woman (Deegan, 2002), as well as providing much needed services within the community at large.

From 1865 throughout the 1920s, nearly all of Detroit’s African American female teachers were daughters, granddaughters or nieces of the elite class of African Americans that had settled in Detroit in the second half of the nineteenth century. They attended normal schools at most (equivalent to present-day junior colleges), and a few made lifelong careers of teaching. Most of the Black upper class in nineteenth century Detroit were in either professional, white-collar, or entrepreneurial occupations, according to Katzman (1973).

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<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Williams was probably very familiar with the African American teachers of Detroit as her sister-in-law, Delia Pelham Barrier, was reportedly employed as an assistant to Miss Richards at Colored School Number 2 in 1865 (Reid, 1999). [See previous note]

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Names of male and female elite populated the rolls of the active service, fraternal and study clubs.

The educated elite corps from which Detroit's first African American teachers came, benefited from at least two, if not more, generations of education and literacy within their families. Fannie Richards virtually apprenticed in a literacy "guild" by virtue of her parents, older siblings and other peers. These teachers arose out of an educational tradition that existed prior to and during the antebellum era.

It is important to note, however, that the advancement of these teachers was constrained by gender and race. While about half of the daughters of these elite families attended normal schools, and in a few cases, received a four-year college education, the corresponding half of male relatives had earned at least one college degree, and a significant number had earned professional degrees. Female occupations outside of the home were more or less limited to teaching for this class of women, and there were few, if any advancement opportunities. Women were only allowed to teach elementary school (high school teaching was reserved for men), and there were no visible routes into administration. The other occupational choice, nursing, was not considered as "respectable" for this elite class; and females were not encouraged to attend medical or other professional schools. Despite relatively high levels of literacy and education, African American elite women, (like their European American counterparts)



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generally conformed to notions of maternalism or domestic feminism and did not commonly protest the lack of women's rights or opportunities.

Meanwhile, the professional identity of these women was also racialized. Reid (1999) observed that the African American women who first taught in Detroit's schools were of "mixed heritage or at least a light complexion, suggesting that a light complexion aided one's entrance into the Black elite and into the public school system" (p. 5). This racialization, however, was also used to the advantage of these pioneer African American teachers. As is alluded to in Fannie Barrier Williams' remarks, it was indeed felt to be an accomplishment when Black female teachers were assigned to teach immigrant children in America's cities. As Reid (1999) describes: "... the act of teaching, especially the teaching of white students, contradicted assumptions about the intellectual ability of African American people" (p. 99). That these women were teaching, and were teaching children other than those of their own race, could be seen as an act of resistance to the prevailing stereotypes about the capacities of African American women.

### **Growth of the City and its Schools**

During Miss Richards' nearly fifty years of employment with the Detroit Public Schools, Detroit's African American population grew from approximately 1,818 to just under 6,000 persons. However, the actual proportion of African Americans fell to about one percent as European immigration spurred

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the city's population from nearly 63,000 in 1865 to over 730,000 by 1915 (Metzger & Booza, 2002). The women who taught through the early 1900s witnessed the growth of the Detroit Public Schools from a loose federation of union schools to a consolidated system with an expanded curriculum that had incorporated the ideas of Pestalozzi, Herbart, and Froebel in their Americanized forms (Moehlmann, 1925). By 1900, the school board had established services for handicapped children, evening schools for working immigrants, ungraded classrooms for the "incurable" and a high school curriculum that included an optional year of normal training (Moehlmann, 1925; Mirel, 1999).

It was onto this stage that the next generation of Detroit's Black teachers entered. These women, the daughters, granddaughters, and nieces of the African American elite, faced a new environment in Detroit as the city changed tremendously between 1910 and 1930.

### **Gladys Pelham Roscoe**

In many ways, Gladys Pelham Roscoe's account is a continuation of Fannie Richards' story. But the rapid changes in the city and in the Detroit Public Schools necessitated new ways of perceiving and acting and Gladys Pelham Roscoe's life story shows how she resisted racism and sexism and incorporated new ways of interpreting the social climate of Detroit.

Gladys Pelham Roscoe, born in 1894, was the granddaughter of Robert and Frances Pelham, another one of the "Cultured Colored 40" families that

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was held in high regard in Detroit. Her uncle, Robert A. Pelham, Jr., succeeded to political prominence after the death of John D. Richards in 1882, and was part of the force behind the *Plaindealer*, an influential African American newspaper published in the 1880s. Gladys Pelham Roscoe's father was a school teacher and administrator, having received his education at Columbia Teachers College. He established schools in Missouri for newly franchised Blacks, and it was there that he met his wife, another African American schoolteacher from Philadelphia. Mrs. Roscoe and her siblings were all born in Missouri. She was the youngest of six children and was an infant when her mother died. After being educated at home by a housekeeper, Mrs. Roscoe was sent back to Detroit at the age of nine to live with her aunt and to rejoin the larger Pelham clan. Mrs. Roscoe graduated from Detroit's Central High School in 1910, at the age of 16 and passed the examination to enter Detroit's Teacher College.

When Mrs. Roscoe was poised to begin her career in the Detroit Public Schools as a teacher, the school system was undergoing a progressive transformation. Mirel (1999) characterized the 1920s as the time when the Detroit school system was considered "one of the finest school systems in the world." This transformation of the school system also paralleled the growth of the city, as Detroit experienced exuberant expansion in population and square mileage due to the rapid development of the automobile industry. Detroit made 40 percent of all U.S. automobiles in 1909; five years later in 1914 it made 75 percent (Bloomfield, 1986 in Mirel, 1999). The first southern migration wave

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between 1916 and 1917 brought between 25,000 and 35,000 African Americans to Detroit (Thomas, 1992). By 1925, the end of the second migration wave, another 40,000 more African Americans had arrived in the city. By 1926, Thomas reports, 85 percent of the Black population had come to Detroit in one decade (p. 27). By 1920, the population of the city had reached nearly one million people, with African Americans comprising about four percent of the total (40,838) (Metzger & Booza, 2002; Thomas, 1992). (See Appendix D.)

During the 1910s, the Detroit Board of Education, like many other school boards across the nation, was the site of conflict as progressive forces worked to abolish the ward system of school governance (Mirel, 1999; Tyack, 1974). By 1919, a small, nonpartisan board of education composed of seven elected members directed the Detroit Public Schools. This body included the first White female elected to public office in Detroit, Laura Osborne.

During the decade of the 1920s, the Detroit school system rose to national prominence as educational opportunities were expanded for urban children. Business leaders and organized labor were convinced that good schools served their interests, and there was a “strong current of popular enthusiasm for public education” (Mirel, 1999, p. 50) as well as strong feelings for the abolishment of child labor. The Gary plan or the “platoon system” was adopted successfully, spurring the development of a progressive curricula that included homerooms during half of the day and an enriched program in art, music, manual training, literature, nature study, and geography (Mirel, 1999;



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Cuban, 1993). This curricula, as well as the sheer population increase, encouraged a massive construction program, the hiring of more teachers, an increase in teachers' salaries, the employment of married women as teachers, and the use of school buildings for afterschool public forums (Mirel, 1999). Intelligence testing and the accompanying development of four distinct high school tracks (academic, commercial, technical, and general) also took place during these years (Moehlman, 1925; Mirel, 1999). These curricular changes had a direct effect on students entering the bustling city from rural or foreign environments.

Also important to the burgeoning teacher pool was the conversion of the Normal School into the four-year Detroit Teachers College. This allowed the Board of Education to be able to train teachers for "all departments or divisions of the Detroit Public Schools" (Hanawalt, 1968). Since secondary teachers were required to have four-year degrees (elementary teachers only needed two-year life certificates), the Detroit Board of Education could now produce teachers to staff the dozen high schools in the city.

The increased professionalization of the teacher corps inspired Mrs. Roscoe to obtain her four-year degree at Detroit Teacher's College if she intended to teach, and she was among the first females in her family to earn a Bachelor's degree in 1914 at the age of 20. She explains how she obtained her teaching position:

At that time, if you were in the top ten of the graduating class, you were automatically given a job to do your field work, without being called a

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substitute or anything. You were called a cadet and you were put on a regular salary. And I made the big salary of \$72 a month.

Note that at the time the militaristic language for describing new teachers ("cadet") and the organization of the school ("platoon") was consistent with the "scientific" management principles of efficiency" that was filtering down through American corporations and the military (Cremin, 1988; Tyack, 1974). Furthermore, Mrs. Roscoe's statement is illustrative of her own academic achievement, as well as the importance of earning one's own salary. Mrs. Roscoe's regular salary was significant in the context of Black women's wages at the time. Thomas (1992) reminds us that

From 1910 to 1930, Black women comprised the majority of workers employed in the largest and lowest paying industrial occupations, such as domestic and personal service. In 1910, 78 percent of all Black women in the labor force worked in domestic and personal service, compared to 24 percent of all White women in the labor force (p. 32).

This vast majority of Black women who worked in domestic and personal service could count on wages ranging from \$3.00 per week for irregular work – to \$16.00 per week for six or seven days of labor (Ciani, 2005). Most women earned a dollar or less per day.

Mrs. Roscoe's statement is further highlighted by the fact that the year she obtained her first teaching position with the Detroit school board – 1914 – was also the same year that Henry Ford instituted the \$5.00 a day wage that so revolutionized the automobile industry. Men working for Ford could count on

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paychecks closer to \$140.00 per month if they were able to achieve the promised \$5.00 a day wage and worked six days per week.

Mrs. Roscoe's career with the Detroit Public Schools was marked by constraints and opportunities. Even though she was an accomplished musician and had specialized in music during her undergraduate teacher education courses, she explained that "colored teachers were not given a choice in specializing." She was assigned a fifth grade homeroom where she faced students as tall as she was. She learned to "have fun" with the kids, and she made "great singers" of her class of mostly Jewish students. Her students' competency in singing was noticed by the Supervisor of Music who periodically stopped by the school. The principal then decided to appoint Mrs. Roscoe as the music teacher – and she was then given three schools in which to teach music. As she explained, "So they appointed me to teach music and they put me in charge of three schools to do whatever the real music teacher didn't want to do." Although she welcomed the opportunity to teach music, thus becoming the first African American specialist teacher in the Detroit Public Schools, Mrs. Roscoe found going from school to school very arduous. She had no transportation, so she walked from one school to another. Political connections, however, helped her out of this situation.

The assistance came from an unusual place. During college, Mrs. Roscoe worked for the City's Recreation Department. She had passed the examination for a Play Leader, and was called to an assignment. The assignment was for

clerical position for the Director of the Recreation Department. When the Director came finally arrived for the interview, he did not hesitate at hiring a "colored girl," despite the reservations of his staff. Mrs. Roscoe went on to work for him for six summers. When he became a judge, she assisted on his first campaign, and claimed him as a friend until he died. Mrs. Roscoe suspects it was this friendship that helped to "pull some strings" at the Board of Education so that she would get a regular position and she was given a music room at the Trowbridge School. She describes the room:

A small room up under the belfry and up over the front steps that was so small, that if I had a piano in that room, I didn't have room for a desk. And if the fire department had looked at the music room, they would have closed it up because there was only one aisle. And that was the aisle right by the door. . .

Eventually, Mrs. Roscoe was moved to a slightly larger room, and the music department was "satisfied enough to make me what they called a 'critic teacher'" during the late 1920s. As a critic teacher, Ms. Roscoe said she had "students from Wayne come and learn music teaching, the art of teaching music, under me." Mrs. Roscoe was assigned to the newly built Duffield School, a school run on the platoon system. The school had two gyms, two libraries, two music rooms, etc. Mrs. Roscoe stayed there for several years until she was forced to resign because of illness. She was away for 11 years, during which time her daughter was born. When she returned, she was offered substitute work, but again, according to her recollection, her friend, Judge Jane inter-

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vened. She was given a permanent assignment as an Auditorium teacher and she remained in that position until she retired in 1964.

### **Emergence of the Black Middle-Class**

From 1910 through 1930, there was not a significant increase in the number of African American teachers in Detroit. By 1926, about forty Black women were hired to teach in the city's elementary schools, out of a teaching population of about 7,000. [See Appendix E.] They comprised less than one percent of the teaching force, mostly drawn from the dwindling elite class that was being supplanted by a much more vigorous and vocal new Black middle-class and industrial working class that arrived with the increasing African American migration.

Thomas (1992) described the Black middle-class as embodying the "the spirit and future Black survival and progress in Detroit" (p. 15). Manifesting the motto, "uplift the race," the

. . . Black middle-class entrepreneurs established saloons, hotels, news dealerships, candy stores, funeral homes, groceries, drugstores, moving companies, coal yards, lumber yards, and especially financial and realty agencies. . . . Confined by residential segregation to the expanding ghetto and excluded from traditional Black service jobs dependent on white clients, such as barbering, the new Black middle-class had no other choice but to choose a strategy of community building based on racial pride, solidarity, and economic independence. (p. 15)

It was this new, emerging Black middle-class that felt empowered to progress without waiting for "Whites to change their racial attitudes" (Thomas,

1992, p. 17). These middle-class Blacks also felt that the Black elite had outlived its usefulness and that its members were more interested in socializing with upper-class Whites than with Blacks of the middle or lower classes (Katzman, 1973; Thomas, 1992; Wolcott, 2001).

Those of the Black upper class who wanted to join in the Black struggle to build a community were generally welcomed but were not allowed to change the new agenda for Black survival and progress, which would remain in the hands of the new Black middle-class until the 1930s.

Mrs. Roscoe certainly witnessed this “changing of the guard.” Steeped in the bourgeoisie respectability of the Black elite, she was able to use many of the tools of advancement common to the group, such as garnering political favors by assisting more powerful members of the Black and White elite. She also participated in numerous social and civic clubs that were begun and maintained by the elite. In the 1977 interview, she retrospectively spoke about what she saw as the separation between the “Old Detroiters” (a term applied to African American families with several generations of Detroit residence behind them) and the new arrivals:

. . . I think the newcomers are the ones who drew that line between the newcomers and the so-called ‘Old Detroiters.’ . . . I think that the newcomers felt the fact that they were coming in on an organized group... they felt they were on the outskirts and I think that drew the oldtimers closer together. . . . And the newcomers had to more or less shift for themselves.

This analysis situates Mrs. Roscoe as an ‘Old Detroit’ with a certain amount of cultural capital, which could not be automatically bequeathed to the

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newcomers. She acknowledged, however, that such distinctions changed over the decades:

Now [1977] I think the whole feeling has changed. I think it doesn't make any difference whether you came yesterday or last year, or ten years ago. If you come up to specifications, I think you are accepted.

"Specifications" is a curious term. It implies that Mrs. Roscoe was still applying the accoutrements of bourgeois respectability upon any one that might seek to be accepted by her generation. In any case, she acknowledged how times had changed, calling for new responses.

#### **Conclusion: Miss Richards and Mrs. Roscoe**

Miss Richards and Mrs. Roscoe, members of the African American elite, were nurtured by their families and community to have the skills and capacities to become teachers. As stated before, to become a teacher was an activist deed and these women were supported in a genderized, racialized, and classed environment to obtain college educations and seek employment in the Detroit Public Schools. Shaw (1996) in her research of Black professional women at the turn of the century pointed out that African American families were well aware that their daughters would have to work to support their families and that the only way to avoid domestic or agricultural work was to become a professional – and virtually the only profession available at the time in the South and in cities was schoolteaching. Shaw's research shows how young Black women of the elite and middle-class were often socialized to be successful through family

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sacrifices that made formal education possible. In turn, these young women were expected to use their skills in support of the community. This notion of “socially responsible individualism” as discussed by Shaw (p. 2) was apparent in the family structures of both Miss Richards and Mrs. Roscoe. This construct had the effect of not only reifying class, but also acknowledging the racialized and gendered environment in which the women participated. That these daughters of the elite were educated for professions meant that they would work in female-dominated occupations, and that they could also cross racialized boundaries and teach not only African American children, but other children as well, including the racialized immigrants arriving from different parts of Europe.

Their education also allowed them to be active leaders in their communities, and their club work, social work, literary pursuits, and (in the case of Mrs. Roscoe) musical endeavors, laid the foundation for developing a leadership class of educated Black women that co-existed with the leading African American males. Miss Richards, then, was not only the first African American schoolteacher – she was also probably the first African American female professional in Detroit. Thus, she and the other women who followed, stepped over a threshold into leadership and family development that had previously been limited to males (Katzman, 1973; Osterberg, 2003; Thomas, 1992; Wolcott, 2001). In addition, their activities brought them into daily contact with White children, parents, and colleagues and this contact probably further reified their

social class and position within the African American community. Mrs.

Roscoe's comment about "specifications" reveals that the community that the African American elite had created in Detroit was well-defined, but eventually, penetrable. Newcomers became candidates through obtaining status in new ways and thus the stories continue.

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## **CHAPTER IV**

### **NEWCOMERS: MIGRANT TALES OF MRS. JONES AND MRS. BROWNE<sup>5</sup>**

The next generation of Detroit teachers is represented in this study by two informants who were in their late 80s when I interviewed them. Both of these women had stories to tell about their careers as teachers, and as administrators. Both were born in the South; however Mrs. Jones arrived in Detroit when she was a baby. Mrs. Browne came in her pre-teen years. They both began teaching toward the end of the Depression, having spent their teen years during some of the city's most dreary times. Since more detail was available in these interviews about the process of going to school, college, and obtaining positions than had been available for Miss Richards or Mrs. Roscoe, and this section will include more of that information.

#### **Images of Discord – the 1930s**

The migration of southern workers to Detroit grew as World War I closed the borders to immigration from Europe. A new African American elite emerged as the community grew in size and stature. This elite was comprised of successful Black entrepreneurs and professionals who served the burgeoning Black community. The daughters and sons of this new middle-class were prepared to become professionals, and many of them chose the teaching

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<sup>5</sup> All of the living teachers interviewed in this study have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

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profession, among few other choices. The school system they entered, however, was substantially different than the school system of the 1920s where many of them received their education.

Mirel (1999) convincingly argues that the strength of the Detroit Public Schools in the 1920s drew from the consensus among political conservatives, business interests, organized labor and liberal allies in defining what a school system is for, who it should serve, and how should it serve. This consensus fell away in the dire financial environment of the Great Depression. Positions hardened across the divide between business and labor and a financially strapped city and Board of Education sought to staunch the loss of revenue.

A hiring freeze put in place in 1931 lasted for four years, resulting in fewer teachers and more students. In addition, it was recommended that married women take leaves of absence. Although few did, an unofficial policy froze all married women in the rank they occupied (Mirel, 1999, p. 139). This had the effect of discouraging married women from applying to the Detroit Board through 1942 when the Board ended the freeze. In addition to these personnel problems, curricular changes were enacted to keep more students in school and out of the employment lines. These changes resulted in watering down the general track, a situation that remained in place long past the crisis days of the Depression (Mirel, 1999). Finally, school construction was halted, and overcrowded classrooms and unmaintained buildings became the mainstay of Detroit schools deep into the 1940s.

Other significant events happened in the 1930s that had an effect on the women to whom I spoke in the course of this research. The Detroit Federation of Teachers formed in 1931 as an underground organization, gained formal recognition in 1937. Also, in 1933, Wayne College incorporated, bringing the Teacher's College under the same umbrella as the acquired medical, law and liberal arts schools. The College remained under the aegis of the Detroit Board of Education.

The most significant change for my informants, however, was the fact that Black community activism became more visible in the 1930s and the Detroit Public Schools became a focal point as segregation and discrimination in the schools became more apparent.

Two women in this study, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne, entered the Detroit Public Schools as teachers in the late 1930s to early 1940s. Their encounters with the Detroit Board of Education were similar in many ways. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne might both be termed "newcomers" - in that their families arrived during the Great Migration. Neither had ties to the Old Detroit families of earlier teaching generations, and both of their fathers were workers in the automobile industry and entrepreneurs.

### **Mrs. Jones' Beginnings**

Mrs. Jones, an only child, was born in 1917 in Tennessee and arrived in Detroit as an infant with her parents. Her father had decided to leave Tennes-

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see because the only work available to him was in the coal mines and the work was too dangerous, he thought, for a family man. So he came with his family, heeding the call for the possibility of earning \$5.00 a day at Ford Motor Company. Only three auto companies routinely opened their doors to African American male employees in those days: Ford, Briggs, and Dodge, with Ford recruiting the most Black workers through an intricate network set up with Black ministers and the Urban League. By having the churches and the Urban League do the pre-screening for employment, Ford benefitted from positive public relations and drew from a "Black labor aristocracy of mature, reliable, long-term workers" (Sugrue, 1996, p. 25-26). Mrs. Jones' parents were both graduates of "academy schools" in Tennessee (equivalent to high school) and were already urban dwellers before they migrated to Detroit. Mrs. Jones' father, however, did not last long with the Ford Motor Company. According to Mrs. Jones,

. . .he went to work at Ford's, happy. And one day, the boss was out. And they asked him to take the place of the boss. And my father found out on the assembly line – this was before we had unions – that those people of the other race were getting fifty cents more a day than he was. And my father came home. My father was a person of great integrity and not fearful at all. He came home and told my mother, 'I am not going to work where it is this unfair.' And he quit Ford right then.

Mrs. Jones' father was able to take advantage of the housing market in Detroit which was stimulated by the overall increase in population, and the Black population shifts during the early 1920s.

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And then he went into real estate. And there was Louis Skaller, who was a Polish guy, who was the guy who did all of our neighborhood, north Detroit. Dad became his agent and worked and so naturally Skaller gave him the Blacks. And remember Blacks are pouring in. This is in the early 1920s. So he sold – [what is] now the Conant Gardens sector – those older houses in that section – my father sold a lot of those, over half of them. And then he decided that he was tired of giving Skaller half the money. And so he said, I’m going to become a broker. And that’s when he got his broker’s license and opened his own office which was on Davison and Dequindre for many, many years. He had four offices there.

Mrs. Jones proudly reported that her father became the first Black real estate broker in Michigan and became one of the successful entrepreneurs, or “New Negro” as Alain Locke (1925) might have remarked. On the other hand, Mrs. Jones’ mother was a homemaker, limiting her duties to work inside the home.

Mrs. Jones comments:

I was very fortunate. My father never allowed my mother or me to do work. He was a very hardworking man and he didn’t believe in his women working.

Her statement echoes the experience of several other women in this study whose mothers were expressly forbidden to perform domestic or service work outside of the home. Since this type of work was generally the only work available to Black women, no matter what their educational or skill status, many Black men chose to not have their wives or daughters seek paid employment. Thomas reports that in the 1930s, 88 percent of Black female employment was in domestic and service employment (an increase from 79 percent in 1920), probably due to the Depression’s early effects on Black workers in general.

(White women’s rate of participation in this employment sector remained at 24



percent). As Thomas (1992) characterized it: "Black women remained trapped in the lowest paying sectors of Detroit's economy" (p. 32). Most Black women who worked did so to supplement the family income. Black male employment was usually only available in the laborer class, and was often low paying, unavailable, or inconsistent (J. Jones, 1995; Pleck, 1980; Sugrue, 1996; Thomas, 1992). Therefore it was considered a sign of a man's strength as a wage earner to not allow his wife or daughters to work outside of the home.

The energies of Mrs. Jones' family seemed concentrated on providing Mrs. Jones with a good education and a safe passage into womanhood. She explained that when she was in high school and college, most of her friends were making money as domestics and going to school. Her father decided she could work in his office – and so Mrs. Jones learned clerical skills, working for her father. "The vast majority of Black female wage earners were barred from peacetime factory labor and from the traditional (White) female occupations of secretarial and sales work until well into the 1960s," researcher Jacqueline Jones reports (1985, p. 4). Thus, Mrs. Jones picked up valuable skills that probably assisted her teaching career, but were of little use in the job market of the 1930s.

Mrs. Jones would not have been interested in any other type of work, for she was one of the few women in the study to absolutely declare that she always wanted to be a teacher.

And I will say that I wanted to be a teacher from the time I was four years old and met my first teacher. I've always admired teachers. I've admired the profession of teaching and I've admired what teachers stand

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for and what teachers do. And no matter where we go or what we become, first there was mother, that first teacher. And then we went out into the larger community where we were taught.

This feeling persisted despite the fact that Mrs. Jones had no Black teachers herself throughout her years in the Detroit Public Schools. She felt encouraged, however, by her own experiences in a multi-ethnic, immigrant neighborhood in Detroit.

In fact, next door Serbian people lived and their girls and I were close. An then as they grew up – I was older – and when I went to City College, they were as elated and happy that I went. And those girls followed me. One became a teacher. And one became a secretary in the schools and worked. The other one . . . got married real soon. . . . But I was happy . . . to have made people want to do what I do.

Mrs. Jones enrolled in City College in 1934 and graduated in 1938 at the age of 20. At the time, teacher tests were not required to become employed by the Detroit Public Schools. “As long as you had a ‘B’ average and went to City College, employment was likely,” she observed. But jobs were scarce in 1938, and Mrs. Jones had to substitute for two years before she was offered a permanent position.

### **Mrs. Browne’s Beginnings**

Mrs. Browne, a year younger than Mrs. Jones, experienced the same situation when she applied to the Board of Education upon graduation from City College. Mrs. Browne’s family had migrated to Detroit from Oklahoma City in 1929, shortly before the stock market crash. Her father was a janitor in

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Oklahoma, and came to Detroit at the invitation of his brother who was concerned about the educational opportunities available to his brother's four children, of which Mrs. Browne was the youngest. Mrs. Browne remembers overhearing the conversation between her father and his brother:

And he said, this uncle said, 'Well, I can give you a job, but you'll never be able to educate these children down here in a segregated society and you don't make enough money to send them away. So, if you want to bring your family to Detroit, I could see that you manage very well.'

Mrs. Browne's uncle convinced Mrs. Browne's father that the educational opportunities were much better in Detroit. He also ran a popular barbeque business downtown and was certain that he could provide adequate work for his brother.

An aunt secured a rented house for them on the west side of the city – in an area which was becoming increasingly African American as some families began to move out of Black Bottom, the poor and overcrowded Negro ghetto on the near eastside. This particular portion of the westside was racially mixed, with primarily Polish residents surrounding a Black enclave. The block to which the Brownes moved had only Negro residents according to the 1930 census. A working class, upwardly mobile neighborhood, the Browne's block featured a mixture of autoworkers, maids, chauffeurs, and a few proprietors. Evidence of the striving character of the block was the presence of a music teacher, a mail carrier and a porter for the railroads (U. S. Department of

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Commerce, 1930), all three of which were considered middle-class positions in the African American community at the time.

There were several aunts and uncles already in Detroit when the Brownes arrived in 1929. These connections helped the family secure employment that kept the family afloat and together through the turbulent economic times of the 1930s.

One of Mrs. Browne's aunts, her mother's sister, was a licensed beautician who eventually owned six beauty shops. According to Mrs. Browne,

She had passed as white at one time and learned beauty culture . . . she learned everything there except how to straighten hair. She knew how to shampoo; she knew how to give facials and manicures, and dye hair and everything. But she was fair enough that she could pass. So, after she finished her training, she went to work in one of the shops that was recommended and she worked there long enough to get herself together and finally, she and her husband decided that they were going to be able to open up a beauty shop. So she opened it up in her basement on Boxwood near Tireman Avenue.

