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**“She Who Learns Teaches”
Othermothering in the Academy
*A Dialogue Among African Canadian and
African Caribbean Students and Faculty***

Much of the feminist discourse in academic work renders African Canadian women’s experiences invisible, seriously compromised and/or marginalized. In this paper, a group of African Canadian and African Caribbean graduate students and professors dialogue with each other about some of their experiences in academic settings. Most of these students are the first generation in their families to pursue graduate education. They are from diverse backgrounds, and study in a range of disciplines. However, what links them is their research about African Canadian women and their interests in pursuing African-centered studies. They will discuss some barriers and challenges they have encountered in trying to make visible the experiences of African peoples. The students will also speak about their fieldwork in the communities, their experiences in doing African centered research, and the links between their academic lives and their communities, particularly their connection with their professors, fellow students, program co-ordinators, and student advisors as othermothers. The faculty members discuss their experiences as academics and othermothers, and some of the challenges and contradictions they face. We begin with a discussion of Africentricity in higher education, and othermothering in the community and the academy. The paper concludes with an interactive discussion about approaches to eliminate gender and racial inequity in research, policy and action.

Africentricity in higher education

By Africentricity we mean using a worldview that sees African people as critical agents of their own experience. The core focus of the Africentric paradigm is the re-assessment of social phenomena from an African centered orientation (Schiele, 1994; Asante, 1987; Collins, 1990). We bring an Africentric

feminist perspective to this piece, which pays attention to issues of race, class, and gender, and the interlocking nature of these oppressions.

Schiele (1994) offers a creative vision of the use of Africentric theory in higher education. He asserts that Africentricity exposes white racism and culpability. Naming the student/teacher relationship as the most important social relationship in academia, Schiele (1994) states that under the Eurocentric paradigm, many African students experience fragmentation, dissonance and frustration. African students are often misunderstood, and are not able to get the supports they need in white institutions (Reid, 1990; Harris, 1998; Schiele, 1994; Cook, 1997; Bernard, forthcoming). Schiele (1994) offers a new vision and perspective. He suggests that the Africentric model would emphasize cooperation and harmony, as opposed to uncooperation, antagonism or aloofness. However, to achieve these goals, the academic must be humble, non-elitist and affable to promote and create a comfortable, nurturing and inspirational learning environment. These are congruent with the Africentric perspective, where the role of the teacher is to:

- emphasize and foster a subjective and cognitive experience of knowledge among students (the feeling intellect)

- be a change agent, promoting the transformation of students

- be an information provider and receiver (learning is seen as interdependent and bi-directional) (Schiele, 1994:156-157).

An emphasis on these roles would help African and non-African students feel engaged and connected to their academic environment. The challenge lies in the academy itself, and the institutional policies and practices that would prohibit the implementation of such progressive pedagogy. It challenges traditional notions of competition and individualism.

Schiele (1994) also offers a new vision for students who are operating within an Africentric paradigm