At a time when beautician licenses were not granted to Black women, Mrs. Browne's aunt was able to "infiltrate" the industry and obtain her own licensure. Mrs. Browne's mother, and later Mrs. Browne herself would help out in the shop, and through this "apprenticeship," learned enough skills to bring in extra money to the household. Mrs. Browne's mother eventually opened her own shop in her basement, working as an unlicensed beautician. Jacqueline Jones (1995) explains the exceptional place of Black beauty parlors in the African American community:

As a type of Black enterprise, beauty parlors were unique. Owned and staffed almost exclusively by women, they created jobs, offered highly valued services, and functioned as social centers in many neighborhoods. Their operators worked on a somewhat informal basis, often in their own homes or in a small rented booth in a store, and kept irregular hours in order to accommodate the schedules of patrons who were domestic servants. Hair pressers and stylists prided themselves on their skills, 'fashioning beautifully arranged coiffures of smooth and pleasing waves'. (J. Jones, 1995)

Hence, Mrs. Browne, her mother and her aunt used their acquired skills to maintain and support their families and interests through a type of female entrepreneurship that was crucial to sustaining Black working class (and some middle-class) families. Although initial licensure, if sought, involved meeting some requirements of the state, it was not necessary to obtain those credentials in order to practice the craft. The service was exclusive to other African American women in the community, and thus it was an important economic mainstay where Black dollars were circulated amongst the Black community. It also provided an important alternative to domestic service that offered independence and community respect. Mrs. Browne's mother used the money to help pay for her house and college for her children. Mrs. Browne relates:

She wanted us to go to college because she did not have the experience. And you know she kept a running finance note at a finance company up on Grand River. It never got paid out until the last one of us was out of school. She just kept renewing it and renewing it so that we could go to school. And she curled hair to pay for it.

Mrs. Browne related another story that speaks to the place of Black women and work in Detroit in the 1930s. She was the youngest girl in a family



of four and had one brother and two sisters. Mrs. Browne was a year younger than her closest sister, and all of the sisters graduated from the local junior high within a year or two of their arrival in Detroit. The middle sister decided she wanted to become a nurse, so she chose to attend Cass Technical High School, instead of the much closer Northwestern High School where Mrs. Browne and her oldest sister went. "And my sister had always wanted to be a nurse, so my mother let her transfer to Cass High School where they had pre-nursing, pre-dental, pre-everything." But the proximity of Cass Technical High School to the downtown business district led to Mrs. Browne's sister making a new choice:

And so when she went to Cass, she hadn't been there very long - I don't know what made her do this. She started leaving Cass every afternoon, going down to J. L. Hudson's [Detroit's largest department store at the time] and finally, Bill Hall, who hired all the Black people for J. L. Hudson's, hired her to run an elevator. And it was weeks before the Board of Education notified my mother that my sister was not in school.

My own family lore includes stories from my mother and aunts about how difficult it was to obtain a job at Hudson's Department Store. African American clerks were not hired in downtown Detroit stores until the 1950s or 1960s. The only position available for a Black woman at Hudson's was elevator operator. Even for that position, she had to pass the "paper bag test," meaning, her skin could not be darker than a brown paper bag. If she passed the test, she might be offered a position in the front banks of elevators. Women with darker skin worked the service and freight elevators, if they were hired at all.

Mrs. Browne's sister had specific reasons why she sought employment:

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And [when confronted] my sister said, 'You've got Theresa already in college and Freida's right behind her. And I'm not going to leave my job. You need every bit of help you can get.' So she continued to work at Hudson's.

Mrs. Browne reported that her sister's employment downtown was beneficial to the rest of the family. "She could get a decent pair of shoes for \$2.99 downtown and she helped us in many ways because money was so short." Eventually, this sister did fulfill her dream of becoming a nurse. She received her nursing degree from Sinai Hospital many years later.

The fact that Mrs. Browne's sister dropped out of high school to pursue employment was not that unusual. In fact, staying in high school was a much less frequent occurrence for males or females, Black or White at the time. Nationally, the high school completion rate was about 30 percent (Grossnickle, 1986; Tyack, 1974). This sister's story, however, illuminates how race and gender restricted the type of work available to young working women in the Detroit of the 1930s. Nevertheless, the sister was able to make a significant contribution to the family's financial situation, and by doing so, insured that her younger siblings would go to college.

Employment proved to be a tenuous proposition for Mrs. Browne's father. When the Brownes arrived in Detroit, he was the main wage earner, but his brother's barbeque business where he was employed soon went under in the throes of the Depression. Unemployed for a while, he eventually landed a job at Ford Motor Company, with the help of his wife's family connections:

My mother had at that time another brother who had come from Oklahoma. The only job he ever had was doorman at the Detroit Athletic Club downtown. He knew every big figure in the metropolitan area. When my father had nothing to do, all he [my uncle] did was speak to somebody who was walking in that door at the Detroit Athletic Club and said, 'I have a brother-in-law who needs a job,' and that's when my father went to work at Ford's.

At the time, Ford Motor Company was the largest employer of Black men in the Detroit area. (Thomas, 1992) By the mid-1930s, however, Ford had curtailed much of its production and many had been laid off. If this memory of Mrs. Browne's is true, it was extraordinary that her father was able to gain employment with Ford Motor Company in the 1930s. In any case, the vignette points to how important family and social networks were for all new migrants. Families with such networks did not have to rely as heavily on such agencies as the Urban League or church programs, or simply on luck. In this respect, Mrs. Browne's family bore resemblance to the families mentioned earlier in this study, all of whom supported each other by finding and/or sharing housing, developing and sustaining independent businesses, and by obtaining employment in either Detroit's diverse and burgeoning industries or with the city government. This family network provided a depth of support that allowed the children of migrants to pursue college educations. This was true of Miss Richards, Mrs. Roscoe, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne.

### **Community Resistance**

There were other factors, however, that assisted Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne in obtaining positions with the Detroit Public Schools. Within the African American community there was a growing dissatisfaction not only with the apparent segregation of schools, but also the lack of Black teachers and other employees within the Detroit Public Schools (Mirel, 1999).

The problem of school segregation became evident as the number of Blacks in the city increased. Prior to the 1930s, Detroit, like other northern cities, had school populations that were integrated (Hornel, 1984; Perlman, 1988). During the 1920s, only two of Detroit's 141 elementary schools were majority Black, and both of these schools were over 40 percent White (Mirel, 1999). By the 1930s, however, the number of Blacks in the city had increased to about 8 percent of the population and as evidenced in the experiences of Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne, the African American community began to spread away from the conscribed, congested area of the near eastside. Appendix F charts the growth of the African American and White student enrollment in the Detroit Public Schools.

Black leaders began to call attention to the low numbers of Black elementary teachers and the fact that there were no African American high school teachers. They also noted that the Board of Education policy

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of placing Black teachers with only Black students was discriminatory.

Segregation of pupils, however, became a larger issue. Mirel (1999)

encapsulates the situation:

By the mid-1930s, there was growing evidence that the school system was again becoming racially segregated. . . . During the late 1920s and early 1930s, many of the schools that previously had been integrated became almost completely Black. Unquestionably, this trend was largely due to the changing racial composition of neighborhoods and practices such as restrictive real estate covenants (p. 188).

Many accused the Board of Education of deliberately segregating schools. The “clinker” for this argument was the Board’s 1933 decision to turn Miller Intermediate School into a high school in order to decrease the number of Black students feeding into the nearby Eastern High School. Miller was located in the mostly African American area of the near eastside. The Board also allowed any (White) students who wanted to transfer out of that attendance area to do so.

While the Board justified the creation of the new high school and the transfer policy as legitimate responses to overcrowding, both actions, in effect, created a segregated, Black high school in Detroit (Mirel, 1999, p. 188)

Mirel concludes:

The importance of race in these decisions is underscored by the fact that, despite the severe overcrowding of all the high schools in the city in the 1930s, no other intermediate schools were elevated to senior high status and, with the exception of Western High School (which was rebuilt after a fire in 1936), no new high schools were constructed during this period. In short, the creation of Miller High School was a clear case of deliberate school segregation.

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While neither Mrs. Roscoe, Mrs. Jones, nor Mrs. Browne mentioned the creation of Miller High School, they did give examples of microaggressions they felt as high school students in Detroit. Mrs. Roscoe described her experience trying out for the Glee Club at Central High around 1909:

. . . when I was in high school, I loved music and I tried out for the Glee Club. . . . And the same Mr. Childress who had to come back and say that my children could sing better than anybody else's when I got to working - I went to the Glee Club because they wanted voices. So that was me. So I went, and I sang. He was astounded because I had a high soprano voice. I could sing upper G above upper C, as easily as anybody could sing any note. And he was surprised. And he said to the girls, 'Why that was such and such a tone. Did you hear that? Oh, her voice is beautiful.' And I thought that I was going to be accepted. But he called me apart and told me that my voice wouldn't blend with the other girls. But he would love to have me sing a solo anytime they were going to give a concert. [pause] . . . That was some of the prejudice that children had to run up against, and really I was a child. Because I graduated from high school in January and I wasn't 16 until April. Children nowadays wouldn't accept that.

Mrs. Roscoe's experience was repeated in Mrs. Browne's encounter nearly 25 years later in another high school. Mrs. Browne remembers that she was not allowed to join any of the extracurricular activities that she loved, including the choir and the septet for which she auditioned and was not allowed to participate in, even though her try-out went well.

Other examples of small humiliations included separating the Black graduates from the composite senior class photograph at Eastern High School (Mirel, 1999). Arnett (2000) reports that only the Black children were assigned

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to clean the floors and windows during home economics classes at her Westside junior high.

These types of indignities, plus the larger economic and social issues of teacher hiring and teacher placement, received hardly any attention from the Detroit chapter of the NAACP, one of the largest chapters in the country at the time (Thomas, 1992). Instead, the NAACP was occupied with housing issues (including the Sweet trial in 1925) and union issues as the drive toward labor organizing was met with heavy resistance in the Black community (Thomas, 1992).

Snow Grigsby, a college-educated Detroiters who worked at the post office (as many others did for there were few if any positions for college educated Black men in Detroit at the time), and Rev. William Peck, the founder of the Booker T. Washington Trade Association (a Black middle-class entrepreneurial business association), formed the Detroit Civic Rights Committee which openly challenged the hiring practices of many organizations, including the Detroit Board of Education. Targeting organizations that were financed by public funds, the Civic Rights Committee published pamphlets and held programs in African American churches to publicize the lack of Black employment in taxpayer-funded organizations. Their pivotal position was that the percentage of personnel hired in publicly funded agencies should reflect the demographics of the city. In other words, if nearly 8 percent of the city population was Negro,

then nearly 8 percent of the personnel hired in these agencies should also be Negro (Grigsby, 1967; Mirel, 1999; Thomas, 1992).

In 1933, the Committee confronted the Board of Education on its dismal hiring record, reasoning that if 8 percent of Detroit Board of Education personnel were African American, the Board should be employing nearly 800 Blacks.

In an interview in 1967, Mr. Grigsby recalls that meeting:

Before going before this Board we worked out a brief, the same as a lawyer would in a courtroom. In this brief we showed that in 91 years they [Detroit Public Schools] hadn't hired but 72 Negroes [50 teachers and 22 janitors], and when we began to question the Superintendent and the Board members . . . the Superintendent said they hadn't hired anyone for several years during the Depression, hadn't even hired a sub.

The Civic Rights Committee, however, was prepared for that response:

But in the meantime we had sent letters to the presidents of all the state schools in the state of Michigan, and had sent this type of letter: 'We understand that the graduates of your school have a good representation as being employees of the Detroit Board of Education. How many have you placed in the last year? And what schools are they working for? And from the answers we compiled a list of how many they had hired.

When confronted with this information, a Board member responded that he had scanned the list at Wayne [City College] and hadn't found any qualified candidates. But the Civic Rights Committee was again prepared for that response.

. . . we had sent letters to 15 colleges and universities throughout the country, and had asked them to give us occupational credentials of Negro men and women prepared to teach in the various fields and when they called on me, I pulled out a stack out of my brief – and then the meeting was getting very warm.

According to Mr. Grigsby, Rev. Peck then reported how dire the situation was for Black Detroiters:

Reverend Peck mentioned the fact that we didn't have a single counselor, not a single head, not a head in the music department, not a truant officer, not even a clerk-typist. And the question Reverend Peck placed before them was that someone had failed, because they were turning people out every year in these fields. So if they hadn't found a Negro to fill those posts, someone had failed.

The Board then assigned Mr. Cody, the Superintendent, to meet with the committee. The instructions were: If qualified people were found, they should be hired. Mr. Grigsby recounts:

To our surprise, we got 19 jobs that day, and within a year the Board hired almost a hundred, whereas before they hadn't hired one a year in the past 91 years. (Grigsby, 1967)

While Grigsby is correct in saying that the Board put some effort into hiring more African Americans, Thomas (1992) points out that by 1936, only 57 Blacks worked as regular teachers, out of a total number of 7,408 teachers. Black teachers still remained less than 1% of the total teaching force. African American employment did increase, however, in other occupations for the Board. Most notably, Lloyd Cofer was hired in 1934 as the first Black male professional and first Black secondary counselor (at Miller High), and William St. Clair Billups gained employment as the first African American school secretary for the Board of Education (C. K. Jones, 1970; Kurth, 2005). These pioneering

African American men ushered in an era of rapid advancement for the few Black males who gained entry into the Detroit Public Schools.

### **College Education and Becoming Teachers**

Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne were graduating from high school when these events occurred, and found their entrance into teacher preparation relatively unhindered. Mrs. Jones entered Wayne College and Mrs. Browne was able to spend her first year at Ypsilanti at the State Normal School, with financial assistance provided by the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA), the beginning of President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal." Among the many emergency education programs of the FERA was the college student aid program. Participating colleges provided part-time employment for low-income or unemployed students. ("The Federal Emergency Relief Administration", 2003) Mrs. Browne remembers:

[It was]'34. And I went straight to college, out at [what is now called] Eastern, because at that time the federal government had some kind of special program and I went out for my first year and I worked . . . the campus was nothing like it is today. They had no hospital, they had nothing to service the students. And all the kids lived in private homes, as we did. Well, out there they had what they called "Health Cottage." It was a two-story house that had been converted to a hospital to service the students - who also lived in homes. And the school had some kind of ruling that if someone living in one of the private homes took sick, the owner of that home had to notify the school. They couldn't take the chance on somebody having something in a home where other kids would contract it. So Health Cottage was an ordinary two-story house run by two registered nurses, and they had rooms upstairs for those kids who had any kind of contamination - they

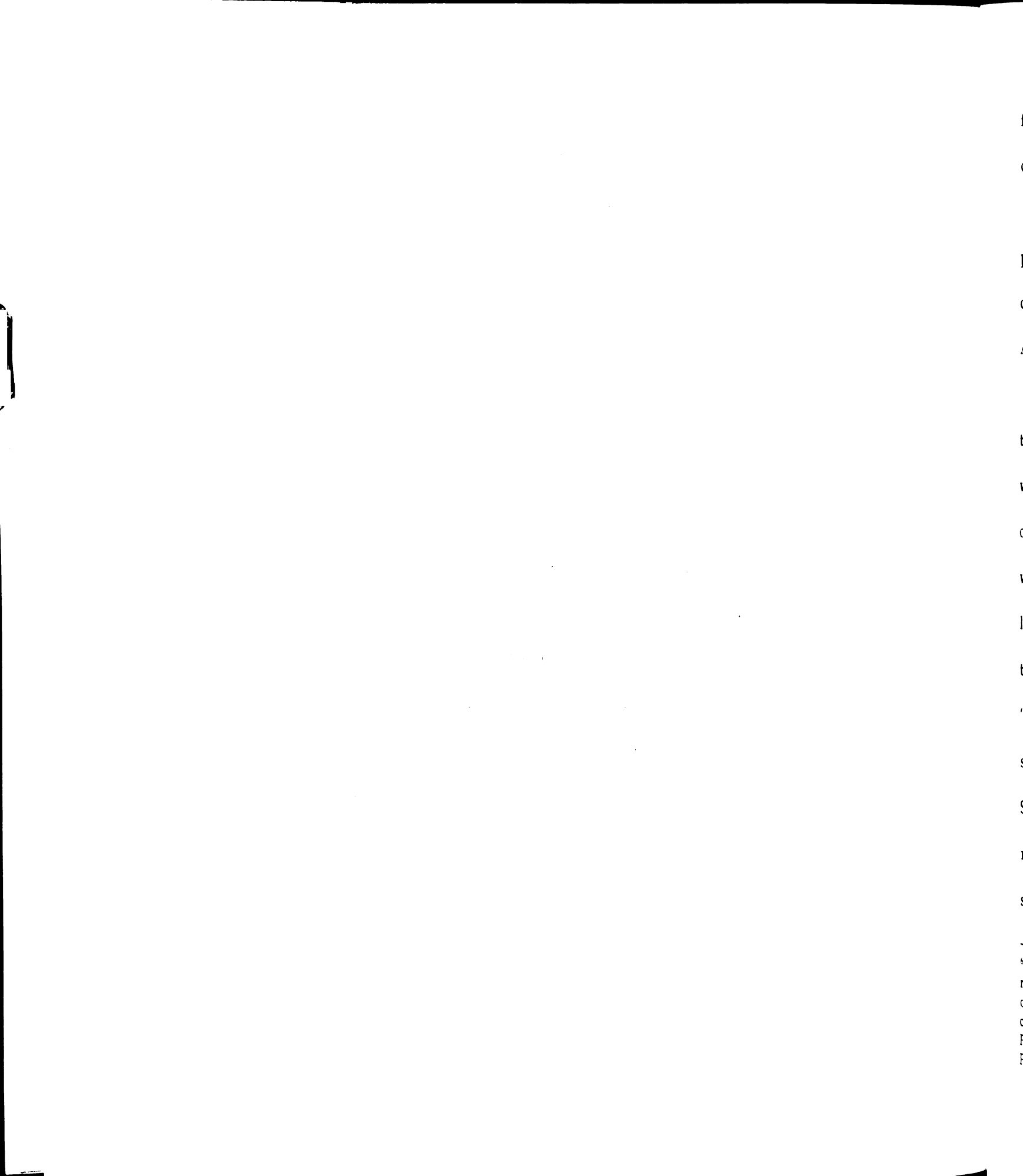
put them up there. And my federal job was to work at Health Cottage and all I did was keep those files, but I got my first year's tuition paid by doing that. The federal government would provide some money, but the school had to give that person a job of some kind. So my job was to keep the records at Health Cottage.

This federal assistance job helped Mrs. Browne develop clerical skills, and she expressed supreme satisfaction with her classes at the Normal College. However, she was unable to remain at the school past the first year. The prioritization of family finances brought her back to Detroit.

And then after my first year, my mother scrounged around and got the first semester's tuition for the second year. But then she said, 'I just can't do it anymore.' She said, 'Frieda, you'll have to come home.' She said, 'You are ahead of yourself, but your sister is behind. So she's the one who has to stay'.

Mrs. Browne, the younger of the two daughters, had actually graduated at the same time as her sister because she was not "put back" when she entered Detroit Public Schools as a transferee from Oklahoma. According to Mrs. Browne, it was common for many students migrating from the South to be "put back," including Mrs. Browne's sister.

At first disappointed at the transfer home, Mrs. Browne came to understand that the trip home proved to be a fortunate event. She soon found out that the only way she could become a teacher in Detroit was to go to City College. According to Mrs. Browne, the Detroit Board of Education "ran City College" and that prospective teachers from other teacher education institutions had to have exceptional credentials in order to be hired by the Detroit Public Schools. She reported that students from the Normal School in Ypsilanti were





frequently sent to “substandard” school systems, such as Inkster, Mt. Clemens or Ferndale.<sup>6</sup>

While both Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne described their educational experiences at City College as uneventful, each of these women recalled what they called a pivotal event when they were invited to join one of the two African American sororities on campus.

Mrs. Jones joined Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA), the oldest Black sorority that was founded in 1908 at Howard University. The AKA chapter in Detroit was incorporated in 1930 and Mrs. Jones credited the sorority as a place to meet other developing professionals in her peer group, as well as the women who were a professional pioneers in the generation or two ahead of her. “Oh, you learned how to act when you were with your sorors. And they taught us how to work with the Board of Education, the city government – oh, everything! ‘Cause the people who were in charge or up-and-coming – they were probably sorors.” Mrs. Browne displayed the same enthusiasm about joining Delta Sigma Theta. She was very proud to have been invited to join the newly recognized chapter, and during our interview, boasted of her 70 year anniversary with the sorority.

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<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Browne’s oldest sister, who became a music teacher, graduated from Ypsilanti, but had to **re**-take many courses in order to be considered for Detroit Public Schools. Even then, it was **only** because the family had become acquainted with some of the more influential people in the **city** such as businessman John Roxborough and School Superintendent and City College **President**, Frank Cody, that Mrs. Browne’s sister eventually acquired a position in the Detroit **Public** Schools as a music teacher.

Sororities, for this generation, were important places of self- and professional development. Unlike other organizations with racial goals, sororities were created to change and benefit individuals, and through the development of individual Black women, serve society (Giddings, 1988; Graham, 1999). "The sorority has also been an important source of leadership training for African American women, whose opportunities to exercise such skills in formal organizations are few" (Giddings, 1988, p. 16). Membership was based on successful college attendance, and women were sought who shared social bonds and experiences. Mrs. Browne's enthusiasm for joining the Deltas was linked to how honored she felt to be asked to join. Many of the members were the wealthier daughters of Detroit's elite and entrepreneurial class, a group she was not sure she belonged with. Mrs. Jones' entry was less surprising, taking into account the status of her father.

The connections forged in sororities served the women well as they entered the Detroit Public Schools. A kinship was shared among the other few Black schoolteachers who were also sorority sisters that proved helpful as opportunities for advancement opened up for African American women in the Detroit Public Schools in the 1950s and 1960s. As the national and local sororities expanded their commitment to community and political service, they began to supplant the national and local club work that women in previous generations had participated in (Giddings, 1988).

### **Entering the System**

Both Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne were required to substitute for one to two years before receiving positions with the Detroit Public Schools. Both women thought the experience gave them a good overview of the school system, although they acknowledged that they were only sent to schools with high African American enrollment. Mrs. Browne proclaimed, I could tell you every Black teacher in the system, 'cause that's the only place they would send me – where there were Black teachers.' Mrs. Browne named four elementary schools on the lower eastside Barstow, Lincoln, Trowbridge, and Duffield – where the majority of Detroit's Black students and teachers attended and taught. In addition, there was a small area in the north end of the city, near Hamtramck, (where Mrs. Jones was raised) that had become mostly African American; as well as an outlying community of predominately southern Blacks on the outskirts of the city near Eight Mile Road.

Mrs. Browne finally landed a permanent position teaching second grade at Lincoln school. Mrs. Jones obtained a position at the Capron School for Boys. Even though she graduated as a secondary English teacher, Mrs. Jones was assigned a first grade which was occupying the second floor of the school, due to the overcrowded conditions in Detroit schools at the time. Mrs. Jones was sure that her secondary qualifications were ignored because of her race. Gender considerations might also have played into the lack of consideration for a high school position.

Mrs. Jones was very happy with teaching her first graders in general, and teaching, period. What was especially important to her was the economic independence her job afforded her:

Now when I started teaching, we were making \$7.00 a day, \$35 a week which went farther than the money that tripled later. And I dressed in the best of clothes, the best of everything, had everything – because my husband was also working and making \$7.00 a day. So we lived beautifully.

Mrs. Jones' husband worked in the real estate office with her father, and also part-time at Ford's. Clearly, she saw the two of them working together to establish a financial base with which to raise a family. Mrs. Jones' marriage, however, was not something the Detroit Board of Education knew about:

I kept my marriage a secret for a year. Now the Black people knew I was married – but you know, we didn't tell on each other. And, then I announced it later. But I didn't tell for a long time – cause they did not hire married teachers. And so then I had to . . . announce it later that I had gotten married.

A similar situation presented itself when Mrs. Jones became pregnant:

And then, when you got pregnant, they really didn't care about you coming back. I'll never forget the woman who was in charge of teacher placement. She was an old maid and I always thought she was jealous because you married and had children. [laughter] Cause when I married – she said, 'Now you are going to be a mother now, and I know you're going to stay home with your babies, blah, blah, blah.' But anyway, I stayed home . . . three and a half years – had my two babies on one leave. And then I went back.

Mrs. Jones clearly disagreed with the Board's policies concerning married women and mothers who taught:

. . . they felt I guess that when you're married, you're too divided . . . I don't know about that. 'Cause I'll tell you what I think. I think with

marriage and children – you’re a better teacher. And I’ll tell you why. You’re having a well-rounded life. Plus I think a mother is a better teacher. I know a mother’s a better teacher – I don’t think it. Because when you get ready to do something to that little kid, you think, I’ve got someone back here at home. . . . I mean I don’t think you think it consciously, I just think it’s just there. Yes, I think mothers make excellent teachers. But, at that time, you know, that was the thing at all, but they let up, you know. As I say, things have really changed (laugh) – some for the better, and others, well, we could let it go.

Mrs. Jones clearly believed that it was in the best interests of her students that she was both a wife and a parent. And she negotiated a space for herself within the Detroit Public Schools despite the tensions created.

There was one other item Mrs. Jones secreted away in order to maintain her employment with the school system: union membership.

Well, you know at the time that I started teaching, you were afraid to let them know if you were a union member. And we snuck – do you like that word? Those of us – cause I was always a believer in the union – so we kept our union membership a secret. And then, a number of us who were real scared, were members of both – the DEA and the Federation. And in that way, I guess we were playing it safe. (chuckling) But unions were frowned upon in education.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) was officially organized as a union in the early 1930s and had grown increasingly active over the decade. Like most union organizations at the time, its politics were viewed as radical and that made it unpopular with administrators and conservative business organizations (Mirel, 1999). The Detroit Education Association (DEA) was a more conservative organization, originally formed in the 1920s as the Detroit Teachers Association (DTA). It was considered by some to be the more “professional” organization and was dominated by administrators for quite some time.

This organization was also not affiliated with organized labor. (Mirel, 1999)

Although the DFT did not become the collective bargaining agent for Detroit teachers until 1963, Mrs. Jones thought union concerns about work conditions and salary and benefits issues fit with her role of being a professional teacher.

### **Conclusion**

The stories of Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne merge with the earlier narratives of Fannie Richards and Mrs. Roscoe. From the 1865 birth of Black female professionals in Detroit to the women entering teaching in the 1940s, cultural historical theory and Black feminist thought help to explicate five conditions that helped to make their entry into high school, college, and later, the Detroit Public Schools possible. Despite the “multiple jeopardies” that confronted all of the women, they were able to pursue successful careers because of active family, community, and individual responses to these jeopardies.

First, all of the women were from highly literate families that supported the education of their daughters. This insurance of a strong education prepared these women for successful college and professional careers at a time when other Black women were still confined to domestic work and when other White women were being prepared for clerical and sales positions unavailable to Black women. Families were willing to physically relocate to places where education was available, and thus, essentially changed their class status from

the lower working class to the striving lower rungs of the professional class by moving their daughters into positions where they could become educated and teach. Some families, such as Mrs. Browne's and Mrs. Jones' took on more entrepreneurial work such as hairdressing or real estate sales; while others, including the Pelhams and Richards, relied professional and patronage positions that were the result of past investments in education.

Secondly, a tradition of community support and agitation made teaching jobs available. Even though professional work for African American women was pretty much limited to teaching (and later, social work and nursing), community agitation was necessary to open up these fields more widely to Black women and men. This was seen with Fannie Richards and her brother's activism to desegregate the schools, as well as Snow Grigsby's campaign to get more Blacks employed at the Board of Education and other organizations.

The third condition apparent across the narratives of these first four women is that each woman was expected to demonstrate a commitment not just to teaching, but to the broader community of which she was a part. Community here is defined as not only African American, but also includes the many immigrant and native-born White students that filled their classrooms. The role of African American women in the acculturation process of immigrant students should not be underplayed and is an important subject for further investigation.

The development of female activist organizations such as sororities was a fourth condition of these first teachers. These organizations supported personal and educational development and provided a “guild” for younger women to develop professional identities that served not only employment specifications, but also leadership opportunities within the community. As Collins (2000) points out in Black feminist thought, these organizations illustrate the interplay of action and thought from a “self-defined Black women’s standpoint” (p. 30). As young African American women were apprenticed into such organizations, they were also apprenticed into a Black women’s standpoint that reinforced their roles in the community.

Finally, the women all exhibited a keen sense of respectability – either elite or middle-class – that helped to shape their identities, as well as carry them into professional institutions and organizations. This personal sense of respectability required that each woman conduct herself in certain ways that reflected her high character, intelligence, social responsibility, and domesticity. Respectability, then, was an active response to dominant mainstream images of the Black woman as simply a domestic or caretaker (“Mammy”), or a female with little sexual restraint (“Jezebel”) (Katzman, 1973; Osterberg, 2003; Reid, 1996; Richardson, 2003; Wolcott, 2001). Schoolteaching reinforced this feeling of respectability, even as restrictions concerning marital status and motherhood were lifted in the 1940s.



The five conditions outlined -- education and literacy, community support and agitation, community service, female activist organizations, and respectability -- all continued to play a role in the lives of women I interviewed who entered the school system in the late 1940s and late 1950s. What differed, however, was the way these attributes were imagined and acted upon, and how they were prioritized. The city, too, continued to change and becoming a teacher meant taking on the issues the city faced as it grew and expanded.

## CHAPTER V

### HOUSING, RACE, AND UNIONS: MRS. RUSSELL'S LANDSCAPE

*Detroit schools have always maintained a policy of non-discrimination and throughout the years have never segregated pupils because of nationality or color. In our classrooms, on our playgrounds, and in such organizations as bands, orchestras, and glee clubs, children of all races work and play together in complete harmony.*

*—The Superintendent's Annual Report (Detroit Public Schools, 1946)*

*I was the first Black-looking Black teacher hired at Smith School in 1947.*

*—Interview with Mrs. Russell, 2005*

#### **Eastside/Westside: The Housing Crisis**

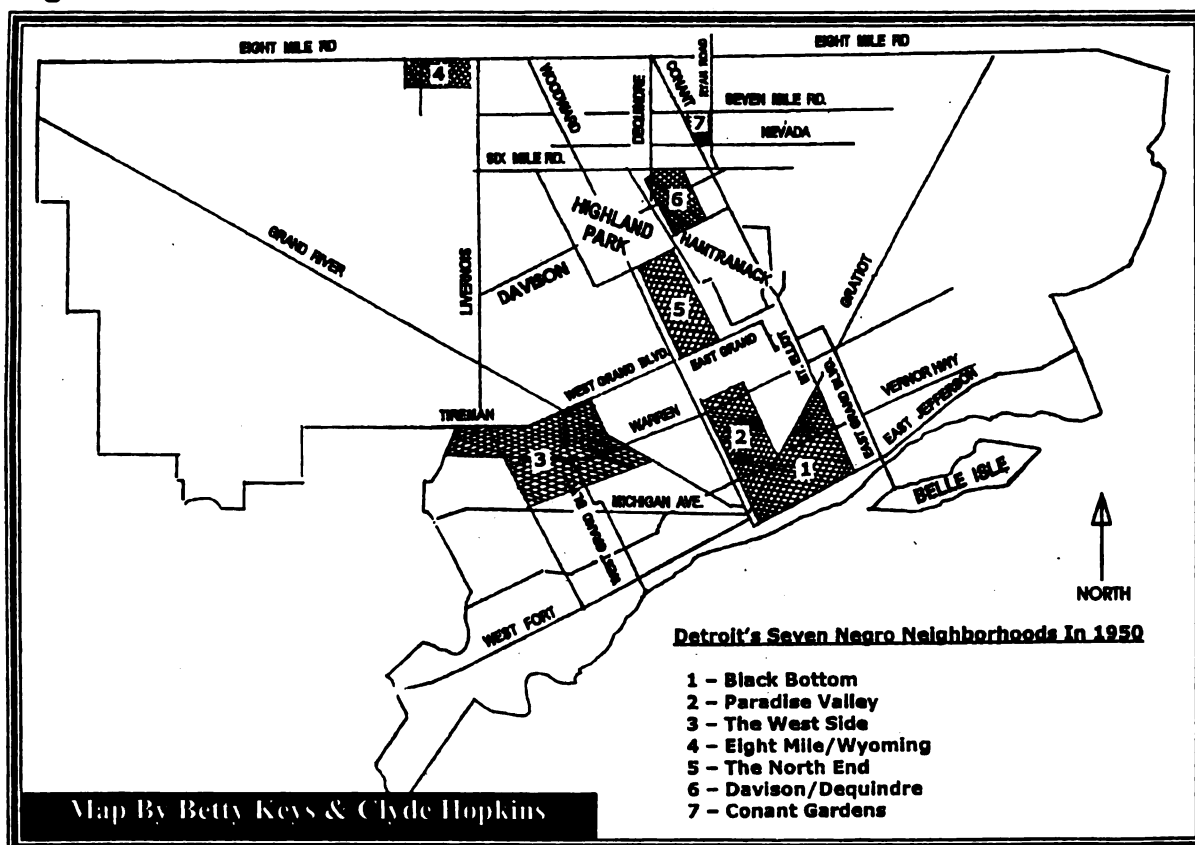
Residency – where one lived – was an important theme in each informant's life story. This theme also became an important one in the story of the Detroit Public Schools, as the system struggled with issues of segregation from the 1940s through the 1970s.

By the early 1940s, Detroit was undergoing radical changes as the Depression years gave way to an economic boom when the wartime economy began to pick up steam. Detroit led the nation in economic recovery, and the powerful trade union movement begun in the 1930s had succeeded in organizing Detroit's industrial workforce, and now workers were guaranteed livable wages and relatively safer working conditions (Sugrue, 1996). The massive wartime defense buildup resulted in a chronic shortage of labor, and the call for workers went out. Migration from many corners of the United States, but primarily the South, swelled the city's population to over 1.6 million. Detroit's

African American population grew to nearly 150,000 people, or a little over 9 percent of the city's population. By 1943, the Black population had reached 200,000 (Metzger & Booza, 2002, Sugrue, 1996; Thomas, 1992; Wolcott, 2001).

The housing situation created palpable tension throughout the city; housing was simply in short supply for the rapidly increasing population. Figure 2 provides a map of the seven residential areas available to African Americans from the mid-1920s through the 1950s. The majority of Black residents still lived in "Black Bottom," the oldest part of the city (originally named for the rich Black soil that European immigrants found suitable for

**Figure 2. Detroit's Black Residential Areas - 1950**



From *Conant Garden: A Black Urban Community* by the Conant Gardeners, 2001.

gardening and farming). As this area became too crowded during the Great Migrations between 1916 and 1929, the African American population spilled over across the Gratiot Avenue boundary into an area named “Paradise Valley.” This became the home of Black businesses and institutions, including the major churches, clubs, stores, and entertainment venues. In 1935, Eleanor Roosevelt presided over the opening of the Brewster Homes, located in Paradise Valley and one of the city’s first housing projects.

Smaller enclaves of several hundred to several thousand working- and middle-class Blacks grew in other sections of the city. The Westside area bounded by Grand River and Tireman is where the Browne family found refuge and the neighborhood expanded with many new migrants and immigrants arriving during the Second World War. The North End (bounded by Woodland, Riopelle, East Grand Blvd., and Woodward) did also, although it was mostly a haven for middle-class Blacks. The Davison-Dequindre area, where Mrs. Jones’ family lived, was on the northern border of a heavily Polish area known as Hamtramck.

Two other areas attracted very few Black migrants during the War. On the eastside, about eight miles from Paradise Valley, a section of the city was deliberately deeded to prohibit restrictive covenants. This area, known as Conant Gardens, was one of the only areas where African Americans could build their own homes (Metzger & Booza, 2002; Sugrue, 1996; The Conant Gardeners, 2001). As a result, this area became attractive to middle- and upper-

class Blacks. In contrast, a section of the city in the Eight Mile-Wyoming area in northwest Detroit, was made available to many southern African American migrants who were able to buy lots, but did not have sufficient capital to build much in the way of housing, at least by Northern standards (Sugrue, 1996; Thomas, 1992; Wolcott, 2001).

By the early 1940s, Black Bottom, Paradise Valley, the Westside, North End and Davison-Dequindre were all overflowing with residents. The housing situation had a definite impact on the school system – both for its employees and its students. Your neighborhood determined where you studied if you were a child, or worked, if you were a Board of Education employee. As race and class divisions tightened, options for African American teachers and their families became fewer.

Using data from census reports and from the interviews, I was able to trace the residences of the teachers viewed thus far in this study. Most fit into the pattern described above. Fannie Richards' lived in the area known as Black Bottom all of her years in Detroit. The main residence which she shared as an adult with her mother, various other family members, and occasional boarders, was owned by her brother, John D. Richards. When he died during the 1880s, Fannie continued to live in the home with other relatives until she moved in with a niece and her husband as the 1910 census shows. (Miss Richards retired in 1915 and died in 1922.) Through all the census reports, the Richards' family

is listed as “mulatto” or “Black” – and are the only family of color listed on their block.

By the early 1940s, Mrs. Roscoe had returned to the classroom, and Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne were in the beginning stages of their careers. The 1930 Census reports that Gladys Roscoe and her husband, Herman (a postal clerk), lived outside of the traditional Black enclaves. They owned a home on Coplin Street off of Jefferson, slightly east of Belle Isle, and she and her husband were the only African American residents on the block. When Mrs. Jones began teaching, she and her husband lived in the Davison-Dequindre area, on Arlington on the northern border of Hamtramck, probably in a home with her parents or nearby. As young newlyweds, Mrs. Browne and her husband lived at Alger and John R, in the North End, slightly north of Paradise Valley. Mrs. Browne described the home she and her husband rented:

A doctor by the name of Mack owned a two-family flat there and he lived in one side. And the other side he divided it up into an upstairs apartment and a downstairs apartment with a hallway on the first floor. And the downstairs apartment got the original kitchen, and I got the original bath. But the smallest bedroom at the back of the house became my kitchen. So I lived there until we got our first house.

Mrs. Browne’s description of how homes were divided and subdivided illustrates the housing crunch that was experienced in the conscripted African American neighborhoods in the 1930s. By the 1940s, things were measurably worse.



Heightening the severe housing shortage were tensions revolving around class and race in the city. As Sugrue (1996) points out:

Class and race became more important than ethnicity as a guide to the city's residential geography. Residents of Detroit's white neighborhoods abandoned their ethnic affiliations and found a new identity in their whiteness (p. 22).

The practices of real estate developers and agents exacerbated the problems.

One developer put up a concrete wall to separate the African American Eight Mile enclave from the surrounding community. Restricted covenants were used as marketing tools by developers and agents to assure White buyers that their neighborhoods would remain homogenous. A federal housing project, the Sojourner Truth Homes, placed near Conant Gardens, was initially resisted by Black and White residents of the area in 1942, and when African American families attempted to move in, White residents staged a siege that escalated into a small riot (Sugrue, 1996; The Conant Gardeners, 2001; Thomas, 1992; Wolcott, 2001).

Overcrowded, limited housing, a 48-hour industrial work week, and a record number of newcomers increased the tension all the more. Integration in the workplace was actively resisted by many Whites. In June of 1943, 25,000 Packard plant workers staged a work stoppage to protest the promotion of three Blacks. In another incident, White women at Packard tried to incite a walkout when newly hired Black female workers were allowed to use the White rest-rooms (Thomas, 1992).





Later that summer, the city exploded and the conflagration called the 1943 Race Riot claimed 34 lives, 22 of whom were Black. Federal troops were brought in to quell what was described as one of the worst race riots the nation had seen since the 1863 Draft Riots in New York (Farley, Danziger, & Holzer, 2000; Sugrue, 1996; Thomas, 1992; Widick, 1972; Wolcott, 2001).

### **Race and the Detroit Public Schools**

In the aftermath of the 1943 riot, attention was directed toward the schools to help improve race relations within the city. In response, an Administrative Committee on Inter-cultural and Inter-racial Education was established in 1943 (Mirel, 1999). Curriculum reforms were instituted that incorporated elements of Black history. These efforts were seen as helpful, but inadequate. The community began to demand the hiring of more African American teachers and other personnel.

One week after the 1943 riot, the NAACP called on school leaders to hire substantially more Black teachers, particularly on the high school level, to hire more Black counselors, to end the policy of placing Black teachers only in schools with predominantly Black enrollments, and to elect a Black member to the Board of Education (Mirel, 1999, p. 190)

The Detroit Board of Education responded to these stipulations to some degree. Mirel (1999) reports that the number of Black teachers in the system increased from 156 to 286, accounting for 4 percent of the total faculty in a school system that had a 17 percent Black enrollment. (See Appendix E for a chart depicting the number of teachers by race over a 130 year period.)

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In addition, only 20 of the 286 Black teachers worked on the intermediate or high school levels. Even more troubling was the fact that the Board assigned all of the Black teachers to the 24 predominately Black elementary schools and the three predominately Black secondary schools, Sherrard and Garfield Intermediates, and Miller High School (Mirel, 1999, 190-191).

Furthermore, African American parents were especially dismayed at the paucity of counselors within the system. Because of few Black counselors, parents believed their children were overrepresented in the special education and the general education tracks.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers was one of the unions who endorsed many of the demands of the NAACP and the Urban League. Following the lead of the UAW, the DFT began to strengthen its ties to the African American community.

The actions of the DFT . . . provide another example of how an important union joined forces with Black leaders and organizations to pursue a common, liberal agenda in the city. Both the UAW and the DFT would increasingly play a major role in the liberal-labor-Black educational coalition that was emerging during these years (Mirel, 1999, p. 191)

The above events provide the backdrop for another informant's entrance into the ranks of Detroit Public School teachers. Mrs. Russell's experience, when compared to the stories of the previous informants, provides a counter narrative regarding issues of race and class and becoming a Detroit Public Schools teacher. Because of this, and because her experiences bridge a critical juncture in the history of the Detroit Public Schools, her story is presented here in some

detail. It is based not only on my interviews with her in 2005, but also upon a 1969 published interview located in Wayne State's Labor Archives.

### **Mrs. Russell: Building a Black-Labor-Liberal Alliance**

Mrs. Russell was born in 1927 in Detroit, the oldest of five children. Her parents were from Tennessee and they actually returned South to wait out the first few years of the Depression on family-owned land. Coming back to Detroit in 1934, the family re-established residence in the Black Bottom neighborhood, while Mr. Russell was able to resume his employment with the Ford Motor Co. He supplemented his income by delivering ice and coal to his eastside neighbors. According to Mrs. Russell, her mother was a teacher down South, but was not permitted to teach in Detroit.

Mrs. Russell recalled that in the early 1940s, there were four schools for Black children on the eastside: Barstow, Capron, Duffield (which she described as the "first real Negro school") and Miller High. Among my informants, Mrs. Russell was the first to speak about Black teachers she had while in elementary school. She remembers clearly three female teachers, all daughters of the entrepreneurial middle-class that had arisen two or three decades before: Agnes Bristol, lower platoon teacher and daughter of the owners of Bristol Funeral Home at Monroe and Joseph Campau in Black Bottom; Elizabeth Cole, upper platoon teacher and wife of the owner of Cole Funeral Home; and Marian Carter, librarian and daughter of Dr. Carter. Mrs. Cole was responsible

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for double-promoting Mrs. Russell twice and Mrs. Russell graduated from high school at the age of 15. Mrs. Russell attributes her academic prowess to the help of her mother, an unemployed schoolteacher. That assistance, and the fact that she was the eldest among the children in her family, made her feel responsible to succeed academically.

Mrs. Russell attended Miller High School, graduating in 1942. Despite its segregated status and lack of facilities, Miller High School had become one of the premier high schools in the city. Mirel (1999) describes how it came to be so:

In 1942, Charles Daly, one of the most enlightened administrators in the school system, became principal. Daly strongly supported the corps of Black teachers [three men]. . . and many of the white teachers who were determined to maintain high standards and expectations in order to assure that students at Miller received a quality education. By 1947, Miller was so academically successful that one Black leader estimated that 20 percent of its graduates went on to college (p. 189)

Mrs. Russell reported that Miller was a positive place that encouraged many of its students to go into professional careers. In a 1969 interview, however, she revealed some of the circumstances under which she was “mentally toughened:”

Learning to cope with society was very painful. We kids at Miller learned not to hear the white kids call us ‘possum,’ ‘coon,’ and ‘nigger’ when we’d compete against them. We’d just look at each other, wink, and then beat them at whatever we were doing. . . . I guess that’s why I’m not emotional today in my dealings with bigots. I ram quality performance down their throats instead of fruitless arguments.

This mental toughness was a frequent theme in Mrs. Russell's remarks concerning her career with the Detroit Public Schools and her later activism.

Mrs. Russell attended Wayne State immediately after high school and graduated in four years. She described her years at Wayne as scholastically rewarding, but it was at Wayne that she became acutely aware of the social distinctions that played out amongst the other African American students at the University. She came to understand that she occupied a different social position than lighter-skinned peers, especially those with professional or entrepreneurial parents. Although some might consider that Ms. Russell's family was "doing well," she recalls that her clothes were always second-hand pieces that her mother, an excellent seamstress, would redo for her. They owned a car, and her father held an important position in the community, having secured the contract to deliver ice and coal. Nevertheless, the family was considered "working class" respectable; not middle-class or bourgeois. Furthering that perception was their church, a commanding influence in their lives.

Mrs. Russell described herself and her family as Sanctified, meaning they attended the Church of God, which was not one of the religious congregations that many (if any) elite belonged to. Sanctified churches arose in the South and came to Detroit with the Great Migration of the 1920s. Sanctified services were distinctive in that they focused on ecstatic worship. True believers had to demonstrate receipt of the "second blessing" through emotionalism, shouting,



singing, spirit possession and speaking in tongues. Sanctified churches also emphasized strict moral rules. Chastity, cleanliness, abstinence from liquor and tobacco, and the abandonment of “worldly amusements,” such as card playing were emphasized (Wolcott, 2001).

The combination of dark skin, eastside address, and religious affiliation separated Mrs. Russell from most of her African American peers at Wayne State. She recalled how class issues surfaced among the group.

When I went to Wayne, the mere fact that I was from the eastside. . .and if you came from over there, you had to be poorer than everybody else; and even some of the poor Blacks from the westside, thought because I was from the eastside, that I had to be less than they were.

Mrs. Russell’s concerns stemmed from the fact that the small, middle-class African American enclave that had established itself on the westside considered themselves as escapees from the “ghetto,” or Black Bottom, located on the eastside. This distinction – of being from the westside or eastside – served as a spatial reminder of the classes of African Americans that populated the city.

Mrs. Russell’s family was well off, but she did not feel she could share this information with her peers:

I’d never told them I lived fairly well, you know, until several of them came by to see me one day and they said, ‘Well, you live in a nice house!’ I said, ‘I wondered if you thought that I was camping.’

Mrs. Russell concedes that the snobbery she felt among Blacks, also existed among Whites and others:

But, there was not only snobbery everywhere among the Blacks at Wayne . . . in the late '40s, there was plenty of snobbery among the Whites, among people who really wanted to use education to escape.

For Mrs. Russell, education, felt like a competitive arena, where working class and underclass sons and daughters competed for goods that would allow them to move into at least the lower middle-class. Her judgment of the situation was succinct: "And it became to be sort of disgusting. You know, you enter into the elite simply because you're fortunate enough to go to college."

The competitive arena among Blacks co-existed with their exclusion from the greater society. For instance, Mrs. Russell recalled that during the 1940s, there were no businesses where Black students could obtain lunch around Wayne University. None of the drugstores or lunch counters in the area served African Americans. elite or not. Mrs. Russell remembers gathering with the other African American students in the basement of Old Main (the old Central High School and main building of Wayne's campus) near their lockers. All of the students brought lunches in brown bags to eat while they stood around.

And most of the very fair young ladies from the west side, like Betty \_\_\_\_\_, whose father was a doctor . . . . They would all stand around in a group, you know. And those who smoked, there was a little place there called 'Nicotine Nook' and they would smoke. But I didn't smoke. But I would stand by my locker and talk to the one or two people I knew, went on and got my grades, and graduated from Wayne and taught school.

Although Mrs. Russell did not feel she fit into any of the designated groups, she did not feel inferior to any of them.

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But I never thought I was any less than any of them. I didn't know 'em before I went to Wayne, and I didn't have to know them at Wayne.

Mrs. Russell always felt that she could independently accomplish her goals without having to compromise her values. She did, however, pledge a sorority (Alpha Kappa Alpha) during her junior year. The induction period was particularly hard on her as the sorors tried to "break her spirit."

And I have scars to this day on my knees where they had me crawling and crawling and crawling. And we used to have to get these eggs. I can recall going to Beulah Whitby's [Detroit's first Black social worker and prominent community member] home and [others]. And you had to get these signatures [on the eggs]. And in those days you didn't have cars. You had to take your little money and get on the streetcars. We didn't even have buses yet then. So, I can recall that they would break my eggs. 'Let's see how many signatures you got, Worm. Oops!' And they would drop my eggs on the cement in front of Old Main. Which meant I had to start over again. And I didn't have that many pennies to buy eggs, either. There were five of us in my house, and mother and grandmother and my father. And so I had to take my poor little change, and make sure I had eggs. I think they must have dropped a dozen of my eggs. But see they can't do things like that today.

Mrs. Russell endured the ritual because she saw that joining such an organization would be important for her. She appreciated the community work they did and she was beginning to see herself as an organizer and leader. Accordingly, she used some strategies to make the hazing process endurable.

I joined AKA in my junior year. And I joined in my junior year, because in those days they could haze. And they could ask you to do things. If they found out there was something you really didn't want to do, that's what they would make you do. And I knew the minute they knew that I went to the Church of God, they would be asking me to do everything to break my spirit, one way or the other. And so I picked \_\_\_\_\_. She was Dean of Pledges at the time. And she laughs to this day: 'Girl, you had us going. The other pledges would say what they had to say, but you'd stand up there and look us in the eye and say it. And we

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would just look at you. The tone of your voice and your eyes let us know you didn't think you were a lowly nothing.'

Strategically, Mrs. Russell waited until she was nearly through with her college career before she joined the sorority, and she picked a sponsor whom she viewed as more gentle and nurturing. She prepared herself for the attacks she expected because of her religion, and she was able to do demeaning tasks while maintaining her self composure.

But, anyway, the difference is, the more you try to break my spirit, the more I let you know you ain't going to break it. And so \_\_\_\_\_ will laugh to this day. 'Girl, you were my little Worm [designation given to neophytes in the organization]. You were something else.' But to this day she appreciates me and I appreciate her. So that was that.

Mrs. Russell's tenacity and forthright behavior continued as she became a teacher in the Detroit Public Schools.

### **Mrs. Russell and the Detroit Board of Education**

Mrs. Russell began her career as a physical education teacher at Smith, an elementary school located in a mostly White neighborhood east of Black Bottom. Mrs. Russell thought her hiring was due to the fact that she was African American:

They were not hiring too many new teachers. . . . And, because I had a Black face, I think [that was] the reason they hired me. I was in the upper bracket of my class; maybe I'm belittling the fact. But many of the White girls did not get an appointment and had to go on the substitute list until they [the School Board] knew they were going to have that kind of money [from the proposed millage increase]

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Mirel (1999) points to the increasing alliance between the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and the liberal Black organizations that were seeking changes in the schools in the mid-1940s. Mrs. Russell's hiring and placement in a White school would be actions that met those demands. Mrs. Russell, however, had also had a successful student teaching experience in a predominantly Jewish school on the Westside of the city:

And here I was with my Black face over there as a student teacher. So, I looked at these kids and I had to teach the sports. And I thought well, let me learn something about how to teach dance. . . . And so I said let me find out. So I did some research to find out the kind of dances that Jewish people did. . . . the dances that they danced for their weddings and all of those. Well, I taught those kids their dances. And the parents came over there 'cause they wanted to see who was this teacher who was teaching their kids their dances. And they came in there and they saw my Black face. But I was treated very well there, though and got an 'out-standing' mark as a student teacher.

In any case, Mrs. Russell was placed at Smith, where she was not the only African American teacher. She declared, however, that she was the "first Black-looking Black teacher," referring to the lighter skin of her African American colleague and eventual good friend.

Within a year after joining the faculty of Smith, Mrs. Russell decided to join the Detroit Federation of Teachers. She related the following conversation she had with her Black colleague at Smith:

I heard about the Detroit Federation of Teachers. It was not the dominant organization at the time. I think the Board was still sort of leaning to it and working with the DEA, the Detroit Educational Association. They were professionals. So, I said to \_\_\_\_\_, 'I'm going to join the Detroit Federation of Teachers.' She said, 'You can't join the Detroit Federation of Teachers.' And, I said, 'Why not?' 'Why, that's a labor or-



ganization!’ I said, ‘Well, what does that have to do with me joining the Detroit Federation of Teachers?’ ‘Well, if you join the Detroit Federation of Teachers, you’re going to get trouble from Mr. Brown.’ Well, Mr. Brown was the administrator. I said, ‘Well, actually all I do is work for the Detroit Board of Education and I teach in a school where Mr. Brown is the principal. And, what I join shouldn’t be any of his business.’ She said, ‘Well . . . it just doesn’t work like that.’ Well, she was right, but I didn’t know it. So I joined the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

Mrs. Russell acknowledged that she joined the union because her father worked in the plant. She felt indebted to the unions because they allowed her father working in the plant to have enough money “to take care of his children and to send us to school, those of us who would go.” Her participation in the labor movement, however, extended beyond her loyalty to her father. Her father, a member of the Church of God, did not participate in union activities; “he did little of anything away from his family.” For Mrs. Russell, joining the labor movement was also an act of resistance toward the snobbery and elitism she found among fellow Black students at Wayne, and later some Black teachers within the Detroit Public Schools. She found that the DEA stressed “professionalism,” which she viewed as a code word for elitism.

And, I decided that if I had to be a professional, I had to be very different. I’d just go right along with the labor movement, you know, which seemingly at that time, they were fighting for many things. And the DEA, to me, was just at a standstill, happy to be the right arm of the Board of Education, or the left arm, or which ever one it was. . .

Mrs. Russell’s act of resistance – joining the union – allowed her to position herself where she felt she could fight for the rights and the livelihood

of her colleagues. She was not yet, however, conscious of the political consequences of her act.

Well, I joined the Federation and I don't think the ink was dry on the card that I had signed before Mr. Brown came flying down to my room. And, he said, 'Miss [Russell]!' I said, 'Yes.' 'Can you tell me who the DFT is running for, is backing for the Board of Education?' Well, at that time, I didn't even know that there was a political aspect to the labor movement. I said to Mr. Brown, . . . 'Mr. Brown, . . . In order to come down to my room to find out who the DFT is running or backing for the Board of Education, you had to pass Mr. Cost's room, who is the union representative.' I said, 'I just joined the union several days ago, so if you want information, it's best if you talk to Mr. Cost.'

It is important to keep in mind that Mrs. Russell was 20 years old when she was hired by the Detroit Board of Education, and nearly 21 when she joined the union. Growing up in a protected environment, she was unable to imagine the consequences joining the union would have on her career.

I stayed at Smith, I would say, about 4 ½ years. Then somewhere along there, . . . I walked into the office and I was being transferred to the Lincoln [school]. Mr. Brown, the principal [of Smith] didn't care that much for me, anyway, because I had joined the union. He had already told me before, 'Well, I want you to know, young lady, my school is not a union school.' And I looked at him and I said, 'Well, Mr. Brown, I am well aware your school is not a union school. It's a school for teaching children.' I said, 'But my father works out at Ford's plant. And if the union is good enough for him, it's good enough for me.'

### **Union Activity**

The Detroit Federation of Teachers Local 231 was awarded its charter in 1931, but remained virtually "underground" until 1938, when it began its fight to restore the pay cuts the teachers had taken during the Depression (Mirel,

1999). In addition to other issues, this fight was resolved, with the DFT winning a substantial \$2 million back pay lawsuit in 1946.

Mrs. Russell joined the Union in 1948. She later became a building representative at Lincoln where she became very active, for she saw the DFT as truly fighting for teachers' rights. Eventually, Mrs. Russell became the representative for the Detroit Federation of Teachers on the Central Labor Board, an organization made up of union representatives in the city. She describes this as the beginning of her involvement in the political scene and getting to know the people in the UAW, the AFL-CIO, the Teamsters, etc. Mrs. Russell recalled how her presence was treated at first. The Central Labor Board met on Saturday mornings and she remembered what happened the first time she attended a meeting:

[And they asked me] 'Well, what do you do?' And I looked at them, thinking, now first of all, why are they asking me what do I do? Cause I didn't understand at that time that most of the people in the labor movement . . . were doing something with factories or cars or something like that. And so finally I said, 'I'm a teacher.' And they fell out laughing.

She also remembers meeting Coleman Young (later long-term mayor of Detroit) at one of her first meetings.

And he wanted to know, 'Well what's a teacher doing sitting up in a labor meeting on a Saturday morning? Most of you educators . . .' In other words, were too . . . 'elite.' So that's how I got to know all of the fellas, because they could not at first imagine a teacher and I guess in particular, a Black teacher, sitting up, and one who would open her mouth and run her mouth when she felt like it, you know. If I had something to say. And they were all very gracious and nice to me.

Mrs. Russell remarked in another interview, "The teachers gained respect, however, when they did actually go on strike."

Mrs. Russell's involvement with the DFT and the greater union activities in the city were emblematic of the "emerging alliance between civil rights organizations, labor unions, and liberal leaders in the city" (Mirel, 1999, p. 201). Her work, however, took her into far-reaching activities on the national level. While remaining a classroom teacher, Mrs. Russell became more and more engaged with the national leadership of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

### **National Issues**

Mrs. Russell began to represent the Detroit delegation at the AFT meetings. She soon became the President of the Black Caucus of the AFT. She recalled a national meeting in New Orleans where the President of the New Orleans local approached her and asked her to lead a group of AFT teachers to protest the policy of the bars and restaurants to not serve African Americans. Mrs. Russell said it was not unusual at the time for the AFT to hold meetings in cities where the Black members were not treated equally with the Whites.

Mrs. Russell was at first reluctant: "Go into a bar? I don't drink." But the union representative said, "If you stand up and tell them, they'll follow you." During the interview, Mrs. Russell produced a photograph that confirmed the union representative's prediction. It was obvious that the member-

ship had followed her – Black and White teachers milled about the sidewalk in front of several establishments, essentially blocking all potential business. Mrs. Russell was among the Black and White members who went into the bars and waited to be served. This strategy was very effective. Later, Mrs. Russell found out that because of her leadership at the convention, the AFT made it possible for Blacks and other minorities to be served in downtown New Orleans establishments. “And I didn’t know all that,” she said. “I just know I got out there and tried to make a difference because they requested it.”

Mrs. Russell had other stories about similar activism in the national organization. She became a strong voice of the Black Caucus and developed skills in hearing out and settling issues.

### **Disillusion with the Black-Liberal-Labor Alliance**

By her 1969 interview, however, Mrs. Russell was less enthusiastic about the direction the union was going. Her experience reflected the divisions that occurred in the AFT, as members took opposing sides concerning decentralization, community control of schools, and self-determination. One example of Mrs. Russell’s displeasure is reflected in her assessment of Albert Shanker, who would five years later become the long-term president of the AFT. The 1968 Ocean-Hill Brownsville crisis in New York had propelled Albert Shanker into the public eye as head of the New York teacher’s union, and Mrs. Russell and others disagreed with him on many positions he took. When Mr. Shanker was

brought to Detroit by the Jewish Labor Committee to speak at the Trade Union Labor Council, Mrs. Russell reports that a contingent of White teachers picketed the venue. Mrs. Russell, however, did not join the picket line. She later explained: "Because I have to hear what is being said. I told you I fight issues. You can't be outside walking in a picket line." She explained that she thought the Jewish Labor Committee and the TULC had brought Mr. Shanker as an information item, and she wanted to believe the sponsors.

When asked what she thought of Al Shanker's speech, Mrs. Russell remarked,

Al Shanker was insulting to me and to every Black person there. Many Black people got up and walked out. I stayed because I didn't want anybody to tell me what someone said, I want to be able to hear it myself. . . . Then, I make my own decision. I think he did nothing for better relationships here. And as one Black person behind me remarked, 'If they bring him here two more times, we'll have the unanimity in the Black race that you've never seen in your life. And, it has taken 400 years and we haven't quite had unanimity. And, if he can do it in three speaking engagements, he's something else.'

Mrs. Russell went on to assure the interviewer that she would not vote for Al Shanker if he ran for the presidency of the AFT. She predicted, however, that

. . . he would get a large number of votes for this reason: Just as George Wallace almost became our president and almost made it very embarrassing for the people of the United States. There are many people who live in fear. And, their fear makes them do strange things. And it seems to be that if we can put enough policemen out there, if we can oppress you just a little more, we'll be safer by stepping on you. But, you see, when you step on me or stand on me, you got to stay there to keep me down. So you ain't going too far either.

Mrs. Russell's remarks reflected her analysis of the situation not only nationally, but locally in Detroit. By the late 1960s, the Black-liberal-labor alliance was already showing signs of wear. The slow progress of the civil rights struggle encouraged more radical solutions to persistent racial problems. "Following the 1965 and 1966 riots in Los Angeles and Cleveland, Black nationalists became increasingly vocal, demanding more rapid and profound changes in American society" (Mirel, 1999, p. 308-309). Black nationalism rejected integration and called for more sweeping, rapid changes. "By 1967, the civil rights movement was torn by the struggle between an older generation of integrationists and a younger, more militant generation of separatists" (Mirel, 1999, p. 309).

In Detroit, Black nationalist organizations such as the Inner City Parents Council and the Republic of New Africa gained adherents. They called for the transfer of White teachers and administrators out of Black schools, because they felt that all Whites "consciously or unconsciously" believed in the inferiority of Blacks. They also called for the removal of biased textbooks and other materials and the implementation of a more Afrocentric focused curriculum (Mirel, 1999).

The deterioration of educational services in the city was real. The general track curriculum, watered down in the 1930s, had become the warehouse for many Detroit high schoolers, Black and White. Overcrowding was common in all schools. In the Black community, however, problems were intensified by the older, more dilapidated facilities available to the students, the

absence of apprenticeship opportunities in the skilled trades; and the lack of academic opportunities in the form of Advanced Placement courses or college-prep curricula. These problems were brought to the attention of the public when Black Northern High School students staged a strike in April, 1966, protesting the quality of education they received. The striking students, with support from some parents and community members, made many demands, including the resignation of the White principal. Fearful of more reprisals within the system, the liberal Board and Superintendent ultimately reassigned the Northern principal to a position within the Schools Center Building, resulting in what the striking students and their supporters viewed as a victory, and what many others saw as a weak, liberal Board giving in to the demands of students (Mirel, 1999).

Sugrue (1996) demonstrates that the student unrest was symptomatic of larger problems in the city. The fear that Mrs. Russell alluded to was manifest in White efforts to sustain housing segregation and workplace discrimination. Furthermore, the overall deindustrialization of the city left fewer jobs overall.

Young people coming of age in Detroit in the mid- and late 1950s and 1960s faced a very different economic world from that of the previous generation. A Black male in Detroit in 1945 or 1950 could realistically expect factory employment, even if his opportunities were seriously limited by discrimination. . . . Over the next three decades, with the exception of a cycle boom in automobile employment in the mid- and late 1960s, few could rely on steady employment.

The increasing distress in the city resulted in the cataclysmic, week-long 1967 riot, where 43 people were killed, 1,000 were injured and more than 7,000



arrested. Property damage included the looting and burning of over 2,500 buildings and was estimated between \$80 and \$125 million. Seventeen thousand troops, including the Michigan National Guard, State Police, and paratroopers were called in to quell the violence (Fine, 1989; Mirel, 1999; Sugrue, 1996; Widick, 1972).

The divided city became even more fractured. The riot served to galvanize White working-class voters, and in 1968, White Detroiters provided a strong base of support for George Wallace, a presidential candidate who opposed “open housing, school integration, and the expansion of civil rights in the workplace” (Sugrue, 1996, p. 265). Despite widespread suburbanization, older White residents in the city’s most northwest and northeast neighborhoods still maintained the voting majority in the city and repeatedly voted against millage increases.

Meanwhile, the DFT itself became more militant, and in the fall of 1967, called its first strike. After two weeks, the Board and Union were able to agree on salary increases for the teachers, a one-week reduction in the school year, and a cap on class size (Mirel, 1999; Detroit Federation of Teachers, 2005). The action had long lasting effects however.

Not only did the strike weaken the liberal majority on the board, it also severely strained the liberal-labor-Black coalition, dividing organized labor, which strongly supported the DFT, from civil rights organizations, which were dedicated to restoring normalcy to ghetto residents after the riot (Mirel, 1999, p. 319-320).

During her 1969 interview, Mrs. Russell was asked to comment on the Ocean-Hill Brownsville Strike that took place the previous year in New York. Mrs. Russell commented, "I think it was a sin against children, against the grown-ups of the community, and . . . it's the kind of thing that labor will spend many years living down." She thought that many Black teachers felt the same way that she did:

I think that Black teachers today feel that their job is to teach children. Money is nice; but unless you think of children first, they aren't too interested in dollars. . . . The first responsibility is to all children in the community where you teach. . . .

Mrs. Russell's comments echo Mirel's (1999) analysis of the relationship of Black teachers to the Black community and to the union. When the DFT became more active in the 1940s, most Black teachers remained loyal to the Detroit Teachers Association, possibly influenced by the class issues Mrs. Russell spoke about earlier. It was not only conservatism, however, that kept many African American teachers from joining the union. Many saw the DFT's emphasis on teacher salaries as a misallocation of resources. Black teachers and parents were much more concerned about capital expenditures than salaries because most Black families lived in the oldest sections of Detroit, and the schools their children attended were often in terrible physical condition. "Nowhere in the city had the fifteen-year moratorium on school construction and renovation had a more profound impact than in Black neighborhoods" (Mirel, 1999, p. 193). Secondly, many Blacks realized that the Board presented

the issue of overcrowding as a smokescreen. They felt that the Board was invested in the process of segregation and used over-crowding as a way to manipulate district boundaries. Sufficient buildings would allow more flexibility with school boundaries and integration efforts.

Mrs. Russell, an ardent supporter of the DFT in 1948, felt differently by 1969:

I would say that once you become big business, be you union or management, you tend to forget the little people underneath. . . . I would say that there are several unions within the AFT that are big business. I think New York is big business; I would say Detroit is big business; Chicago . . . They are the large unions; they're respected across the country, you know. And, they're more of a symbol of unionism that actually the hard-hitting union that they should be.

Mrs. Russell clearly felt that the union was no longer responsive to the "little people," the teachers it was meant to represent. From her position she could see how the union's power could be misused or abused. This was most apparent during the first Detroit teacher's strike in 1967. Although she admitted the strike gained respect amongst the union coalitions in the city, the timing of the strike struck a chord of soreness with Detroit residents, especially inner-city Black parents who felt that the strike came much too soon on the heels of the 1967 riot in July.

Mrs. Russell felt that DFT's leadership was not being responsive to either the community or to the teachers it represented. She felt that if the union had engaged the community in discussion about personnel issues regarding decentralization and community control of schools, there would have been

some space to negotiate. As it stood, many of the parents and students simply resorted to strikes and boycotts whenever they felt the school or Board were being unresponsive to their needs. She felt that the result was heading in a certain direction when she predicted: "I know this. There is going to be some kind of decentralization and community control."

She also noted, "Now, in many of the big cities, Black teachers don't want any part of the union movement." She later said that she thought Black teachers might organize on their own and confront the issues facing them. Despite her lack of optimism, however, she retained her position on the Executive Board of the DFT for two more years. She commented:

We are going to continue to try. I wouldn't have gone back on that Executive Board. I did not want to be bothered with them any more. I mean, I would work, I would pay my dues, but I didn't want to be bothered with even having to say too much to them because I don't think at this time, unless there are some changes, that that union is going to be the kind of union that we can continue to support, not and have dignity in your own community because at the end of the day, I'm right here with Black folks. I can't go out in suburbia somewhere.

Mrs. Russell realized that she had to face the community in which she lived, and that she could not exercise the option of leaving the community and teaching in communities where she was not wanted. Furthermore, she hoped she could work to prevent Black teachers from assuming a degraded role in the community:

And, then the criticism will come and Black teachers in Detroit and across the country will be in the same position as Black policemen everywhere because, you know, Black people don't like policemen, period! But, a Black man that has to work in that blue uniform is in a very poor

position today. And, Black teachers don't intend to get into that position.

Mrs. Russell is clear that Black teachers should not assume the conflicted role of policing for those in power. This role, similar to the overseer's role in slavery, would leave African Americans at odds with their communities and would further increase the tensions between the "haves" and "have-nots."

She still had hope, however, at least in 1969:

Now if the union wants to fight, if the union wants to be where it was a few years back when I helped fight with them for collective bargaining and for the kinds of things that made teaching beautiful and meaningful; if the union will stop concentrating on terrific salaries and the more money we get, the less accountable we seem to have become, if they will do these kinds of things, then Black teachers can be their strongest supporters. . . .

Shortly after this interview, Mrs. Russell was involved in putting a decentralization resolution before the AFT. She thought that if she could get the strongest and largest teacher's union to support decentralization, it had a better chance in the Michigan legislature. She managed to get the AFT resolution passed, and Coleman Young took that resolution to Lansing and decentralization of the Detroit Public Schools became a reality in 1969.

In the aftermath of the 1967 Riot, an organization was formed by the mayor and top business leaders called, "New Detroit." Public agencies and private corporations were asked to supply "loaners," staff employed on a temporary basis to "engage in research and brainstorming" for the five subcommittees concerned with "communications, community services, education

and employment, law and finance, and redevelopment” (Fine, 1989, p. 438). As an educator with extensive experience with labor, Mrs. Russell was “loaned” by the Detroit Public Schools to New Detroit for a two-year period. She never commented on this work – the efficacy of the organization is still being debated – but it led her into a different arena of work with the Detroit Public Schools. One effect of the work with New Detroit was to increase the visibility of its participants within the local sphere. As a result, Mrs. Russell received a phone call from a Black attorney who was the first African American to negotiate contracts for the Detroit Board of Education. He called to offer Mrs. Russell an opportunity to work for the administration of the Detroit Public Schools:

And he said at that time, there was a sort of mistrust in the community as it related to educators, particularly the administrative, management side. And the people know you. And when you speak, . . . you speak the truth. . . . They have a great deal of respect for you.

So Mrs. Russell became the Personnel Administrator for one of the regions created with decentralization. Subsequently, she was promoted to become the Vice President of Human Resources at the Board’s main offices, a position she remained in until she retired from the system in 1988.

Mrs. Russell found herself in a location where she could possibly make more of a difference for African Americans. As White families continued to leave the city, and the Black population continued to increase, Black students became the majority in more and more of the district’s schools. As head of personnel for the Detroit Public Schools, Mrs. Russell could help enact policies,

monitor retention rates, and improve the situation for Blacks to obtain teaching and administrative positions in the schools. Thirty years later, she commented briefly on her move from the union to Board administration: "I didn't want to move over from the union, but I did. And I have not regretted it." She saw her job at the Board helpful in developing more economic power among the teachers she met, especially the women. Many were unaware of how to obtain tenure or knew the importance of contributing to retirement plans. She found that economic empowerment of teachers was a laudable part of her service to the community.

Mrs. Russell's involvement with the community did not end when her work with the DFT ceased. She became a prominent figure in local Democratic party politics and still serves in some capacity in City government. She channeled her commitment and energy through local political venues which she thought were more responsive to the changing needs of constituents than the teacher's union.

### **Conclusion**

Mrs. Russell's experience shows how a particular individual's experiences could be raced, classed, and gendered not only within the confines of Detroit and the Detroit Public Schools, but also within the African American community itself. Many of the early critical incidents in Mrs. Russell's narrative revolved around confronting racial and class boundaries as she moved

from high school into college. She was determined to become a teacher, regardless of the obstacles strewn in her path because of her skin color, her residence, and her religion. Despite her “lack of credentials” for moving into the middle-class elite, Mrs. Russell was able to turn the very structures of membership to her advantage. This trait is observable with Mrs. Russell throughout her career. True to the old African American adage, Mrs. Russell made a “way out of no way.” She used the configurations of exclusivity to scaffold her own entry into leadership positions. As Mrs. Russell advanced in the union arena, she found this ability further enhanced her leadership skills and she was able to play pivotal roles despite her gender – or maybe because of the daring her female presence in union caucus meetings signified.

Mrs. Russell was equally as adept in moving from the union hierarchy into the administration structure of the Detroit Public Schools. In both her union position, and her central board administrator function, Mrs. Russell was well aware of the possibilities of service inherent in these roles. Mrs. Russell saw herself as a change agent and a champion of the underserved or down-trodden. Thus, her actions were consistent with the ethos of “socially responsible individualism” and middle-class respectability. Throughout her career Mrs. Russell was a fighter for Black women and the African American community at large. Her analysis of the political and social situation in Detroit is evidence of her Black female standpoint which informed and supported her work.





## **CHAPTER VI**

### **LATER MIGRANTS: MRS. DAVIS AND MRS. WEST**

The last two women profiled in this study entered the Detroit Public Schools as teachers in the late 1950s. Mrs. Davis was born in Detroit; her family migrated with her older siblings in the 1930s. Mrs. West's family migrated from the South to the city in the 1940s, when Mrs. West was nearly a teenager. Both of these stories speak to the widening opportunities for African American women during the 1950s and 1960s.

#### **The Straight Path: The Story of Mrs. Davis**

Mrs. Davis' story differs in many ways from Mrs. Russell's. Another elegant, dark-skinned woman, Mrs. Davis has a different tale to tell about becoming a Detroit Public School teacher, entering ten years later than Mrs. Russell. Mrs. Davis narrated her story in a very matter-of-fact way and clearly saw her life as triumphant over obstacles that stood in her way.

Mrs. Davis was born in Detroit in 1935, the eighth of nine children. Her parents came from Mississippi where her mother had obtained a third grade education. Mrs. Davis said that her mother's mother worked in the city, doing domestic work. Therefore, her own mother had been raised by Mrs. Davis' great-grandmother. Mrs. Davis' father had completed the eighth grade, but the funds for his further education had been spent by the neighbor entrusted with

them for safekeeping. Among rural folks, banks were not available or trusted, Mrs. Davis explained. Unfortunately, the money was never recovered.

Shortly after this incident, Mrs. Davis' parents married and had two children. Mrs. Davis described why it was necessary for her parents to leave the South:

My father was a young buck who had a temper and way back then you didn't have a temper – not in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And so he had to get out real fast. My mother recalled incidences of lynching and so on – she saw all of that.

The potential violence and lack of economic opportunity in the South for young men specifically, and African Americans in general, persuaded Mrs. Davis' father to move to Detroit, where Ford Motor Company promised \$5.00 a day. Mrs. Davis' father struck out on his own to Detroit, and after obtaining the hoped-for job at Ford's, he sent for his wife and children. Mrs. Davis reported that her father worked for Ford's for "nearly 30 or 40 years," the rest of his entire working life.

Mrs. Davis' mother had no work skills, other than housekeeping, and it was her father's desire that her mother work only at home – and not work in "any White man's kitchen." They lived in a rented two-bedroom flat on Detroit's North End; and over the next several years, seven more children (one died in infancy) were born to the couple. Sixteen years separated the ages of the oldest and youngest of the eight children.

Mrs. Davis attended schools in Detroit: Breitmeyer Elementary, Sherrard Intermediate, and Cass Technical High School, graduating from the latter in 1952. She doesn't remember having any white classmates until she got to high school. She named two Black teachers she remembered; one was Marvin Greene who later rose through the ranks of Detroit Public Schools to become Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, and another was a female poetry teacher whose name she could not recall.

Mrs. Davis spoke much about her upbringing in the North End of Detroit. She described how much her father disliked factory employment.

Because my father . . . hated the factory. . . .He would talk to us all the time about the young 'fools' who thought they could be in the factory the rest of their lives and not get an education. . . . So our whole life was nothing but education.

Mrs. Davis' oldest sisters set the example for the rest of the brood. The eldest one went to secretarial school and majored in accounting and bookkeeping. She moved to New York in the late 1940s and became a bookkeeper for a jewelry firm, a job she held until retirement. Mrs. Davis' second oldest sister wanted to be a doctor, but settled for becoming a pharmacist. With the support of her father, she attended the three year pharmacy course at Wayne University. Mrs. Davis described the ribbing her father would get from other men on the job:

They thought he was crazy. 'Why are you sending that girl to school?' 'You know she's going to marry and have babies or whatever.' She actually never did, but he didn't know that then. He would just say, 'Naw, they should go to school.'

The older girls were able to begin working and help send younger siblings to school. In fact, the older sisters supplemented the family income so much that they family was able to move into their own home on the eastside of Detroit in 1948, when Mrs. Davis was 13 years old.

The Davis family was very insular. They spent their time in school, at church, at the library, and at home. Mrs. Davis said they had set routines that they followed religiously. They never went down South to visit, and they had no relatives in Detroit, except some distant cousins on her father's side that her mother did not approve of. Mrs. Davis remembers that they didn't even go the store, or hang out in the neighborhood.

It's strange, I thought all families were like ours. But my mother didn't let us go to other people's houses. You went to school, you came home. And she didn't allow us to go into homes. She said she didn't know what was going on there - she only knew what was going on in her own home.

When the children came home from school, they changed from their school clothes and sat down together to do homework or review their lessons. Older siblings helped younger siblings. There were weekly visits to the library together, and to church, but that was the extent of Mrs. Davis' social universe.

Part of the reason for so few activities for the family was the poverty Mrs. Davis remembers. "We really were very, very poor," she explained. She remembers wanting to take ballet or music lessons, but the 25 cent charge was too much for the family budget to take on. Still, Mrs. Davis remembers with

pride how good a seamstress her mother was, and that they always had clean and neat clothes and enough to eat.

After graduating from Cass Technical, Mrs. Davis spent her first year of college at Wayne University, and then she received a gift from her older sister: A year at Ypsilanti Normal School. Mrs. Davis described that year as “the best year of my life.” She lived in the dorm with three other girls and experienced the exhilaration of independence. Socially she felt well supported – she pledged AKA, the sorority her older sister belonged to – and she made many friends because her brother was well known among the Black students on the campus also.

Mrs. Davis majored in Home Economics, specializing in sewing and dress design, a course she had studied at Cass Tech. She remembers feeling that teachers gave her “B’s,” when she knew she deserved “A’s,” grades which seemed to be reserved for the White girls. When she complained to her mother about the situation, her mother simply replied, “Welcome to the real world.” The unfairness shocked Mrs. Davis, but she realized there was nothing she could do about it.

After her year at Ypsilanti, Mrs. Davis returned to Detroit and finished up her degree at Wayne. She passed the teacher’s examination and interview, but there were no jobs available in her area of Home Economics. So, she substituted and began to take classes that would earn her certification in what is now called Special Education. After doing this, Mrs. Davis landed a position

in Special Education, teaching mentally retarded students at a small elementary on the near east side, thus joining the Detroit Public Schools as a full-fledged teacher in 1957.

Meanwhile, two of Mrs. Davis' other siblings ended up in education. Her older sister was initially refused in her application to the Detroit Board. During the interview, the examinees determined that her voice had too much of a "southern accent" to it. They recommended she apply to another district and so she taught in Inkster for four or five years before she reapplied to the Detroit Board and became a teacher, and later a counselor for the Detroit Public Schools. Mrs. Davis' brother went to Howard to join another brother who went to dental school there. When he returned, he became a teacher, and then rapidly rose through the ranks, becoming a principal of a high school.

Mrs. Davis taught Special Education for about 10 years at different schools, including Northeastern High School. From there she became a high school counselor, which she says was her "best job." In 1970 she was promoted to Assistant Principal at an elementary school, and later promoted to Principal where she stayed at one elementary for 11 years. Then she received her final promotion and worked at the Central Office in Human Resources. She retired from that position after 40 years with the Board of Education.

Mrs. Davis reported that she was usually assigned to all Black or majority Black schools – and as the years went on, that seemed to be all that there were. She was not heavily involved in union activities – she thought that some

of the strikes were unnecessary. Instead, Mrs. Davis felt focused on insuring a productive academic environment for the students. Even as a Special Education teacher, she found ways to make sure the students were held to as high a standard as possible.

It was easier to get a kid out of Special Ed than it is now. . . . We really tried to keep them only a year and a half. And later teachers would say, 'Your kids turn in such nice, neat papers without any scratched out words.' Because I didn't allow it. And I would tell people, 'I teach at Northeastern here just like I would teach if I were at Denby [an all-White school at the time].' I have the same high standards. I bring my kids up to my standards; they don't bring me down to theirs.

Mrs. Davis was also clear that she knew where she stood in the raging controversies that encircled the schools from the mid-1960s through the 1970s. She observed, "Martin Luther King was killed during that time. But we didn't have a riot at Northeastern." She attributed this to having more seasoned teachers on staff who were more "Old School" in terms of how students should be treated.

I think there is a different attitude now for going into teaching. They go into it for the wrong reasons. We went into it because we wanted to make a difference. We knew . . . to get a nice house, a nice job, you had to go to school. And that was all we heard.

For Mrs. Davis, teaching was a way to expand the opportunities for her students, and education was a way to escape lower-class citizenship and dependency on the government. She offered this viewpoint to her students and felt successful when they took her up on it.



People who went into teaching because it was an opportune job, or because they just considered it a job, disappointed Mrs. Davis. "You have to like kids. And you have to be on a mission – but you have to make it fun," she counseled.

Anybody can give them that content, but there are some other things you need to give them. Something that they need to live by – words of wisdom and integrity and honesty. . . . and all the things that we are seeing going on now are just deplorable, deplorable. I still say we can make a difference.

Mrs. Davis' fervor is reflected in the activities she participated in outside of her employment. Besides being a very active member of the AKA sorority, Mrs. Davis devotes many hours to her Baptist church. She remembers church attendance as being time well spent as a youngster, and she lends her professional skills to the administrative end of her church as much as she can. In addition, Mrs. Davis belongs to a national Black female social club called the Carousels. She said the purpose of the group is to provide a place for professional Black women to have fun. There are twenty chapters of the Carousels throughout the country, and in addition to monthly meetings at members' homes, they have an annual convention in different spots around the globe.

Mrs. Davis is also a member of the Links, Inc. Graham (1999) describes The Links as

upper-class Black America's most elite organization for women. For over fifty years, membership in the invitation-only national organization has meant that your social background, lifestyle, physical appearance, and family's academic and professional accomplishments passed muster with a fiercely competitive group of women who – while forming a

rather cohesive sisterhood – were nonetheless constantly under each other's scrutiny (p. 102).

The 10,000-member strong organization is the largest and most influential of the Black women's clubs, and contributes millions of dollars to national organization such as the United Negro College Fund and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Local charities and scholarships are also supported by the organization. Members of the organization are expected to do substantial volunteer work in their communities, as well as participate in an extensive social calendar that includes formal parties, debutante cotillions, boat cruises, art auctions, fashion show luncheons, etc. (Graham, 1999).

Comparable to the Junior League, the Links boast a list of members who constitute many of the most important African American women in the United States today, including Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund; former secretary of energy Hazel O'Leary, and Bennett College President Johnetta Cole.

The extensive reach of this group is reminiscent of the National Organization of Colored Women founded in Washington, D.C. in 1896, which counted Harriet Tubman, Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells among its members. The Links, however, limit their membership to the most accomplished Black women and their application process is quite intense. Mrs. Davis recalled, "We just had that process and only two of the 17 applicants were admitted."

Mrs. Davis talked about some of the activities she is involved with in her chapter, such as supporting the local soup kitchen, doing a clothes drive for women getting back after drug addiction, and being part of a literacy project that tutors young people. Mrs. Davis' daughter is also a part of the local chapter and they do many projects together.

Mrs. Davis' story is interesting in that it contrasts a very secluded and focused life growing up as a girl in Detroit with a very rich vocational and service life as an adult. She has passed on both of these legacies to her only daughter who is now a teacher and a member of service organizations. For Mrs. Davis, her career with the Detroit Public Schools was chosen because it allowed her to give back to the community through the children she taught and the teachers she helped as a Human Resource official. Within the schools she also formed professional and social alliances that allowed her to join influential social and cultural organization, thus reinforcing her own personal and professional identity as an effective person.

### **Mrs. West: The Economics of Teaching**

Mrs. West came to Detroit from Griffin, Georgia with her parents in 1945, when she was 11 years old. Both of her parents were college educated; her father was a physician and her mother was a homemaker. Mrs. West was the youngest of four children, but her siblings were far older than she was and were already attending college when the family moved to Detroit.



Mrs. West expected the streets of Detroit to be “paved with gold in terms of everything we heard about ‘Up North’,” so she was surprised to find the schools segregated and so few Black teachers. She remembers there was “one little White boy in her class” at Maybee Intermediate, and he was “the poorest child I had ever seen in my life.” Nevertheless, Mrs. West got along well with her teachers and entered Northern High School where she developed journalism skills and became the editor-in-chief of the school paper.

Northern was an integrated school when she entered in 1947, but by the time she graduated in 1951, the student body was mostly African American. She thought, however, that the curriculum was quite good during her years at the high school and that nothing had been watered down.

Yes, the curriculum was quite good. It had a very strong language department, and I had a great experience there in journalism. I had French for four years. In fact, when I went to Michigan State, the principal of Northern came up. I guess this was something principals did – they visited students sometimes to see how they’re doing as freshman. When he looked at my records, he said that I had everything I was supposed to have to prepare for college. So I was really pleased. You know, as a student back in those days we didn’t have any choice. Now students say, I don’t want to take that. We would go to our counselor and she would just give you your schedule. That’s how I had French for four years. I didn’t ask for it. (chuckling) But by the time I graduated, in my last year there were about 8 of us in the class. But, you know, it was a good thing.

Mrs. West’s comments contrast drastically with the complaints of African American students just 15 years later during the Northern High School boycott. Her comments also speak to an authoritarian environment that gave few choices, but insured a curriculum with high standards.

Mrs. West also remembers not having Black teachers at Northern until 12<sup>th</sup> grade, when both her math and her art teachers were African American. She also had a counselor, Mr. Loving, who was the first African American man hired in a purely academic secondary position (English) at Miller High in the 1930s. Mr. Loving had been promoted to a counselor at Northern and Mrs. West found him to be very wise and supportive.

Well Mr. Loving was the counselor and he sort of walked you through the whole four years. . . . He was like a village in one person. And the good thing about him is that he was concerned about all the students. . . . even if you weren't having problems, he was still very much concerned about you. So he kind of gathered us all around him no matter what was going on.

Mrs. West's English skills served her well, and she thought that journalism would be a suitable career. She acknowledged, however, that in college she realized that the field was not yet open to Blacks. She also thought about being a doctor, and during high school, considered transferring to Cass Technical High School to become a lab technician. Her father, however talked her out of it. "He said, you know if you become a doctor, you'll have a hard time finding a husband. He said that men would be intimidated by me."

Mrs. West chose Michigan State to begin her college education. She wanted to get away from home and experience some independence away from her parents. Although her older siblings had attended Spelman and Morehouse in Atlanta, she felt that she was too much of a "free spirit" to deal with what she felt was the snobbish and authoritative atmosphere of Spelman. At Michi-



gan State Mrs. West met a senior, her husband to be, who was active on the cheerleading squad and majoring in business. After her first year, she returned to Detroit to go to Wayne State and be nearer her boyfriend who had already graduated. She had decided to become an Education major because she liked children, and she saw that many of the Blacks in college became teachers. She thought the idea to teach was always “lurking” and so she was not uncomfortable with the choice at all.

After two years of college, Mrs. West married her boyfriend. He had joined the army by this time, and they relocated to California. After the marriage, the “children started to come” but Mrs. West said she was “determined to finish my schooling.” When the family returned to Detroit, it took her four more years to finish her degree. “So I started college in 1951 and I graduated in 1958. But I had two children by then and . . . I was expecting a third.”

Mrs. West completed college with “a baby in one hand and a book in another” and started teaching elementary school for about 3 ½ years. After that time, she decided to take a leave of absence so that she could spend more time with her family. During the leave of absence, she substituted part-time, and she discovered that by doing so, she did not lose any of her seniority. After about a year, she returned to the classroom, taught for about five years, and then took another leave and substitute taught.

It was a good little rhythm for me because . . . I’ve got three children waiting for me at home. People sort of looked askance at me sometimes. ‘Why, if you’ve got a full-time job, would you leave it and become a



sub?' But for me it was working. And the way [my husband] and I had planned things, it worked for us.

Mrs. West also appreciated the variety her choices afforded her. "I was never just married to one school . . . I liked going to different schools."

Mrs. West and her husband worked out their financial situation so that Mrs. West could spend as much time as possible with the family. They lived "below their means" she said, and invested wisely so that their retirement years would be supported.

After about 24 years of her "on-again, off-again" schedule (including a nine year stint at one school), Mrs. West began to feel burned out and so she took another leave of absence. Her children were grown by then, and she remembered attending a church service with her son and his wife. The church had recently opened a school on their campus in a near suburb and the pastor announced that a second grade teacher was needed. Mrs. West decided to try that position for a year.

She found the environment at the small church school very different than the Detroit Public School settings she had taught in previously.

But it was a good bridge for me because again, it was a totally different environment. I had ten children. . . you know if you had 10 children in public school, you lost a teacher, hands down. Ten children. In fact I used to tell them, you know some people have 10 children! So that was very good for me for that one year.

Now it was so different. One of the interesting things about it was that we had a system called ABECCA curriculum. It was very detailed. They told you exactly what to say, exactly what to do. So you lost that sense of creativity. But guess what? The children could read and they



could do math, and they could write. So you began to think, well so what if I can't do my little creative things so much. They're learning. Because everyday they would have a quick math test, and they had to write three sentences everyday about something. If you just stayed with that, the lesson plans were already there more or less. So you just pulled them out. But again, as I said, we lost that sense of creativity. We had to wear uniforms. I had never done that before. So that was different But it was a good thing. Because it gave me a good respite from the public schools.

Mrs. West felt rejuvenated after spending a year at the Christian school. Even though there were some drawbacks, such as a prescribed curriculum and the wearing of uniforms, she felt she learned about different ways to bring curriculum.

She also realized something about unions that she had never thought about before.

But another interesting thing that occurred while I was there. I was never very big on the unions for teachers. I always thought that unions were not a good thing for teachers. I thought they made you have another mentality that I thought was fine in the factories and I felt we needed the unions in the factories because of all the issues around fairness and the hard work that they did. But I thought in teaching we should be able to sit down and do another thing.

Mrs. West's displeasure with the unions had even led her to cross a picket line during one of the strikes the DFT led in the 1970s.

In fact, I even crossed the picket line once and a few people stopped speaking to me. But after a while I felt very good about it. I just didn't believe in the strike, so I went into the building.

Mrs. West's comments echo Mrs. Russell's concerns about what Black professionals needed from their unions. But, during her year at the small Christian school, Mrs. West found herself changing her tune somewhat:



The year I was at [the small Christian school], there was no union. So I began to see what it is like working without a union. And I said, 'Aha, there are some perks and some security in a union.' Now what they did, they didn't demand that you did things; but they did ask you to do some things that were not a part of your teaching. And I just thought that if you had a union, they would say well teachers don't have to do this. So I saw that little difference. So I had new respect for the unions - sometimes you need protection.

So Mrs. West could see some of the value of having teacher unions after her year of working outside of union boundaries. This memory, however, brought up another one for her that I did not hear from any other teachers in this research:

Interestingly enough, when I began teaching, we were invited as Black teachers to become members of the union [DFT], but we were not invited to be members of the DEA or the NEA. And I noticed that. The White teachers were invited, but we weren't invited to the National Education Association. No, they didn't invite Black teachers to do that. I don't know when they changed, but they just didn't and I was aware of that. So I don't know when they started to do that. That was something I noticed right away. 'Humh, why aren't they inviting me to come over to those meetings?' But again, you see those little subtleties. But I did learn my lessons about the unions.

Mrs. West's comments are particularly interesting when contrasted to Mirel's (1999) and Mrs. Russell's perception that Blacks were reluctant to join the DFT, feeling that the DEA was more professional. Perhaps as the DFT's Black membership began to rise in the 1950s, the DEA stopped inviting African American teachers to join them. Whatever the reason, Mrs. West's experience of the union in 1959 was different than previous respondents' perceptions.

Mrs. West remained in the classroom throughout her career - she was not interested in taking the extra coursework or time it would require to

become an administrator. As such, she stayed on the front line in the classroom during some of the most tumultuous years in Detroit's history, from the 1960s through the 1980s. When asked how she felt about some of the demands being placed on the school in terms of curriculum, she sought to recall how she responded. She remembered once being in Atlanta with one of her sons, socializing with a group of Detroiters, one of whom had had Mrs. West as a teacher back in the 1970s. The young woman spoke up and said, "Well, Mrs. West always made sure we knew we were Black." The comment surprised Mrs. West as the girl mirrored back to her what her experience had been in Mrs. West's classroom. As she thought about it further, though, she did realize that she had felt empowered by some of the rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s that had an effect on her practice as a teacher and as a mother. "I guess I was conscious," she said softly, as a flood of memories came back for her.

The boys [her sons] and I did walk . . . we walked in the Poor People's March [in Detroit]. Dr. King had been here and they had a march and then he left and Abernathy stayed and there was this Poor People's March. And so I was determined to join it (I think [my husband] was out of town). And so I had these two little boys and we marched from the church there on Woodward and Chicago or Boston, from that Catholic Church down Woodward all the way down to Vernor Highway. And I remembered there was this White guy who sort of stayed with me. He was telling me all these radical things about why we shouldn't read the Free Press; the different newspapers that were so racist. The people who were monitoring the march - they kept telling me to stay in the middle -- they were trying to keep the women in the center of it, and of course the children. They were frightened that people might throw rocks. And it had never occurred to me until later, you know people could have been violent. Afterwards, I thought, 'Look what I've done!' I had my two little boys - if someone had hit them I would have never recovered. But I

was doing my little 'Angela Davis' thing – but I wasn't . . . I was certainly aware and I was trying to be . . . I was pro-Black, let us say.

Mrs. West found that her "pro-Blackness" was supported by her family's brief attendance at the Shrine of the Black Madonna, a Black Nationalist church founded by Rev. Albert Cleague, one of the leaders of the 1966 Northern High School walkout and promoters of a Black Nationalist agenda.

I was going to the Shrine. In fact, we attended that church briefly. Some Sundays we would go there. I remember one Sunday we went and Rev. Cleague was preaching and our son – I guess he was about eight – stood up and applauded. And I was really moved by that – I thought you know he's really listening. So we exposed them to some interesting things. But, I never thought of giving myself any credit for that . . .

Some of Mrs. West's thinking translated into her practice as an elementary teacher.

I didn't have the African alphabet up, but I remember we used to do the flag. The children knew what the Black national flag meant. We did that. I can remember hearing them say, 'The red is for blood; the green is for land; and the Black is for people.' At our school, when I was at Parker, we had Black History Month of course and I was always on the committees for that. Well, they asked the teachers to dress in African clothing and there were only two of us who did. I was one of them. Thinking back, the others didn't when we decided to do that. And Miss Loving, Mr. Loving's daughter, was the other person who did that. So I guess there were some things, but yes I had the little flag in the room. I told them about Malcolm X. I had the pictures of famous Blacks. The same people, though, I kept thinking I'm getting tired of the same people. Lena Horne, they've probably replaced her by now because they wouldn't have a clue as to who she is. (laughing) They had Lena Horne and different people. And I remember when Langston Hughes died I did a kind of a big thing there. And also, I recalled during the Viet Nam war, I read where a Black soldier had been killed and he was from Florida. When they brought his body back they wouldn't bury him in the cemetery. And I stopped putting the flag up for about ten years after that. I just said, well I won't put the flag up. I don't know what that did, but I said I ain't putting the flag up. I'm mad. I never said that to

anybody – but I just stopped doing the flag. I guess I had my little churnings that were going on somewhere.

Mrs. West's resistance against what she felt were the micro-aggressions against

Blacks permeated her sense of self as a mother, wife, and teacher.

. . . there were efforts to get more Blacks just in the stories. Because with [the children] learning to read, if you didn't see any Black people . . . so there was an effort. I had kind of forgotten about that. Because everybody in the books was blond and blue-eyed. So they didn't relate to our students. So that was a big deal when we started putting some Black families in there. You know you forget how all these things were big deals then.

Only in retrospect was Mrs. West able to see herself as an activist who tried to bring positive racial experiences to her students and her children. While the way she conducted her career reflected her pragmatic concerns about balancing teaching and having a family, she realized the extent of her influence on the young beings in her classroom and her own growing children.

### **Conclusion**

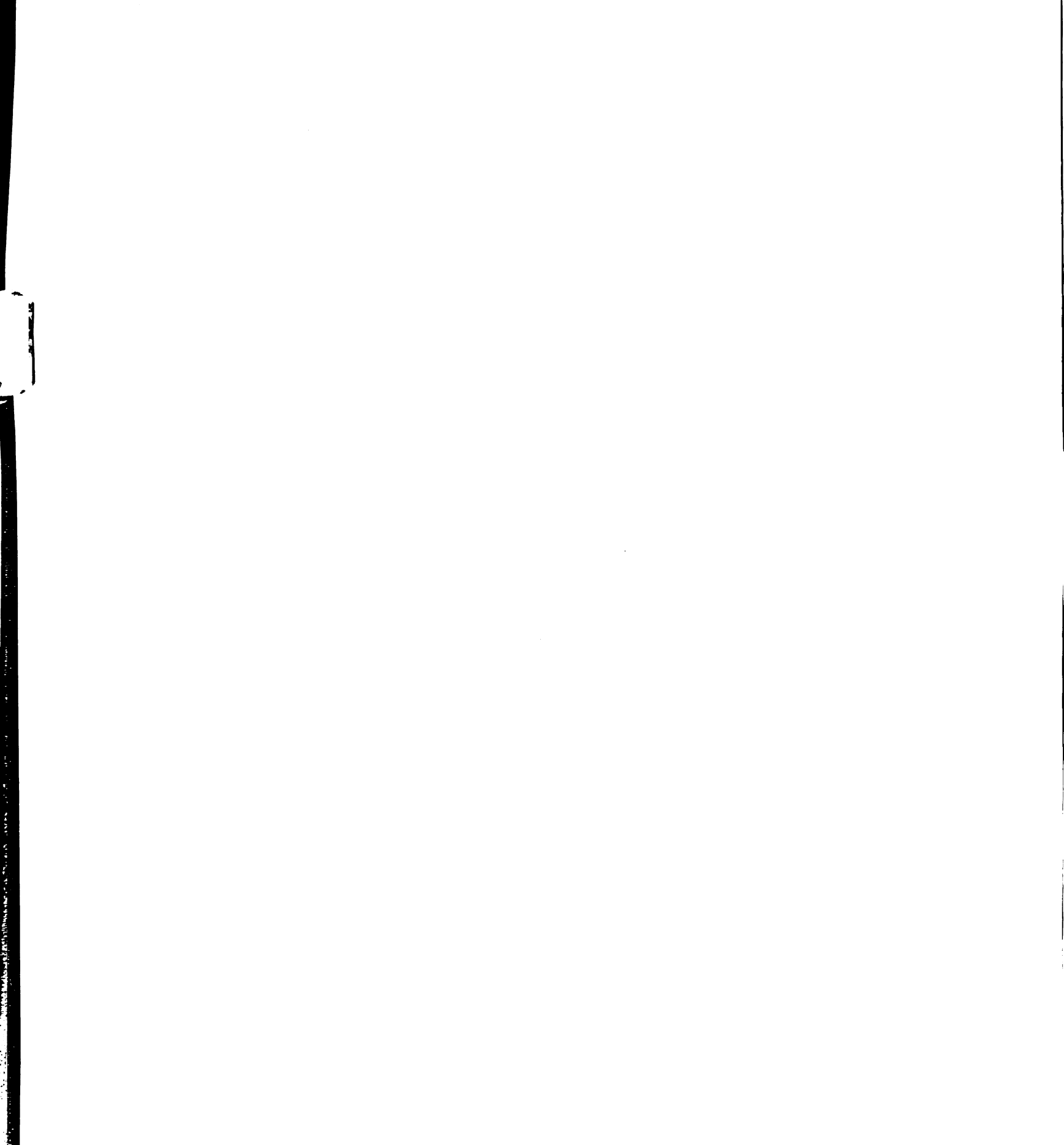
The three women's stories in these last two sections show a progression from the difficult times of the 1930s, through the tensions that accompanied the increase in population during the war, through the disruptions of the 1960s and 1970s. The three women in these stories arrived in Detroit with little social capital, but their varied responses allowed them to accumulate both social, professional, and economic capital as they negotiated their careers. Again, they were supported by families who were intent on having their girls educated.



Mrs. Davis and Mrs. West seem less supported through formal community structures, as were present for Miss Richards and Mrs. Roscoe. Church, library and school served Mrs. Davis and mostly just school for Mrs. West, while Mrs. Russell identified most strongly with her church membership. Sorority membership was less enticing – only Mrs. Davis spoke proudly of belonging. Mrs. Russell described joining the sorority as a rather traumatic experience, and Mrs. West admitted that she joined but that she wasn't active. She found herself too much of a "tomboy" to be bothered with the feminine formalities that sorority membership required.

Both Mrs. Russell and Mrs. Davis sought to advance in their careers and they became administrators in the system. Mrs. West's focus on her family precluded her from taking time away from them by taking classes and being so involved in a school where evening meetings and such were mandatory. Hence, she never pursued advancement.

These three stories illustrate various ways African American women responded to the strictures, as well as the realm of possibilities within Detroit and its school system. For these women, teaching afforded many opportunities to establish careers, give back to the community, and to maintain families.



## CHAPTER VII

### BORDERLANDS AND BORDER CROSSINGS: RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN THE FORMING OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

*... the Borderlands are physically present where two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.*

—Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, (1999)

#### Introduction

According to cultural historical theory, all communities are shaped by interactions or what could be termed conversations between the overarching social, cultural, and historical contexts and the agency and voice of their participants. Participation in the social world is a dialogic relationship that requires the activity of the agents, and the response of the shifting social constructs that are simultaneously the products and the shapers of the relationship. In other words, we make the world and are made by the world in ongoing conversations that are neither static nor stable.

An additional lens for viewing this research project include the tenets of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990). Within this framework we see that within African American female communities, individual and collective wisdom is distributed as Black women confront the multiple jeopardies and opportunities that comprise their experiences in a racialized, gendered, and classed society. The community of African American women is neither mono-

lithic nor determined. What draws it together, however, is a distinct consciousness born out of the legacy of racial, gender, and class subordination that have enveloped Black women's experiences in this country.

In the presentation of the data, I have taken the narratives of seven Black female teachers from Detroit and contextualized their experiences within the history of Detroit and the Detroit Public Schools. By doing so, I carved out a space in the grand historical narrative where the voices of some Black female teachers are heard. The women's narratives were used as representational devices: they functioned so as to "portray, reveal, or illuminate self or surrounds" (Gergen, in Wortham, 2001). My perspective can be compared to a camera as I shifted the position of the lenses, alternately foregrounding and backgrounding my informants and the city's history of which they are a part.

While the previous analysis emphasized these shifting views, in this chapter I narrow the camera lens to examine the women's narratives from three perspectives: race, class, and gender. I do so not to impose a framework on the women's stories, but because most often, pivotal events in the women's narratives revolved around one or more of these axes.

In the discussion on race, I explore some of the women's recollections while growing up, but I focus on racial border crossings mandated by their employer, the Detroit Public Schools. The following section approaches class through the issue of housing. While the frame for this discussion was introduced in Chapter Five, here I follow one woman's housing journey through the

years, a journey that was reiterated in other informants' stories. I also look at issues of class from the perspective of the Black middle-class and other researchers' comments as to its development. The final discussion in this chapter looks at gender from three different standpoints that stood out amongst the narratives: 1) relationships the informants had with their fathers; 2) female literacy environments; and 3) comparing the rise of African American women with the rise of African American men in the Detroit Public Schools.

### **Racial Crossings: Confronting the Borderlands of Race**

Each of the women in this study spoke about race, and for some of them, critical incidents often featured border crossings that traversed the racial divide. Taken as a whole, these racialized episodes reflected an active, ongoing response that both resisted and reinforced racial discourses.

Racial integration was a running theme through all of the women's stories, highlighting the significance of race in developing both personal and professional identity. Race first became an issue in childhood, as women experienced homogeneous and heterogeneous communities within the overall racialized backdrop of the United States. Some of the earliest teachers in this study, Miss Richards, Mrs. Roscoe, and Mrs. Browne, spent much of their childhood in independent Black communities in Virginia, Missouri, and Oklahoma, respectively. In these communities they experienced their parents and other adults as powerful, self-determined agents, even if the shadow of

even more powerful White business and economic interests was still visible. I have already briefly described how Fannie Richard's family resisted White restrictions on Black education in antebellum Virginia.

In Missouri, Mrs. Roscoe was the daughter of the schoolmaster, who in this case, had migrated to Missouri in order to bring schooling to other Blacks. The schools were supported sometimes by the town, but more often by the funds Mrs. Roscoe's parents raised among other Blacks and White supporters. In any case, her parents were influential and significant movers and shakers in the districts and in the state. Mrs. Roscoe also remembered being separated in some ways from the other, ostensibly poorer children in the town her father taught in: "My father kept us to ourselves. Neighbor children came in our yard, but we never went anywhere. Everybody came in our yard."

Mrs. Browne recalled her home in Oklahoma City: "And I have a lot of nice memories of Oklahoma City. They were all connected with Black activities. We belonged to a Black church." Mrs. Browne's grandparents (original homesteaders) and parents were well-regarded and well-educated members of the church and assisted with the administration of the congregation.

When these three women moved to Detroit as children, they found themselves securely ensconced in Black communities, but educated, for the most part, in integrated schools. Mrs. Roscoe spoke most freely about this situation. When she came to Detroit to live with her prominent relatives, her aunt bought a large house some distance away from Black Bottom, where most

Blacks at the time lived. Mrs. Roscoe who was about 10 years old, was allowed to take the streetcar to the Russell School, where most of her friends and family went to school. One day, while exiting the streetcar near home, Mrs. Roscoe was hit by a Ford Motor Company test car. After recuperating for a month at home, Mrs. Roscoe's family decided to enroll her at the local school. "They never had had a colored child in the Farrands School," Mrs. Roscoe explained. Nevertheless, she was enrolled. Mrs. Roscoe did not experience any difficulty at the school. She was possibly considered precocious because she was much younger than the other children and had benefited from the education she had received in Oklahoma from the housekeeper who homeschooled her after her mother's death. Mrs. Roscoe enjoyed the friends she made, and in retrospect, seemed grateful for the opportunity to attend what was considered one of the best schools in Detroit, all by virtue of the turning point in her life caused by a Ford test car.

Later teachers such as Mrs. West and Mrs. Russell also remember strong, segregated Southern communities in childhood. Mrs. Russell, who was born in Detroit, spent several of her early years in Tennessee when the family returned to their own land which they farmed as they waited out the Depression. There she experienced the independence of rural life, and the ability of her African American family and community to help each other out during difficult times. She also remembered this racial memory, sitting on her porch as a little girl in Detroit:

...I used to sit on the steps on Clinton and look at the people going into this Episcopal church. And they all looked White to me. [pause] And like I said, being a little girl and only seeing White folks in the schools, you didn't see a whole lot of White folks. But I would see this church and I just thought they were White. Well, years later, I was invited . . .to be the Woman's Day Speaker – at that same church, but it was downtown around Lafayette, somewhere in that area. And so, I walked in there that day to speak. And in my mind's eye, I'm still that little girl sitting on the step, seeing all these White-looking Black folks I didn't know at the time.

Border crossings were more significant as the women moved into high school and college. As has been described in several of the cases, notions of race, gender, and class became more prescriptive and women found ways to embrace, reject, or move around these images as they developed their own agency.

What has not been mentioned thus far is how these women negotiated border crossings mandated by the Detroit Public Schools after they became teachers. The charged racial atmosphere of Detroit required the response of the school board, and frequently the women in this study were major players in the seismic shifts necessitated by community demands.

Mrs. Russell's experience of being one of the first Black teachers at an eastside elementary was already told in Chapter V. Here, episodes reported by Mrs. Browne and Mrs. Jones are used to further help understand the role race placed in developing a professional identity.



### **Mrs. Browne: Integration at Home and Abroad**

Two distinct moments seem to stand out for Mrs. Browne concerning her teaching career. She highlighted both memories several times during the interviews as she warmly and energetically recalled them.

The first had to do with integrating the teaching staff at the Detroit Public Schools. "I was teaching at the Davison School at the time (mid-1940s)," she recollected. The Davison School was located in Detroit's North End community, adjacent to Hamtramck and served a mostly Black student body at the time.

Mrs. Browne remembers receiving the critical phone call.

The Board of Education called one Friday and the secretary identified herself. And she said, 'At last night's Board meeting, it was decided that some schools were going to be integrated. And you are to go to the Mason School.' Which is on the other side of Seven Mile Road. So I was the first Black person over there.

Mrs. Browne also remembered that she was instructed "not to tell her principal." Nevertheless she did call him immediately, and she reported his exact words were: "Well, I'll be damned. They said they were going to start integrating some schools, but I didn't think they were going to mess with my teachers." Mrs. Browne knew that her leaving would upset him because she ran a disciplined classroom. Her transfer, however, would give her an opportunity to demonstrate her skills in a new arena.

Mrs. Browne remembers the time at the Mason School on the city's far northeast side as the highlight of her teaching years. She found a kindred soul

in her White female principal, one who was highly disciplined and authoritarian in her approach.

That was a wonderful experience. The principal had become a principal there from the day the building opened up, brand new. She was the only principal the school had ever had. And it was her school. You did what she wanted done or you were not there very long.

The principal believed in a very orderly school and required, for instance, that teachers could not leave the building upon dismissal of their students. Instead, they were to return to their rooms, clean up, and set the lessons for the next day. Another rule was that teachers had to abide by the lavatory schedule she devised for each class. She did not want more than one class in the hallway at a time because then teachers would begin talking to each other and leave the students unsupervised. Mrs. Browne admitted that the principal was “very rigid. . . . anybody who worked there walked the line she put down there.” But she admired the woman’s command of her building and said, “I didn’t object to it because I had no problem with doing my work.”

Mrs. Browne was obviously satisfied with the synchronicity she felt with this particular principal. Her most oft repeated story was about the time her husband had to visit Washington, D.C. and had been invited, along with other members of a group, to visit the White House. Mr. Browne wanted his wife to accompany him because he thought it would be an educational experience for her to share with her students. Subsequently, Mrs. Browne informed her principal she would be gone for one week and for what reason. She felt it in her

best interest to be honest with the principal and not just take sick leave time.

The principal asked if her room would be ready for a substitute, and Mrs.

Browne replied it would be:

‘Oh, yes. My room will be ready. And I’ll be gone one week’ . . .  
When I came back, she said, ‘Your room could have run without a teacher. You left it in perfect order, in perfect condition.’ So I felt good about that.

As Mrs. Browne proudly repeated this story, it was obvious that she was very happy working under an administrator who valued the same kind of order and discipline she wanted for her students. She commented, “She [the principal] was an excellent administrator. And I often said, I hope that if I ever get to be one, I can be as good as she was.”

The second highlight of Mrs. Browne’s teaching career occurred as she accompanied her husband overseas to Germany. During the Korean conflict, Mr. Browne was called up to serve since he was active in his reserve unit. But by the time all the men were called up, the fighting had ended. Mrs. Browne explained that since many of the men had rearranged their lives by selling their homes or moving immediate family to relatives, the Army decided to send Mr. Browne’s unit to Germany. Mrs. Browne took a military leave from the board and accompanied her husband with her two young sons, to Germany.

While she was in Germany, Mrs. Browne lived the life of an officer’s wife. Her oldest son attended the base school and her youngest son was still an

infant. She also had household help in the form of a German maid. She described how she began working at the base:

... My son was in the Kindergarten and they sent out a form asking if there were any certified teachers because they had no substitutes. And they thought maybe if there were some certified teachers, they wouldn't mind every now and then giving a day at work. So I filled out this form that my son brought home. And I forgot all about it.

In the meantime the government had been drafting young men from the south and other places – some of whom had never gone to school – both Black and White. Couldn't read or write. So they set up classes for them 'cause they felt that they couldn't keep men in the Army who couldn't read. Their lives were at stake. ... So, I heard about that through a friend and I went in to see what it was all about and they didn't hire me to teach. When they found that I had had student teachers, they hired me to show the people that they had already selected how to teach. So I did that for a while.

Mrs. Browne was surprised at the lack of literacy of the troops, both Black and White. Her skills as a teacher were put to good use and her own tendency toward discipline and order was probably a good match for the military program. Eventually, however, she was called for a possible substitution placement:

That's what I was doing when I got home one day and the maid was all excited because the school had called. "Die Schule! Die Schule! Arbeiten die Schule!" And I called the number that was left for me and I talked to this woman over the phone, and she finally said, 'Well, I've practically hired you over the phone, but I think I ought to see you before you walk into my third grade classroom.' When I got to her door that Thursday evening at the time appointed, she was so shocked she couldn't ... she just stood there. And her daughter in the back of the living room says, 'Mother, you'll have to invite her in.' So after I got in and she

composed herself, she says, 'I can't hire you. I didn't know you were colored.'

Mrs. Browne felt that since the troops had recently been integrated, that integrated schools would soon follow. The woman sent Mrs. Browne downtown to the man who was Superintendent of the Dependent School System.

He had the audacity to ask me if I had ever taught any White children. But [earlier in the conversation] he had . . . told me that he had done his advanced work at the University of Michigan. So I politely then said, 'Then you know Detroit schools are not segregated. You've been to the University of Michigan - you must have studied the Detroit school system at some time. And you know it's not segregated.' That didn't mean, now that we didn't have some more Black schools and some all White schools, but it was not considered a segregated school district. So that's the way that went and I was hired.

Mrs. Browne substituted for a little over a year in the Dependent School System. Since only officers' children attended the school, she said she only had one Black pupil in that time her classes. Evidently Mrs. Browne reported that she was well liked as eventually some parents even requested that their children be put in her class. She was very proud of the fact that she had helped to break another racial barrier and that she was held in high esteem as a good teacher. She also appreciated the educational benefit her older son enjoyed as he attended classes with other officers' children and learned enough German that he was able to continue taking German courses in the Detroit Public Schools upon their return.

Mrs. Browne believed highly in the value of integration, and she was very traditionally minded about how integration should proceed. Once legal

barriers were broken, it was important to show that Black teachers were highly disciplined, respectful of authority, and willing to “go along with the program.” They were not there to make waves, but rather, to fit in. This would prove to White colleagues and administrators that Blacks were fit to take on positions of responsibility. Mrs. Browne’s attitude was reminiscent of the “Old Detroiters,” the elite Blacks who had established themselves professionally before the advent of the waves of Black migration in the 1920s and the 1940s. Following the tenets of “respectability,” these elite Blacks saw assimilation and integration as the way to eliminate racial strife (Katzman, 1973; Wolcott, 2001).

Like Miss Richards, Mrs. Browne was pleased with her ability to work in integrated settings. Her experiences in Detroit and in Germany underscored her sense of herself as a professional teacher whose methods and capabilities were admired and supported. She also saw herself as able to “rise above” any petty racial discrimination and that that skill was important in order to achieve the large goal of integration. As she said of her Detroit integration experience, “I knew being the first teacher there, I was exposed to a lot of opportunities to be upset, upset others, and so forth. So I said, “Well, I’m going to do the best I can as a teacher, and that’s what I did.”

**Mrs. Jones: “The Niggers is Coming!”**

Nearly 25 years later, Mrs. Jones’ received her first administrative assignment as an Assistant Principal. The year was 1972 and she was assigned to

a school on the far southwest edge of the city. There she experienced a bit of culture shock:

When I went into that school there were four Black children. Now my whole teaching career had been Black. So I was amazed to see all these blue and grey eyes, and blond hair. But after all they were children and we loved each other.

Mrs. Jones found leadership and integrity in her principal. "And I had a wonderful principal and he and I just clicked." The population she served was very poor. She observed, however, how much the parent community supported the school.

The camaraderie and the good things that those mothers did – they were poor, but they were there at the school. We had a strong mother's club. In September they were as anxious to get started as we were. And they began working on projects for their children. And at Christmas we had several days when we would sell to the children at cost – I even have some of the things to this day that those mothers made for me. It was a love-in and I loved it.

The "love-in" was not to last, however. Mrs. Jones reported how disturbed she was with the final outcome of the situation: "But after integration, that school was closed. And it was one of Detroit's oldest schools."

Mrs. Jones was transferred into a similar situation:

And I was transferred to the Neinas School [in the same area]. And at the Neinas School I had very good relations with staff and teachers and there, too, um it was an all White, Mexican and Chaldean school with just a sprinkling of Blacks. But when the integration came, wow! The neighborhood did a complete flip-flop.

Mrs. Jones attributed abrupt changes in these schools with integration and accelerated White flight. Indeed, she had become an Assistant Principal

during the years of volatile battles concerning three major school issues: school funding, desegregation and community control of schools. The competing interests had the effect of decimating the school system, and Mrs. Jones witnessed the effects.

She described the impact of the anticipated changes on one small pupil in her charge:

One of my funniest and I think saddest experiences: One of my little boys was walking holding his little brother's hand; first-grader holding the Kindergartener's hand. And . . . the Kindergartener was crying. And I said, 'What's the matter sweetheart? Can I help you?' He said, 'I'm so scared! My mother says niggers is coming to the school Monday.' And he said, 'I'm scared.' So I said, 'Don't you worry. Mrs. Jones will take care of you. And if I see anything that looks like a nigger, I will . . . let you know and we will take care of the situation.' (chuckles) Meanwhile, the kids are looking right at me. But it just shows you how innocent and beautiful children are. And they went in holding hands and we were fine.

But the anticipated transformation did happen. Mrs. Jones relates: "... then the big change came. The Exodus. And those who had the money and the wherewithal, left us. And so there were problems in the school."

Statistics corroborate Mrs. Jones' assessment of what happened as busing was implemented in Detroit after a protracted court battle between 1971 and 1976. Mirel (1999) reports on the exodus of White families and students from Detroit:

Admittedly, even before *Miliken v. Bradley* [the busing case] was filed, White students were leaving in large numbers, with 55,000 fewer Whites attending Detroit schools in 1971 than in 1961. Nevertheless, as soon as the desegregation case went to court, White enrollment fell sharply. Between 1971 and 1976, the peak years of the busing furor, the number of



White students in Detroit schools dropped by more than 51,000, almost matching the 1961-71 figure in half the time. In 1971-72 alone, immediately following Roth's desegregation ruling, the system lost twice as many White students as in 1967-68, following the Detroit riot (p. 359).

Mrs. Jones was concerned with the Black children most affected by the busing:

. . .the children who came through busing were almost left completely out of the sphere of the school and the spirit, and they didn't ever - in my opinion - work in and become members really of the school. They came in and we worked with them, and they left. Of course, being the type of person that I am and the color that I am, I worked very hard to get these children integrated. I had a number of Mexican women and also, Arab women who were my aides. And I put them to work to help get these youngsters integrated and then there were the teachers, some of whom were not truly that interested. Cause they would rather have not had the integration. But many were good, I will say this.

Mrs. Jones' analysis of the racial situations that arose due to bureaucratic attempts to integrate students reflect her experience as a Black female raised in integrated environments. While she intuitively understood the benefits of voluntary integration, she saw that involuntary integration would not achieve the same results. Nevertheless, Mrs. Jones felt she had to do all she could to ameliorate the situation and she remained in the situation until she got word of an assistant principal position under one of her former White male principals. Then she transferred back to the all-Black junior high she had taught in before, and where she felt she would be able to successfully implement many programs and institutional habits that supported and built the camaraderie of the integrated staff.

While these women's experiences point to the salience of race in the formation of personal and professional identities, they also show how women counteracted negative projections. Mrs. Browne and Mrs. Jones provided different responses in different times. Mrs. Browne's responses in the 1940s and 1950s harken back to the constructs of bourgeois respectability that Fannie Richards and Mrs. Roscoe were so emblematic of. Even Mrs. Russell's comment about responding to racism at Miller High by "ramming quality down their throats" could be seen as fitting in with Mrs. Browne's response. Mrs. Browne appreciated closely monitored, precise teaching environments and she was able to fit in aptly within the particular White school she was sent to, and in the military schools overseas. This match of teaching styles allowed her to integrate smoothly into the situations she was called to.

On the other hand, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Russell responded differently to the different racial circumstances they confronted in the 1970s. Both women built more horizontal alliances with like-minded women and men from other racial and ethnic groups in order to make the transition from segregated to integrated environments more successful. For Mrs. Jones, this strategy was possibly the result of growing up in racially and professionally integrated environments where Mrs. Jones was comfortable within her own developing professional and personal identities. Mrs. Russell's alliance-building activities were linked more to her understanding of oppression and the necessity for groups seeking justice and equality to bond together.

### **Following Housing, Following Class**

Concerning class, issues of bourgeois and middle-class respectability have already been examined to some extent in the informants' stories, and as the stories are linked temporally, it is possible to see a movement from bourgeois to middle-class respectability through the generations. Class concerns often reflected the highly stratified housing environment of Detroit and these were examined up to a certain point in Chapter V. One woman's journey through residences over a 50 year period, however, is helpful in understanding the tenacity of this issue and how residence impacts and is reflected in class and identity perceptions. Again, Mrs. Browne's story gives a clear picture of this.

Mrs. Browne was described in a previous chapter as moving from the Westside enclave to which she migrated as a child from Oklahoma, to the area called Paradise Valley. The home was described as a flat that had been subdivided into two units, and Mrs. Browne was happy to get the upstairs flat that had the original bathroom. By this time, in the early 1940s, Mrs. Browne had married another young rising Black professional, and the two were engaged in planning their future together.

The housing Mrs. Browne described was, in some ways, typical of the housing her students lived in, and thus there was little social or spatial distance between the housing available to poor and middle-class Black residents in the 1940s and 1950s. Subdivided properties were common to this extremely overcrowded section of the city where most Black residents were confined. What

was different was the fact that the owner of the house still lived on the property and was a member of Detroit's Black professional class, himself. This fact alone underscores how confined the housing situation was for Black citizens in Detroit.

This residence seemed to serve Mrs. Browne adequately, especially as her husband was soon drafted and she was living by herself. While her husband was in the Army, she "put all of his checks away for a house - every last one of them." Her salary was apparently sufficient to allow her to live on her own, and she saved her husband's checks for her dream: a new house. "I always wanted a new house. And so we finally got one - out in Conant Gardens, the only place Black people could have a house built."

Located nearly eight miles from Paradise Valley, Conant Gardens was the neighborhood on the far eastside that was formerly a farm owned by James Conant, one of the city's first abolitionist leaders. When he died in the early 1900s, his will stipulated that no restrictive covenants concerning race could be inserted into the deeds governing any of the property inherited by his beneficiaries. Conant Gardens was the one exception in Detroit where racial restrictive covenants were not used and this neighborhood became a "Striver's Row" of sorts for upper working-class and middle-class African Americans who left the crowded slum areas of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley and were seeking to do better for themselves (The Conant Gardeners, 2001). Based on his analysis of census tracts, Sugrue (1996) describes Conant Gardens as

the wealthiest area of Black Detroit. In 1950, the median income of Black families and unrelated individuals in tracts 603 and 604 ranked first and second of all tracts in the city with more than five hundred Blacks. Over 60 percent of area residents owned their own homes. Conant Gardens residents also had the highest levels of education of Blacks in any section of the city (Sugrue, 1996).

Mrs. Browne proudly described how she found the property:

And we got it under some unusual circumstances. I used to look in the paper every day for new houses. And my husband used to laugh and say, "You're just wasting your time. You're not going to find anything in there." But I did. I showed it to him and he said, "Well alright. I'll make a call on it." So he made this call and we were invited down to a lawyer's office. And this house was in Conant Gardens and it had not been completed. And the man indicated that the house was being finished for some people . . .but the bank wanted the money - that's what it was. The bank had put a certain amount of money up for this and they wanted the house sold so they could get their money out of it. So the bank put the ad in the paper. And we went to see about it. And their attorney told us what had happened.

And they had investigated us and after telling us all about the situation, the man who was talking to us says, "Well, looks like we're going to let you have this house." Well I was delighted because I'd always wanted a new house and as I said, my husband always said, 'You're not going to find one in the paper.' But I did! So we went ahead and put our money down on the house and so forth . . . And so I was just delighted.

As soon as they moved in, the Brownes insisted on some improvements in the neighborhood and because of Mr. Browne's connections in the city, they were readily enacted:

Even the road wasn't paved when that house was built. And of course, I didn't like that at all. I said that dust just flies up in here every time some car goes down. And we talked to the neighbors about it and they said, 'Oh, we don't want the street paved because we have children who can play out there.' And so my husband says, 'But my wife does not want an unpaved street with dirt blowing in her house.' So he went on and the City came out and

paved it. Of course their taxes went up, but so does everybody's, you know. So we stayed there a good little while.

The Brownes, a two-career professional couple, were probably able to more easily afford expenses that some of their working-class neighbors could not. Another "luxury" that Mrs. Browne paid for was household help. For Mrs. Browne, help with the housework was something that was necessary with the demands of her job and her two boys. She describes how this came about:

I always had help. My husband always took the attitude, you went to school, and trained to be a teacher. When you get a leave to have a child, you will stay home for the leave time that they give you. But when you want to go back to work, I'm not going to object. All I say is you're not going to work at home and work out of the home, too. So, out of your money, you will pay somebody to do the housework. (Laughs.) So, that's what we did!

But, Mrs. Browne did not have to rely on strangers for household assistance. She describes, "I had an aunt who was married to one of my mother's brothers, who was absolutely wonderful with my children." Mrs. Browne, like most working Black women, depended on her extensive kin network to assist with household duties and child rearing (Bell & Nkomo, 2001). In turn, she was able to provide a source of income to a member of her extended family.

In the early 1960s, the Brownes moved again. By this time, Mr. Browne had completed his overseas assignment connected to the Korean War and had resumed his career in Detroit. Both of the children attended Detroit Public Schools, but when they reached the middle school grades, they went to a school slightly outside their neighborhood's boundaries. As Mrs. Browne describes it,

"They didn't have many Blacks over there, and they ran into some difficulty. Both of my boys got marked down in a couple of subjects that didn't make sense to me." After a distinctly unfair punishment was given to her youngest son, Mrs. Browne consulted the Region Superintendent, whose office was in the same building Mrs. Browne worked. Mrs. Browne described the conversation:

I got that all straightened out. But she finally said to me, 'There were a lot of neighborhood changes taking place, and we are anticipating more of what you have come up against. And I'm going to suggest now that you look for another place to live.' And she says, 'But if you find something that you like, don't sign any papers, until you come and let me know where it is. All over certain sections of Detroit, changes are taking place. And it's no point in you jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.'

Sugrue (1996) offers a detailed analysis of the housing issue that the Regional Superintendent was referring to. According to Sugrue, the blockbusting and speculating practices of both White and Black real estate agents had brought "unintended consequences for the social geography of Black Detroit, particularly in the economically troubled 1950s and 1960s" (p. 197). These real estate practices encouraged the development of transitional neighborhoods, neighborhoods that were rapidly changing from White to Black. The scarcity of housing options and the high prices charged by speculators meant that only financially stable, middle-class African Americans were the first to move into these neighborhoods. Once that barrier was broken, blockbusting techniques were used to convince the remaining Whites that they had to sell before more Blacks moved in and their property values plummeted. "Those [Blacks] who

followed,” argues Sugrue, “usually working-class Blacks, often had a tenuous grasp on homeownership.” As a result of the wide-spread use of land contracts (because of redlining practices of the Federal Housing Administration and the discriminatory lending policies of banks), they found themselves “pushed to the brink of solvency when they purchased a house in a racially changing neighborhood” (p. 197). The process was exacerbated by the economic restructuring and deindustrialization that characterized the city at the time. During economic downturns, “houses in predominately Black neighborhoods changed hands with alarming frequency,” says Sugrue, and unstable neighborhoods were the result. A further result was the intensification of class segregation within Detroit’s Black community. Sugrue notes:

Detroit’s Black population was distributed in concentric circles by economic status, the center containing the poorest and most immobile population, and each succeeding ring containing a progressively wealthier population (p. 203).

Mrs. Browne’s Regional Superintendent had indicated that “neighborhood changes” were occurring and that “we are anticipating more of what you have come up against.” The changes included the influx of more Blacks into the neighborhood, more likely working class Blacks who may or may not have had a “tenuous hold on home ownership,” as Sugrue described. The Region Superintendent suggested that the solution to Mrs. Browne’s problem was to move – presumably to a neighborhood where these “changes” were not yet taking place. The Superintendent’s offer suggested that she would use informa-



tion from the schools to determine if Mrs. Browne might be "jumping out of the frying pan into the fire," or in other words, moving into another neighborhood that was undergoing rapid transition from White to Black.

Mrs. Browne did not question the Superintendent's analysis at all. In fact, she and her husband precisely followed the advice given.

And so I followed her suggestion, and, when I told her we had found this house, on Outer Drive near Sinai Hospital, she says, 'That's good. We have had no problems up to this point and we hope there are not any.' So we went on and made the move. We were well satisfied with our house.

Mrs. Browne was obviously proud of their new neighborhood.

We were the first Blacks in the neighborhood and we were in a block where the houses were all ranch type. They weren't big ranch houses, but it was a block of some importance. Next door to us, on our right, were the owners of the Farmer Jack stores. And across the street, on the corner, lived the Sibley shoe store people.

Their presence in the neighborhood, however, was not entirely welcomed. Mrs. Browne described the first association meeting of residents that she and her husband attended:

And we went to a couple of meetings of the residents around there. They had an association. And the man who was in charge was White, and he welcomed me, but he let me and the others know if the neighborhood became all colored, he would be gone. He was not going to live in an all colored neighborhood. Now, I can't remember his exact words - but that, in essence, is what he said.

She concluded that report with a chuckle: "And so, I guess he moved eventually. I don't know where he went."

The Brownes, themselves, eventually moved also in the early 1980s. By that time, her husband had become a bank executive and they had experienced several break-ins in the home that was now enclosed in a nearly all Black neighborhood. "They must have thought my husband brought home money from the bank," Mrs. Browne said jokingly. "But after a while you get tired of things like that happening to you and not knowing what the results might be." The Brownes remained in their home until the Riverfront Apartments opened downtown, in the early 1980s, after both had retired. These upscale apartments were part of a downtown plan to reclaim and refurbish the city's riverfront. Mrs. Browne reports, "My husband had been born in downtown Detroit and always said, 'Detroit's coming back. And I want to live back down there.' So we were the first ones to move into the Riverfront Apartments." Mrs. Browne remained in her apartment after her husband's death and only recently moved out to assisted living quarters in Dearborn, closer to her son's family.

Mrs. Browne's story traces the migrations she and her husband took as they settled comfortably into their middle-class existence and sought homes that reflected this. Their story is a reflection of the attempts of Black middle-class workers to exercise agency in their selection of residences under difficult and constraining circumstances.

The sources Mrs. Browne used to find suitable homes are revealing. Despite her husband's misgivings, she was able to locate a newly constructed home through the newspaper. Sealing the deal, however, was the location of

the home – in Conant Gardens, a community developed specifically without the restrictions of racial covenants. Mrs. Browne's second source – work connections – illustrates the assistance middle-class Board employees gave each other in finding adequate housing. Mrs. Browne's Regional Superintendent was able to access "insider" information so that the Brownes could find a new home in a neighborhood that was not in "transition." Ironically, as Sugrue points out, the arrival of the Brownes in that neighborhood probably signaled the eventual exodus of middle-class and upper middle-class Whites. In less than ten years, the Brownes found themselves in an almost entirely Black neighborhood that became plagued by crime.

### **Moving On Up: The New Black Middle-Class**

Mrs. Browne and the other women in this study illustrate the role Black female teachers played in the formation and persistence of a Black middle-class in urban areas. Exploring Black professional women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Higginbotham (1987) stated that over 40 percent of all Black female employed in managerial and professional (middle-class) work are employed as teachers, counselor and librarians. In her view, this concentration of Black female workers partnered with either middle-class or working-class husbands -- has accounted for the increase in the number of Black middle-class families over the past four decades. This is especially true in Detroit where the increased employment of Black teachers since World War II resulted in an increased percent-

age of Black families achieving middle-class status. Higginbotham warns, however, that

. . . Black women . . . in professional occupations . . . are limited to serving clients who are predominantly Black or other people of color. Their clients are also generally poor and working class people. Employment in the public sector is also problematic for professionals in this sector, as well as their class coworkers, because both groups are vulnerable to policy shifts.

This results in what Higginbotham describes as “racial stratification” in the job market where Black women actually have fewer choices and are dependent upon a particular class of jobs in the public sector. Vagaries in the public policy arena could result in the loss of gains made in achieving middle-class status. This may help explain why we are seeing fewer African American women choose teaching over the last two decades.

Looking at the data collected in this sample, two trends related to Higginbotham’s warning are apparent. First, it must be noted how many women in this very small sample moved out of the classroom into administration. Of the seven women reviewed here extensively, four moved out of the classroom into either assistant principal, principal, or central board positions. Although in a “ghettoized” occupation, these women took advantage of opportunities to improve their professional and economic status by advancing up the career ladder when they could. Like the males in Lortie’s (1975) ethnography of classroom teachers, this is evidence that suggests that Black women might use teaching as a springboard toward positions with greater responsibili-

ties, status, and economic benefits. And these positions were often found in the school system they began their careers in.

Secondly, it might be instructive to see whose children chose to take up teaching. Two of the seven women, Fannie Richards and Mrs. Russell, did not have children. Mrs. Roscoe's only daughter taught for ten years; she recently retired as an administrator at Wayne State University. Mrs. Jones was the only one who proudly said that both of her daughters and three of her granddaughters are teachers. Of these, one daughter became an administrator at the county level; another granddaughter teaches in a suburban district. Neither of Mrs. Browne's two sons became teachers. Mrs. Davis's one daughter is now a teacher in Detroit, and one of Mrs. West's sons teaches at a southern college after receiving his Ph.D. Although this can hardly be called a scientific sample, slightly over half (5 out of 9) of the offspring of the teachers in this study entered teaching, and three of those five moved out of K-12 classroom teaching into administrative positions at the county or college level. What is even more telling, however, is that all of the children of the mothers in this study obtained professional positions. Teaching, then, perhaps served African American women as it had their European American and immigrant sisters: it provided an entry into the professional class, and it allowed them to more easily provide an entry for their children into the professional classes (Higginbotham, 1987; Perlmann & Margo, 2001; Rury, 1991). Rury (1989) noted that in a 1957 study of the social origins of teachers in Michigan (mostly Detroit), nearly 40 percent of

the teachers were from working class backgrounds. While Rury questioned the reliability of the study (the working class designation was drawn simply from occupation), he noted that

it probably is also true that a larger proportion of teachers in communities such as Detroit, where most of the labor force holds blue-collar jobs, will have working class backgrounds. The social background of teachers, after all, is partly a function of the peculiar mix of possibilities in each setting (p. 39).

For the women in this study, teaching was one of the few avenues available that allowed them to move from working class backgrounds into the professional middle-class.

### **Gender Issues: Daddies' Girls, Female Literacies, and Watching the Brothers**

#### **Daddies' Girls**

Shaw's (1996) seminal work, "What a Woman Ought to Be and Do," tells how middle-class Black families between the Civil War and World War II sought to educate their daughters for the work they were deemed to do inside and outside the home. She denotes child-rearing strategies that enforced character traits such as thrift, manners, moral superiority in the face of prejudice, and self-control. Families and communities also stressed what Shaw calls, "socially responsible individualism" that transcended class divisions within the community and encouraged girls to develop themselves, their education, and

their work out of a sense of service and responsibility toward the African American community.

In this study I found that the women often spoke about the encouragement they received from their families, especially their parents, and in many cases, specifically from their fathers. In fact, fathers took on heroic proportions in many of the stories told.

I have not found any data on Fannie Richards' father, but it is reasonable to assume that her brother, John D. Richards, filled much of the father's role for Fannie and the other younger siblings. Historical and census records indicate that he looked after his widowed mother, as well as siblings, nieces, and nephews in need of assistance (Osterberg, 2003; Katzman, 1975). His role in helping Fannie Richards get her job in the Detroit schools is indicative of both his widespread influence and support of his sister.

Mrs. Roscoe told many stories about her widowed father, that spoke to her respect and almost heroic worship of him. This story was repeated twice in her taped interview and was clearly very important to her. Here she not only recounts the perceived resistance to Black education that her father sought to provide in Hannibal, Missouri, but also her father's ability to deal with frightening circumstances:

. . . People had warned him about having a school to teach Negroes. And there was no age limit. Anybody who wanted an education could come to his school. And some were afraid to come [because of possible reprisals by the White community]. But those who were brave enough

to come; all ages came to his one-room school. And they warned him about the James boys.

One day he looked out of the window and saw a cloud of dust coming down the road. And he told us that it came to his mind, 'This is it.' And they tied their horses up to the tree. The cloud, instead of being a whole army of people, was just two men: Jesse James and his brother. They came into the one-room school and asked him what he was doing. He said, 'We're having a spelling lesson; I'm teaching these people how to spell.' And one of them said, 'And what comes next?' And he said, 'Well this is one of our Good Behavior days, so we are closing school early this afternoon. This is the last class. I expect it to be the last class, anyway.' And the pupils were dismissed.

Well then the James brothers got very friendly and said, 'You're trying to teach school in this dilapidated place?' There was a big pot-bellied stove there. They spit their tobacco juice on it and it fried on the pot-bellied stove and my father said it made him so sick that he tried to keep his courage but he was so frightened. And they said, 'Well this is no place to be trying to do anything.'

Where do you get your material?" [The James brothers] saw they had paper, they had one or two books, and they had pencils. He said, 'My sister sends them to me from Detroit. And her friends.' The James boy said, 'Oh.'

And they got on their horses and left. And then they provided a good school for him to teach in - a building.

Whether or not Mrs. Roscoe's accounting of her father's experience is true, it gives an idea of how much she admired and idealized him.

While not all father stories were as superheroic as Mrs. Roscoe's, a certain heroic quality about their fathers penetrated the stories of all of the women I interviewed. For many of the women, their fathers were simply the supreme providers, sacrificing years at Ford Motor Company in order that their children could continue their high school and college education. Durant and



Louden (1986) remind us that in 1950, 13 percent of African Americans had completed high school; 20 percent in 1960; 32 percent in 1970 and 70 percent by 1980. Thus it was significant that these women were able to stay out of the labor force long enough to complete their educations – and this was largely due to the jobs their fathers took in order that their children did not have to quit school to work.

Mrs. Davis emphasized how her father did not want any of his children to work in the factory because he did not consider the work humane or fair. It was indeed due to his employment and the assistance of the older siblings that six out of the eight children in Mrs. Davis' family obtained college degrees. Of the other two, one went to secretarial school and learned bookkeeping, while another brother became a custodian after he served in the war. During the 1940s and 1950s this was an accomplishment.

Mrs. Russell was not only grateful for the support her father provided the family so that those who "wanted to go to school, could," she also credits much of her "attitude" to him and the Sanctified church they were a part of. She repeated twice an anecdote that reveals much about her relationship with her father, and her ability to address injustices. When her father was dying in 1969, he called her in to speak with her after hearing she had traveled to a civil rights march in Memphis. Here is what Mrs. Russell reports he said:

I understand you marched in Memphis . . . Always, if you take a stand, make sure it's your issue and your stand. As soon as you take a stand, you're out on a limb. Someone will cut off that limb and you will find

yourself flying through the sky. You will need to flip like a cat, arch like he does, and stand proud and strong. And never let them see you cry.

This tough resolve of the father was visited on the daughter.

Fathers in this study were also responsible for enforcing a code upon their daughters and wives that restricted all of the women in this study and their mothers from engaging in domestic employment outside of the home. With the exception of Gladys Roscoe, none of the mothers of the women in this study worked outside of the home. (Gladys Roscoe's mother was a teacher, along with her father). As Mrs. Davis' father expressed it, he was not going to allow his wife or daughters to work in "any white man's kitchen." This metaphor speaks to the fears that Black families had over the sexual exploitation of their wives and daughters (Jones, 1995; Shaw, 1996). Families from the South were especially familiar with the dangers faced by young Black women in White homes. According to Ransby (2003), "The sexual exploitation of Black domestic workers, especially live-in maids was commonplace up until World War II, when the job market began to change" (p. 1). It was not uncommon in the South for families to strategize how they could avoid placing females in the unsafe atmosphere of a White family's home. Many women opted for what they considered the safer work space of the agricultural field to avoid such situations. In this study, the informants' fathers continued this tradition of actively seeking to protect daughters and their mothers from the possibility of sexual exploitation.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the women in this study grew up in homes that were the picture of the traditional nuclear family. While it is true that the mothers stayed at home, they still contributed to family income. Some of the mothers of the women in this study took on work that they could do at home – such as Mrs. Browne’s hairdressing trade. Others, such as Mrs. Russell’s mother supplemented the family income with sewing. Boarders appeared frequently in the census reports of the earlier teachers. Siblings, also, added their income to make the family a two- or three-income family. As discussed earlier, until employment opportunities in clerical and sales fields opened up more substantially in the 1970s, Black women’s work outside of the home was largely restricted to domestic service and laundering. The women’s families in this study created ways to avoid domestic service, while still providing a space for some or all of the offspring to complete their education.

### **Female Literacies**

McHenry and Heath (2001) argue that research on African American literacy is often limited to the vernacular – that Black culture champions the oral over the visual. They believe that more emphasis should be brought on how reading and writing were mainstays in the Black community. While coding the interview data for “literacy,” I realized that I had to expand my concept of a monolithic or even dichotomous look at literacy as oral and/or reading and

writing. As I also looked at professional identities, I realized that there were many “literacies” (Street, 1985) that the women participated in and that all of these intersected and crossed borders and sites in ways that helped to develop both personal and professional identities. Royster (2000) notes:

For African American women, becoming literate has meant gaining the skills to read and write, and it has also meant taking the power and authority to know ourselves, others, and our circumstances in multisensible ways and to act with authority based on that knowing. (p. 5)

In this section I will describe what I noted as sites of literacy that the informants described in their interviews. These literacies appear to be genderized – in that they often appear and are supported in female-led environments. Thus, in contrast to the “heroic” stories of the fathers; the mothers and other women in these communities provided spaces for the development of female literacies that were instrumental in developing personal and professional identities.

In all cases, the primary site for the development of personal and professional literacies was the home. The women in this study spoke to the influence their parents, siblings, and other family members had on their own development as students and teachers. Besides a distinct ethos to move ahead into lower level middle-class positions, the adage was always to get an education and perform well. Linked with this admonition was the perception of many women in the study that they were “smart.” Not one of the women said this outright, but they implied that their parents and siblings considered them smart, and they found that they themselves began to believe it. Home litera-

cies included reading avidly, both fiction and non-fiction. Mrs. Davis recalled the weekly visits to the library and the books given as Christmas and birthday presents. A newspaper was always at hand – something Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Russell, and Mrs. Browne remembered sharing especially with their fathers. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Russell remembered participating in discussions about the budget, paying bills, and managing money. Mrs. Davis' working sisters (a bookkeeper and pharmacist) bought the family their first car – even though Mrs. Davis' parents never learned to drive it. In various ways, the literacies of home were acquired and mastered by the growing young women in the rich environment of their households.

Being “smart” was tied to being literate and women spoke about the church as a site that reinforced and enabled their literacy. The church, for all of the respondents in the study was a site of empowered community. Ministers and preachers were seen as literate and powerful; they could read, write, and speak. Mrs. Browne, speaking of her years in Oklahoma City, remembered an Evangelist, Sister Mitchell, who would visit their congregation and totally captivate the congregation with her sermons and Bible references. Mrs. Browne also remembered her grandparents keeping the church books and correspondence. Mrs. Davis world was immersed in the activities of the church. She and Mrs. Roscoe recalled that women were the backbone of the church – they organized festivals, activities, charity, etc. The women were apprenticed into their roles in the church, participating in Children's Day presentations, running

Sunday School classes, and taking up fundraising and clerical duties. Mrs. Russell's sanctified church, while strict, still had many administrative posts reserved for women. The church also emphasized reading the Bible, and oral performance was promoted in ecstatic worship.

School was another site of literacy in which all the respondents found success. According to their self-reports, the women were never disrupting, and were often among the best students, a belief that seems to often appear in the biographies of female teachers. In school the notion that the informants were smart was reinforced. Mrs. Roscoe was proud of saying how young she was when she entered and later excelled at a school we would probably now designate as "gifted and talented." Mrs. Browne spoke about how she surpassed her older sister in academic skills because she must have gotten ahead by "just listening to her older siblings when they studied their lessons." Mrs. Russell repeated several times how her mother wouldn't let her go down South to school (college) because she didn't want a 15 year old traveling alone, especially while troops were still being mobilized across the country. Finishing school early was a badge of "smartness" and many of the respondents equated this intelligence with their literacy skills.

For the older generation, female literary clubs were sites of literacy where Black women gathered to discuss literature, and current issues. Papers on specific topics were given by the members and writing was often critiqued. Both Miss Richards and Mrs. Roscoe belonged to the Detroit Study Club, the

oldest literary club in the city. At the time of their interviews, Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Jones spoke about the books they read and shared presently with friends in book club environments.

“Uplift” activities were also sites of literacy. Here, women gathered to provide needed social services in the community – everything from making cancer pads, to providing clothing and food for a strapped family. Officers in these clubs, (often teachers) helped to negotiate real estate deals, budgets, and coordinated appeals to the various social service funding agencies. Like the literary clubs, these groups were run as corporations, closely following *Roberts Rules of Order* and other literacies of business.

Professional identities were reified in Black female sororities where women learned the accoutrements of professionalism as they interacted in their local chapters and national assemblies. All of the women in this study (with the exception of Fannie Richards whose teaching career predated the formation of sororities) had pledged either Alpha Kappa Alpha or Delta Sigma Theta during their college years. Two of the women also belonged to Phi Delta Kappa, the professional educational sorority and they served as officers in the organization.

Mrs. Russell reported that her union work was an opportunity to expand her knowledge about labor contracts, negotiations, and other legal documents such as court orders. Union work also helped Mrs. Russell to develop her strong rhetorical style and gave her the confidence to speak at national cau-

cuses. Her literacy education in the unions helped her develop political skills in other areas.

Social and service clubs such as the Links, the Carousels, and Top Ladies of Distinction (TLOD) brought the literacies of the upper-class to two of the women in the study. Through these exclusive organizations, women participated in international projects and activities that had far-reaching effects, as well as the work in their home chapters.

Political work was one other site of literacy that the women spoke about. Some joined formal organizations such as the Democratic Party or New Detroit, while others participated in occasional political functions. Mrs. Roscoe proudly reported that her mother and aunts voted as “soon as they got the chance,” and Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Browne, and Mrs. West remembered stories from their parents and grandparents about the difficulties of voting in the south, and they were always urged to participate in the democratic process.

Thus, the Black female teachers in this study were engaged in multiple sites of literacy, and multiple literacy practices that helped them to develop and refine their professional and personal identities. They were able to transfer their skills into professional, political, and social arenas as well as pass on their skills to their offspring and to their students.



### **Watching the Brothers**

There is a worn 1966 newspaper article in my grandmother's scrapbook that I remember my grandmother gluing in when I was about 8 years old. The article was about my Uncle Leonard and the headline read, "Father Makes the Grade: From Janitor to Principal." The short article, complete with photograph, tells how my uncle used to be a janitor at Barstow School, among other jobs, during the Depression. He took on these jobs in order to pay for his college education, which he finally completed in 1947, after a stint in the Navy, marriage, and the birth of his first child. Uncle Leonard began teaching "troubled boys" the article said, continuing on at Wayne and earning his M.A. in Education in 1951. He also "moved up the promotion ladder," becoming assistant principal and then principal at McKerrow School. (I remember some hoopla about that, too. My mother was the school secretary at McKerrow and she had to be transferred in order to avoid accusations of nepotism.)

In retrospect, Uncle Leonard's rise in the school system – from teacher to principal in eight years was pretty remarkable. Most of the women in my study who became assistant principals and principals did so on a much slower track. The earlier teachers, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Browne, for instance, became reading specialists after about ten years in the classroom. After several years as reading specialists, they were interviewed and appointed as assistant principals. Mrs. Jones retired in that position, but Mrs. Browne was later made principal after

four or five years of being an assistant principal. She had also had a stint as an auditorium teacher and she said,

I got promoted to the auditorium which is supposed to be a promotion, which I didn't care for. But I took it. I never, you know, rejected anything that I was asked to do. And so in that last school we had a double platoon so we had a lower platoon and an upper platoon. I was placed in as an auditorium teacher. And most of the people who became principals were auditorium teachers or gym teachers.

She thought the reason why auditorium teachers were often promoted to principal positions was because they had exposure to a larger range of pupils than other elementary teachers. They also had the experience of often managing school-size groups in the auditorium and that must have contributed to the perception that they could manage schools (Rousmaniere, 1997).

Later teachers, including Mrs. Russell and Mrs. Davis took advantage of jobs that were opened at the Central Office level. Both of these women worked in Human Resources for the last 10 to 15 years of their careers. Mrs. Davis, however, had served as an assistant principal and principal before her promotion.

Why did there appear such a differential between the speed Black males and Black females were advanced in the system? Two perspectives emerged from the data in considering this issue. One concerns the hiring of Black males at all. Dr. Lloyd Cofer was the first Black male hired as the result of that national search that the postal employee Snow Grigsby initiated, and he was placed in a counselor/community relations position at the newly formed Miller

High School in 1933. Edward Benjamin, a physical education teacher, and Al Loving, an English teacher, joined the staff soon thereafter in 1934 and 1935 (Jones, 1970). Thus, the first Black male teachers entered the system nearly 70 years after Fannie Richards became Detroit's first Black teacher. Because men were hired in at the secondary level, it was assumed they were "principal" material. Men were automatically considered good administrators, as was evidenced by the predominance of White male principals in the system as reported by the women and the historical accounts. In addition, the call for more Black administration during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s encouraged more men to join the teaching corps. Fine (1989) shows how the Board responded to these demands:

The percentage of Blacks in the public schools between 1967 and 1970 increased from 56.7 to 63.8, and the percentage of Blacks attending predominantly White schools decreased from 9 to 5.8. . . . As the Black student population increased in the public schools, so too did the Black instructional and administrative staff. The percentage of Black faculty rose from 31.7 in October 1966 to 38 in November 1968, and 50 percent of the new faculty hires by that time were Black.

In an effort to place more Blacks in administrative positions at a time when so many Black teachers lacked very much seniority, the school administration reduced the amount of experience required for promotion. This contributed to an increase in the number of Black school principals from 6 percent of the total in February 1967 to 12 percent by October 1968 and an increase in the number of positions above the rank of teacher held by Blacks from 192 in October 1966 to 271 in February 1968 (Fine, 1989, p. 434-435).

Fine's report of the Board's response gives an ideal as to why there seemed to be more Blacks - especially Black men -- gaining positions in administration.

Another factor was the result of the community concerns voiced by both radical and more traditional leaders – that a testing procedure be adopted by the Detroit Board of Education to assess eligibility for promotion. This procedure was adopted in 1968 (Mirel, 1999) and encouraged many to apply for administrative positions. Mrs. Davis remembers taking the test for elementary principal and being placed on the eligibility list before she was given her first administrative position. Another interviewee who joined the Board later, Mrs. Jenkins, recalled that it took a long time to be called up to an administrative position in the 1980s.

Mrs. Jones gave the most succinct appraisal of what she thinks happened as the relationships between teachers and administrators changed over the years:

In the early days, I feel the administrator was more like “Father.” He called you by your first name and you called him, “Mr.” And he was just the one who seemed to know everything and to run everything in the old days. But as we went along, teachers gained more position and power and teachers were put on a higher plane. So it became more of a playing field that was equal. I think I lived to see that, happily.

When I became an administrator . . . in 1972, I’m sure there were quite a few [other Black administrators]. . . . I’ll tell you what was going on. At that time our Black men were really being promoted. And I watched the Black men go up, up, up. The Black male . . . it was the day of the Black male really rose in this place.

Yes, we [women] were a little slower. I think maybe people might have felt that our men – see, we Black women you remember – we owned the cabins. We’ve always had more of a position than our men have had. And I think that maybe there was a little feeling, especially the Black males who were able to help their brothers, they helped those brothers – I’ll tell you. (laughing) I watched that. And of course, we sisters were

helped too. We came along too. Because I think they looked and saw that it had been unequal for many, many years.

Mrs. Jones echoed a long-standing feeling in the African American community that Black men lagged behind Black women in economic empowerment. "We owned the cabins" implies that even in slavery, Black women had "more of a position."

Mrs. Jones' comments reminded me of a conversation I had with my own southern-born father. My father migrated to Detroit in the mid-1930s when he was in his early twenties. I had a conversation with him about this research about a year before he died at the age of 87. I asked him if he remembered any of his Black teachers down south in Edna, Alabama. He spoke about the schooling he had received and how he had to leave home to go stay in town in order to attend the county training school that served as the high school in those days. He remembered the principal of that school who had graduated from Morehouse. I was impressed with that and wondered how that came to be. Daddy replied,

His white father sent him to Morehouse. Everyone in town knew who his white father was. He had nine children by this Black woman. He sent them all to school. Gave each one a portion of land.

My father then went on to say in a voice that surprised me for it was tinged with anger:

A Black woman could do anything she wanted in the South. Black men couldn't do anything. Couldn't even look at a white woman. Could be beaten or lynched or both for anything.

Obviously, my father saw that this Black woman -- by establishing herself in a common-law relationship with a propertied white man -- was able to do something that he, as a Black man, could not: Guarantee both social and economic capital for his children. This Black woman gained social capital for her children because they were of mixed heritage, with the accompanying light skin and smooth hair associated with the elite class of African Americans. In addition, all of the children -- both male and female -- were educated and prepared to take leadership roles in the Black community. Economic capital was assured in the form of land. My father saw this Black woman's relationship as a conscious choice made available to her by her gender. And he saw this choice as a strategic one that essentially launched her progeny into the stratosphere of Black society, and possibly even entry into white society.

While this particular Black woman in Daddy's recollection could make strategic choices that would insure her family's survival and success, the choice she made was not available or even desired, by the vast majority of Black women. Yet, there persists this feeling, as evidenced by Mrs. Jones' comments, that Black men had been "left behind" and were entitled to establish a private "good ol' boy" network for a little while. This question calls for more research into the career trajectories of Black males within the Detroit Public Schools and how those careers compared with African American women over the years.

## **Conclusion**

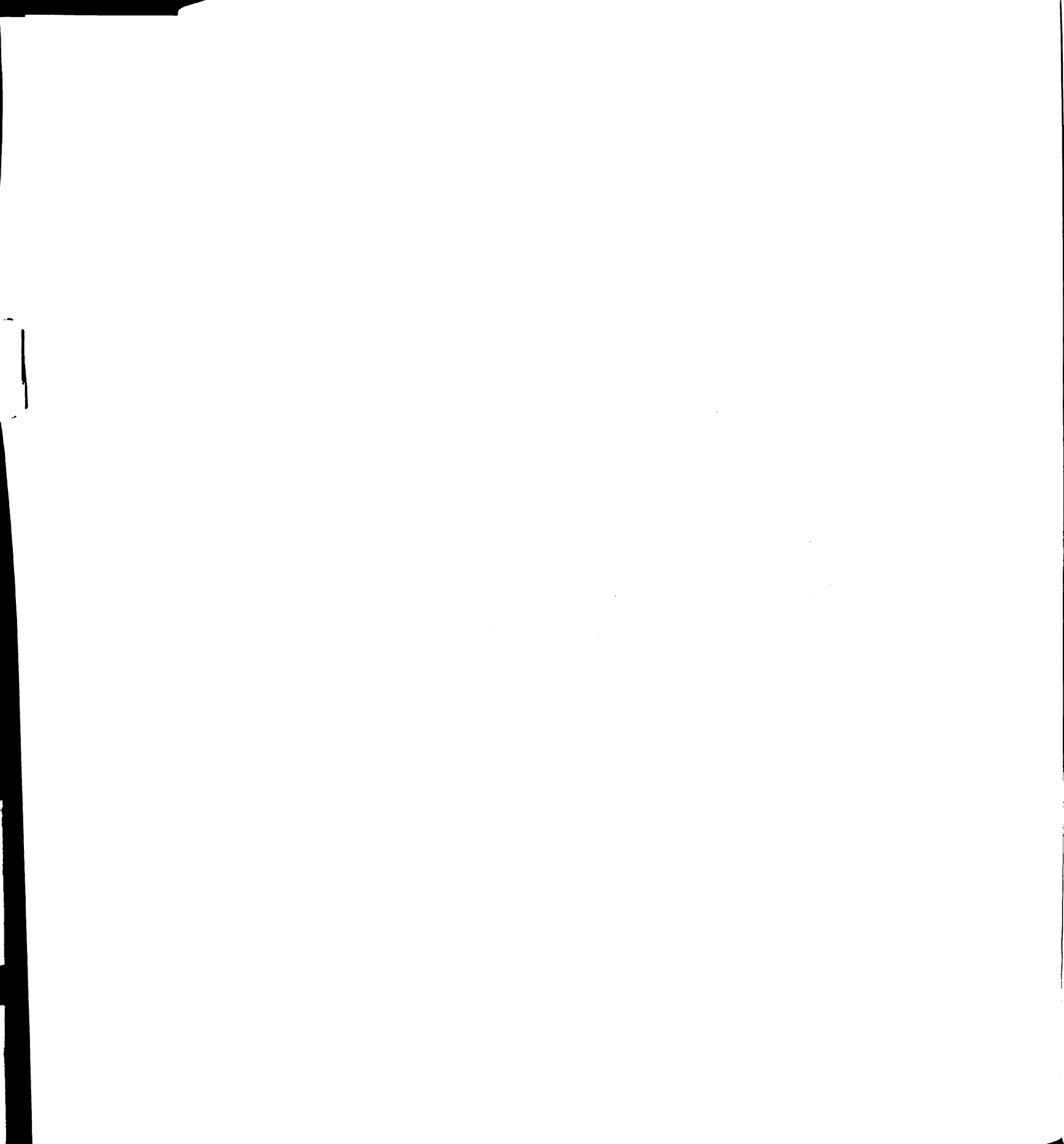
In this chapter I have explored the themes of race, class, and gender that appeared in the Black women's narratives collected for this research. As Black women crossed figurative and real boundaries in their quest to become teachers and administrators in Detroit, they created new ways of developing personal and professional identities that served their purposes.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **CONCLUSION: METAPHORS, METANARRATIVES AND IMPLICATIONS**

This dissertation began with an anecdote about an administrator who believed that there really was no story to tell about Detroit's African American female teachers. I was sure there was one, and now I find myself swimming in all the tellable tales I have learned, many of which have been recorded here. In this study, seven African American women provided the narratives of their experience and in so doing, highlighted another presence that figured greatly in their stories: the City of Detroit, itself. The women's narratives were bound up with the locus of their personal, social, and professional development. In these stories "place" was more than a setting, it was a protagonist, the eighth active participant in the narratives. In the next section, I will highlight the metanarratives of Detroit by comparing the women's stories with the "Detroit Story". I seek to capture the narrative tropes and forms present in both the grand narrative of the city and the petit narratives of the informants. I am interested in how the metaphors of the Detroit Story are reflected or deflected in the women's narratives, and how the women position themselves in relation to it. After this I will return to the main research questions and summarize what I think these stories have had to say and the implications for teacher educators,





education schools, and general policy. Finally, I will turn my gaze toward the future and describe further research strands that can and should be undertaken.

### **The Detroit Story as Metaphor**

“Motor City.” “Arsenal of Democracy.” “Motown.” “Renaissance City.” “America’s first third-world city.” These metaphors of Detroit speak to its industrial height when the growth of the automobile industry propelled the city into prosperity, and its eventual decline as it assumed its membership in the “Rust Belt,” the string of manufacturing cities that had lost their stake in the economy.

There are, however, many other versions of the “Detroit story.” One is featured on the official seal of the City of Detroit which commemorates the great fire of 1805. The seal is composed of two women; one is crying and being comforted by the other woman. The crying woman represents Detroit at the time of the fire; the one on the right represents hope and future. In the background of this raised seal are two depictions of the city: The old city engulfed in flames, and a new city on the right. The inscriptions of the seal are two Latin phrases, *Speramus Meliora* and *Resurget Cineribus*, which mean, “We hope for better things. It shall arise from the ashes.” The seal of the City of Detroit tells a story of a cycle of desolation and renewal, as the city consistently “rises from the ashes,” both metaphorically and literally. This imagination of hope and rebirth is reflected in other naming rituals. After the 1967 riot, a coalition of

business, government, and labor leaders joined together to form an organization called, "New Detroit," which held the vision of a city "rising from the ashes" (Fine, 1967). More recently, the Mayor of the city, Kwame Kilpatrick gave a State of the City address where he envisioned the "Next Detroit," and called on the community to join him in reimagining what the city could become (Kilpatrick, 2006). This metaphor of devastation and rebirth echoes the most fundamental cycles of nature, and the Christian allegory of death and resurrection.

Another version of this story is often told, however. Local knowledge shifts this metaphor into a widely repeated metanarrative of Detroit. This metanarrative can be entitled, "The Rise and Fall of a Great City" and goes something like this: "Detroit was a grand and marvelous metropolis that put the world on wheels as the car industry led the nation. Growth and prosperity became the rule of the city. Then all the Blacks from the South came, the jobs began to dry up, and in 1967 there was a riot and many Whites left. Then Coleman Young became mayor for 20 years and the rest of the Whites moved to the suburbs. Detroit has yet to recover from the job losses and White flight, and is now a thin shadow of its former self, left mostly to poor Blacks and the few Whites who did not have the wherewithal to move."

This is the story of Detroit that I grew up with as a Detroit resident. It was a simple explanation that went unquestioned, as far as my child's mind could grasp, and even as an adult, it seemed to be an accepted explanation for

the state of the city. The problem with this metanarrative —and all metanarratives — is that they are, by definition, distortions or caricatures that simplify complexity. This story is like the “dead language” Toni Morrison speaks of:

unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences. . . . Yet there it is; dumb, predatory, sentimental . . . summoning false memories of stability, harmony among the public (p. 13-14)

Detroit’s metanarrative is a misrepresentation, an inaccurate representation of the complex, dynamic social organism that a city is. Yet, when a grand narrative like this one becomes the lingua franca of a community, it serves to stifle and influence how the participants respond to the place. Furthermore, this unquestioned grand narrative becomes a basis upon which we speak and act.

The women who I spoke to personally in this study, and those that left historical traces did not verbally voice the “rise and fall” trope. Instead, their gaze was not so directed toward the landscape of the city, but to the landscape of their own lives as teachers, and the lives of their children and grandchildren. Perhaps this was a function of the age of the informants (the youngest was 69 years old), or perhaps because the interviews took place in the women’s homes. Perhaps, too, the Detroit story was present, but held in the background and not talked about.

Another way to look at the informants’ relation to the “Rise and Fall” trope is that it did hold their attention — not as a reflection of their own experience — but as something to work in opposition to. In other words, even as the

city was continuing its so-called descent, these women were ascending. Their stories were ones of success, of “moving on up” through circumstances that hindered many of their peers and family members.

This, of course, brings up the critical researcher’s question: Who does the “Rise and Fall” story serve? This grand narrative serves to justify the actions of those who did leave the city. It glorifies the experiences of immigrant and migrant parents and grandparents who came in the earlier, “booming” times, and it follows their path and the path of their descendants out of the city when times got tougher. These stories are about “ascent” also, but this version requires an “Other” to leave behind, just as the teachers’ stories perhaps required an “Other” to push against. The metanarrative essentializes the Other – in this case, the mostly Black population remaining in Detroit – and in a way, essentializes the teller, also, by freezing him (or her) in the depiction as the “one who had to get out.”

No wonder, then, that this version was not part of the stories of the Black female teachers I interviewed. Although difficulties in the city were infrequently alluded to, not one teacher saw her story as following the (mis)fortunes of the city. In fact, the women did not voice their image of Detroit in the terms of the metanarrative. Instead, there was much more optimism about the city and the public schools. Several teachers summed up the feeling with the following: “You just don’t hear about the good things happening in the Detroit Public Schools.”

When I examined the narratives more closely, I realized that the stories were more about the ability of the women to make personal decisions about the things that mattered to them. The stories were about increasing agency and autonomy and less about constrictions or restrictions. That is not to say that the women were not affected by racism, sexism, or class discrimination – the last chapter points out episodes that could be called “narrative ruptures” or awakening moments concerning these issues. Rather, the stories were uniformly affirmative about the struggles the women engaged in. As one informant phrased it, “We made it!” One aspect of the Black women’s standpoint evident in this study, is that there were possibilities to be mined within the landscape – despite the barriers of racism, sexism and class discrimination.

In addition, the women defined some aspects of their success in terms of the agency they were able to exhibit over their own lives. Ci (1999), in his exploration of the meaning of agency, gave this definition:

In contemporary capitalist society, the agency of most people is limited to individual mundane tasks such as finding a job, a friend, a house to buy, a vacation spot, a hobby, a movie to watch, a candidate to vote for, and to interpersonal interactions with individual friends and relatives.

The agency of most people does not control the manner in which social activities such as work, religion, education, government, and medical care are socially organized. Within the personal areas that agency does navigate, it has legal and moral authority to make decisions according to its own point of view which will benefit the *individual*. This (limited) individual freedom is a principle of the market economy (quoted in Ratner, 1999, p. 423). (emphasis added)

When agency is considered from this cultural historical perspective, it is more understandable why the women felt – or at least presented – the way they did. The agency that Ci speaks about was a relatively new phenomenon in their family histories as African Americans, as women, as working-class or lower middle-class. What Ci calls “mundane” were events that the women spoke about as pivotal moments. These were the freedoms that they experienced and to which their memories spoke – freedoms (such as buying a home) that were new for their families.

Detroit, then, for both the early and later informants in this study, was a place of opportunity, possibility, and movement. The women and their families rode the crest of the wave during times of high prosperity, and paddled through times of crisis. It was a place from which they could launch dreams and intentions, and a place from which they could shepherd their own children into more promising futures. Life did not cease or “fall” with the exodus of much of the White population from the City. Rather, the women in this study had begun their own “rise.” Their petit narratives complicate the grand narrative of Detroit and forced us to re-examine the real stories of Detroit and its citizens as it (and they) continually redefines itself decade after decade.

### **What Is Learned From these Stories?**

At the outset of this project, the research questions focused on activity and the function of narratives. I was interested in what the women did to

become teachers in the Detroit Public Schools, what capacities they had, what resources they used, and what strategies they employed. After working with the narratives and approaching them through different lenses, two themes seem to stand out most prominently. The first theme is that a focus on activity cannot be divorced from the cultural historical milieu in which activity exists. While considering these narratives and the temporal quality of the collection of stories, it became clearer to me that the women's resources, strategies and capacities were part of a cultural kit created in the sociohistorical moment of their lives. As Black feminist theory emphasizes, thought and action are dialogical, and both are informed by the cultural circumstances within which individuals and groups participate. The women developed resources, acquired capacities and strategies within the concentric circles of social activity. Their engagement with family, peers, school, church, social clubs, unions, etc. helped them to develop the skills and resources needed to acquire college educations, and professional positions as teachers and administrators. All of the women were active community members – even, as in the case of the young Mrs. Davis – that community barely extended beyond the bonds of family. Their participation in numerous activities pushed their learning and their learning pushed their activity.

What specific resources, strategies, and capacities are evident amongst the women? They thought of themselves as smart, they were mentored by others in all of the aforementioned sites, and they sustained relationships both



formally and informally with other active, involved women. These qualities are by no means limited to women who made successful careers as teachers, but nonetheless, the women in this study seemed to have webs of activity and sustainability that supported them in their work.

The second realization came around the theme of narratives, themselves. The similar form and function of the narratives reminded me that the stories, too, are also the result of activity, a performance activity that allowed the women to perform as they wanted to be perceived. Wortham (2001) claims that narrative self-construction is a result both of the “representational function of autobiographical discourse” and also, the “interactional functions.”

That is, autobiographical narrators *act* like particular types of people while they tell their stories, and they relate to their audiences in characteristic ways as they tell those stories. (p. xii)

In this way, telling one’s story is more than just a recounting of past events – it can be seen as a self-constructing activity that reinforces and possibly transforms the storyteller, as well as the audience. The liberatory aspect of Black feminist thought emphasizes this meaning making and self-defining activity as a necessary part of realizing African American female empowerment. By performing one’s story, the informants create not only an historical record; they also participate in the production of knowledge that supports a Black female epistemology. Narrative’s function, then, is both ontological and epistemological. It is a form of telling into being and being into telling, much like Behar’s (1993) *Esperanza*.

In addition, the content of the narratives, when interwoven with the larger structural and historical themes, allow us to enlarge the image of African American teachers in Detroit. This broadening of the historical record allows for a multiplicity of voices to be heard. No longer are these women “veiled behind a shroud of silence” (Hine, 1994). Through documenting their stories, they become present and accounted for and situated in the history of the Detroit Public Schools and the city, itself.

### **Implications for Future Practice and Research**

Teacher narratives provide an important window into the lives of successful teachers. They connect teachers across social, cultural, historical, and professional spaces. They serve as guideposts, both for the teachers who develop them and for the teachers who read them (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995). The life stories of the women in this study make way for future research questions that may serve to further illuminate what inspires African American women to go into teaching and to stay in teaching as a career.

What can we learn from the way the African American teachers in this study created cultural kits that helped them traverse the multiple jeopardies of race, gender, and class? Building on the activity engagement discussion from above, one consistent message that each woman brought forth in her interview was her ability to work with others in a variety of networks. These networks, whether sponsored by familial, institutional, religious, or social organizations,

provided ways for women to apprentice into the culture of professionalism, teaching, and social activity. They also helped the informants combat social and economic barriers based on race, class, and gender. This type of connectedness might be essential for preservice and new teachers. How can teacher education institutions make use of cohort groups, mentors, and focused service activities that assist teachers in forming networks of relationship to the communities in which they will serve?

This research also leads to a further question about the use of teacher narratives in teacher education. How can teacher biographies and autobiographies be utilized to inspire African American and especially other marginalized students to enter the teaching profession? Social foundation courses could perhaps be adapted to engage more biographical and autobiographical narratives, as students begin to try on the “identity kit” of being a teacher. Especially helpful would be stories from diverse communities. These would be particularly pertinent for first generation college students and others who are beginning the journey to becoming a teacher. Students, also, should be encouraged to interview former and current teachers in order to broaden their own perspective on the teaching profession. To be successful, students, too, will have to make meaning of their lives and their times in order to define a self that not only undertakes a teaching career, but ultimately successfully completes it.

In addition, how can understanding the experiences of women as they made the step from working class to middle-class existence through employ-

ment as teachers help to support a diverse teaching population? More stories need to be collected from women from a variety of ethnic or racial groups so that comparisons can be made as to how these first teachers in a public school system were supported by their families, peers, communities, and schools (see, for instance, Florio-Ruane & Williams, 2004). Such comparisons might help us to understand how to better support the various and diverse teachers we need as immigration populations increase, and new generations of women and men make their way into teaching.

Future research might also delve into the question of the similarities and differences between the women in this study and those seeking to enter the teaching profession today. This research should be extended to investigate the resources and capacities developed by African American women who were born during or after World War II and who entered the teaching profession after 1960. The narratives of these and subsequent generations of Detroit's Black female teachers will contribute to the development of a more complex and nuanced picture of the community African American female teachers in Detroit.

Further research should also explore the experiences of African American male teachers as an interesting contrast and supplement to research on the Black female experience. This would also add to a more complete portrait of the African American teacher in an urban setting and would also highlight the restraints and possibilities connected with gender.

In summary, this present study is a contribution to the field of teacher narratives. Its focus on a particular group defined by race and gender, in a particularly distinct spatial location over time provides a window into the multiple ways that teachers are socialized into becoming teachers. The historical, political, and economic landscape of Detroit played an important role in the development of an African American teaching force in the city. In addition, the cultural and social capital of the women themselves was equally as important in determining their career paths. The cultural-historical emphasis of this research allows us to see how changing conditions within the city encouraged the development of different strategies of a community over time. Further research will only add to the amazingly rich and wonderfully complicated stories of the seven women in this study who so eloquently divulged how they were able to weave the tapestries of their lives into successful teaching careers.

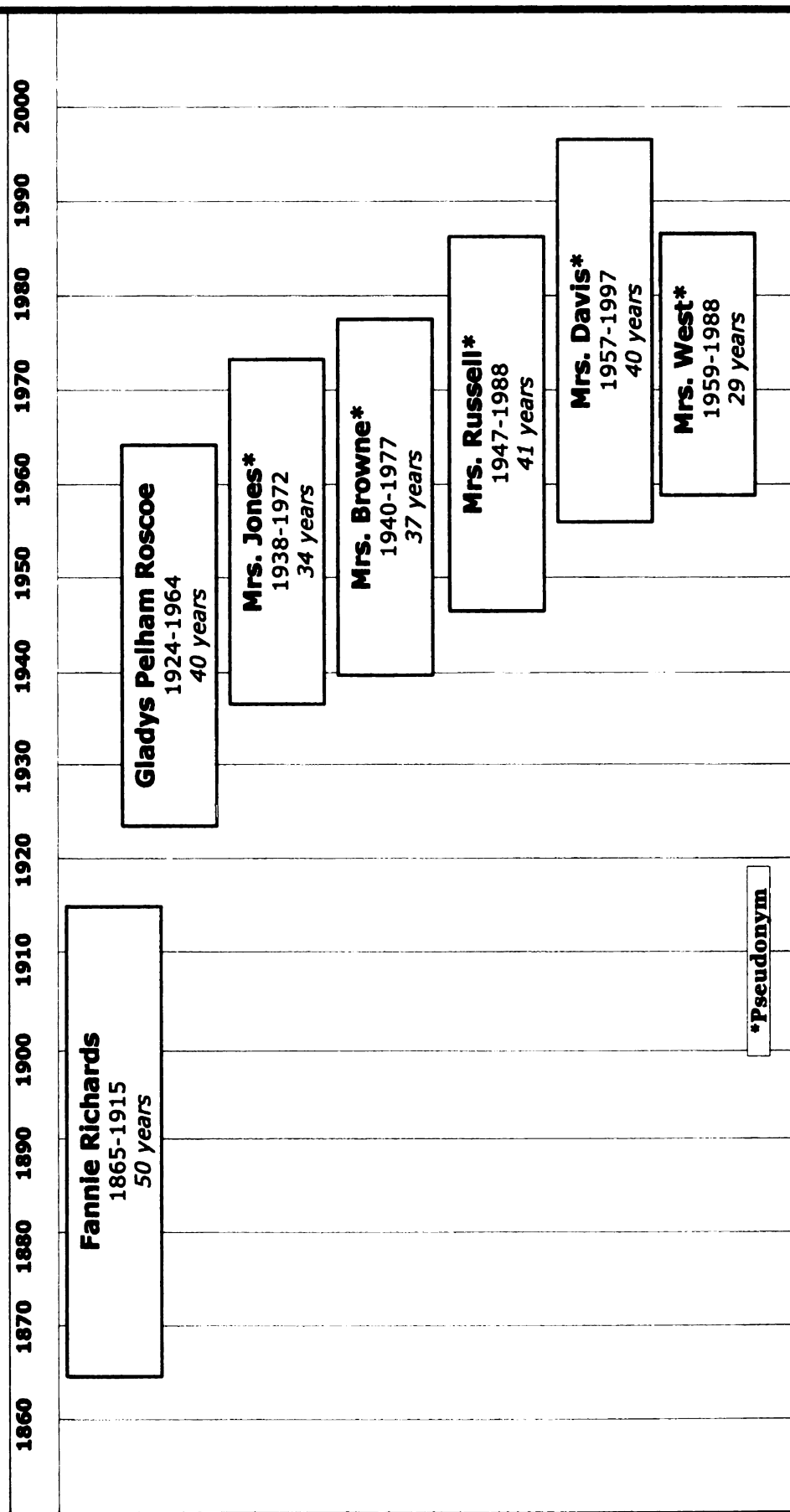
## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A**

### **FIGURE 3**

**DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOL CAREERS OF  
SEVEN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE  
TEACHERS FEATURED IN THIS STUDY**

**FIGURE 3. DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOL CAREERS OF SEVEN AFRICAN AMERICAN  
FEMALE TEACHERS FEATURED IN THIS STUDY**





## **APPENDIX B**

### **DATA COLLECTION FORM**

## Data Collection Form

DPS \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_ Place of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Came to Detroit in \_\_\_\_\_ Reason \_\_\_\_\_

Addresses: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Schools Attended: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Certifications: \_\_\_\_\_

Detroit Public Schools: Date of Hire \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher Test? \_\_\_\_\_

School Assignments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Administrative: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Retirement: \_\_\_\_\_ Years with DPS: \_\_\_\_\_

Other:

Birth Order \_\_\_\_\_ # of Siblings \_\_\_\_\_

Education of Mother: \_\_\_\_\_ Occupation of Mother \_\_\_\_\_

Education of Father: \_\_\_\_\_ Occupation of Father \_\_\_\_\_

Affiliations (churches, sororities, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

## **Initial Interview Protocol**

*These general questions will be asked of all participants in the initial interview.*

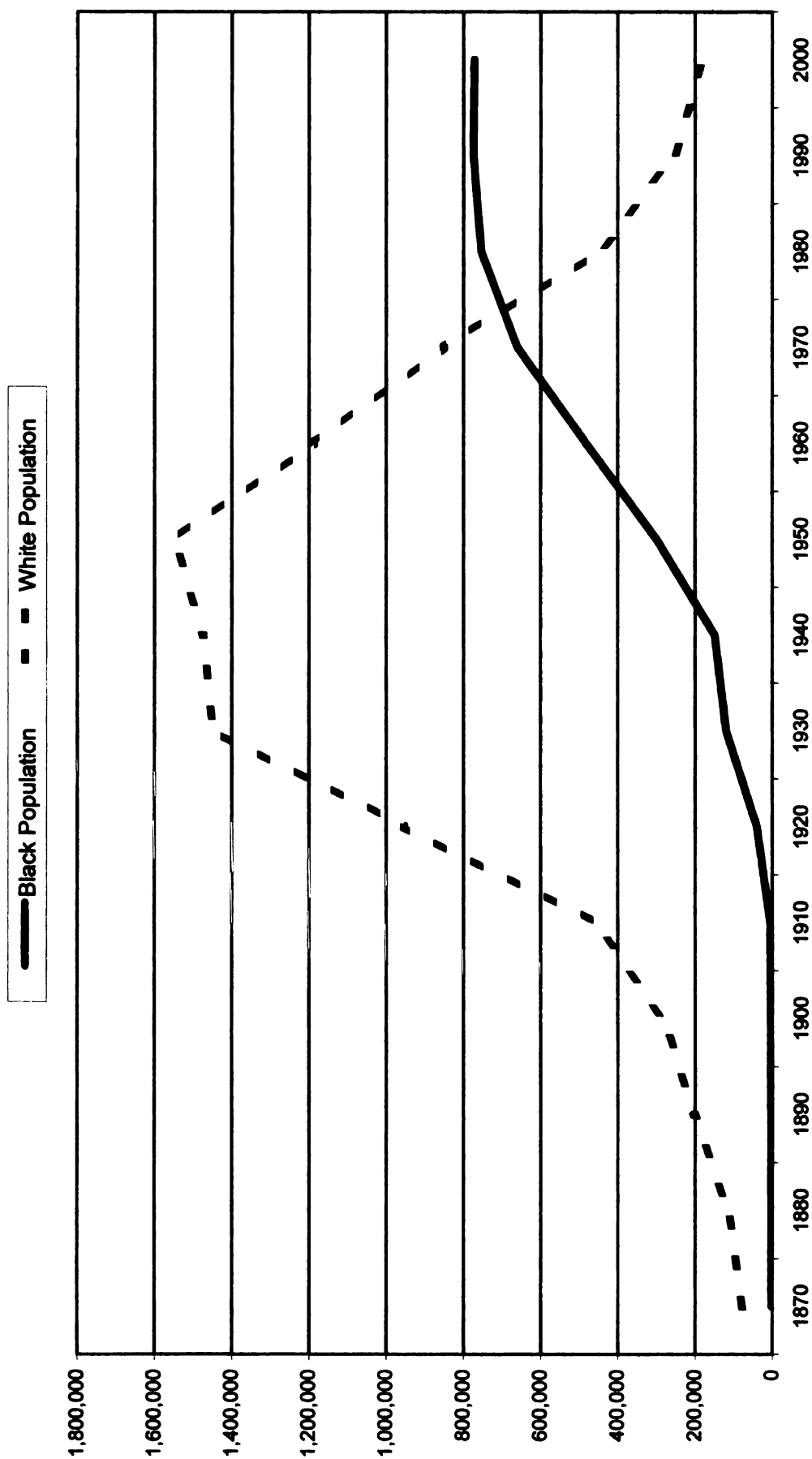
1. Date of birth
2. Place of birth
3. Place of rearing
4. Type of household (childhood)
5. Type of household (current)
6. Schooling and occupation of grandparents, if known
7. Schooling and occupation of parents
8. Names and locations of all schools attended
9. Other training
10. Degrees, dates of graduation
11. Past/current/future occupations
12. Describe how you became interested in teaching.
13. Describe how you became a teacher.
14. Describe the schools and grade levels you taught.
15. What made you want to teach in Detroit (urban environment)?
16. What were your students like?
17. How were you alike or different as a student?
18. Describe what it was like teaching in Detroit during \_\_\_\_ time.
19. What aspects of teaching encouraged and excited you?
20. What aspects of teaching challenged you?
21. How would you describe the relationship between the administration and the teachers?
22. Name three important influences on your teaching career.
23. What organizations were of significance to you during your teaching career?
24. What personal professional qualities helped you to sustain a teaching career?
25. What were the three most noteworthy local or national events during your teaching career?
26. What advice would you give teachers new to the profession today?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **FIGURE 4**

#### **CITY OF DETROIT BLACK AND WHITE POPULATION 1870-2000**

**Figure 4. City of Detroit Black and White Population 1870-2000**

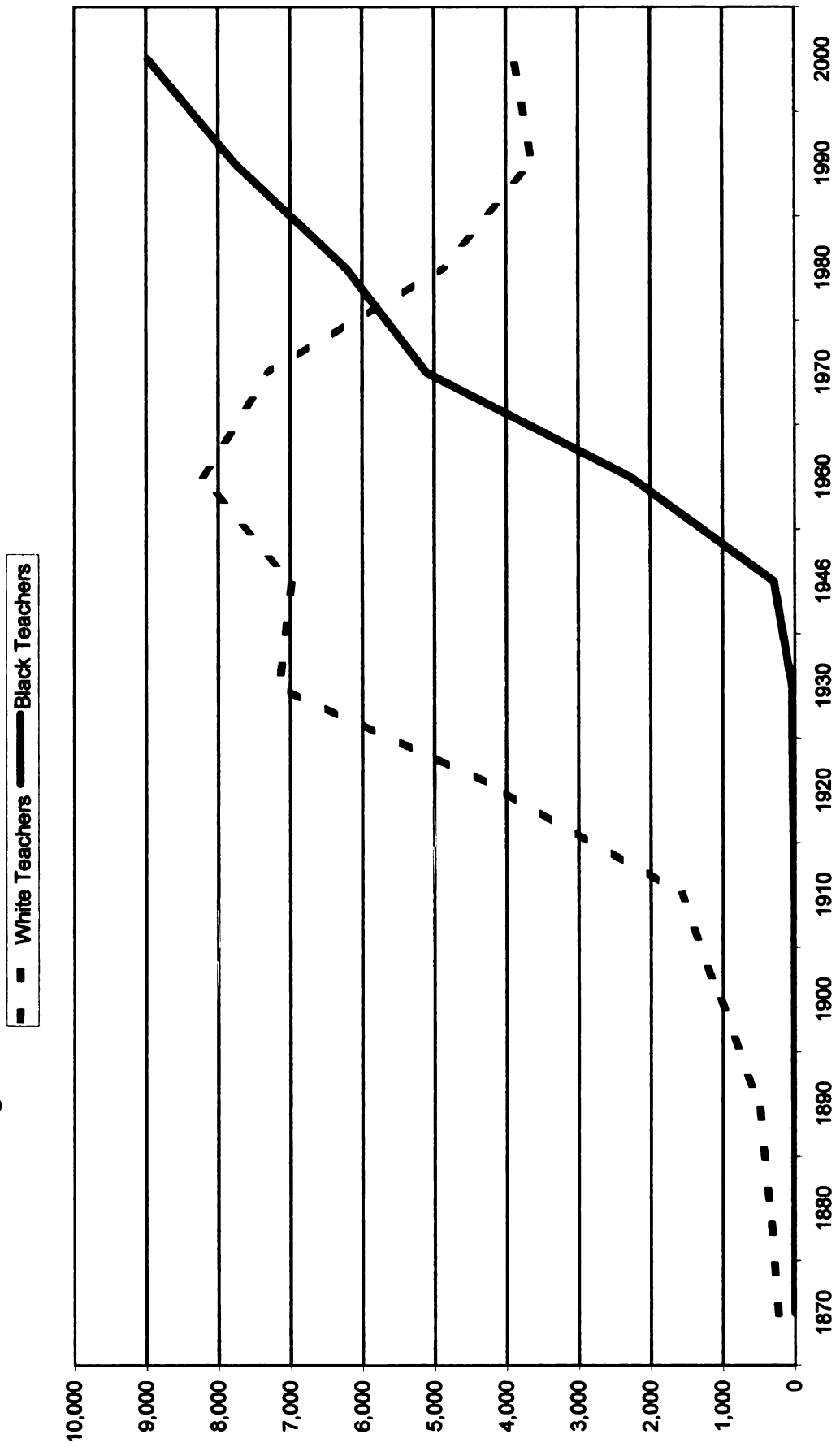


## **APPENDIX E**

### **FIGURE 5**

#### **BLACK AND WHITE TEACHERS, DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS 1870-2000**

**Figure 5. Black and White Teachers Detroit Public Schools 1870-2000**





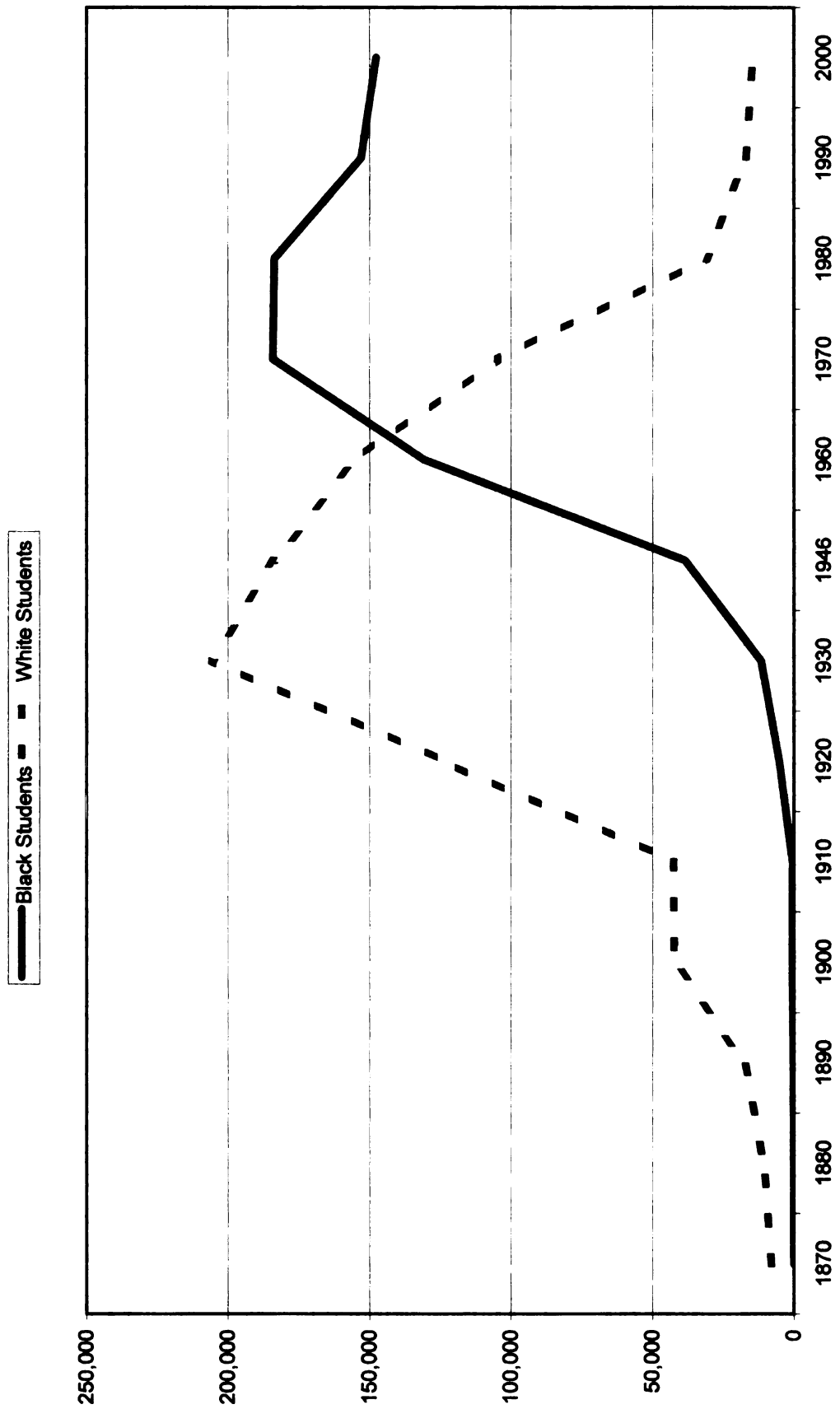


## **APPENDIX F**

### **FIGURE 6**

**BLACK AND WHITE STUDENT POPULATION,  
DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
1870-2000**

Figure 6. Black and White Student Population Detroit Public Schools 1870-2000



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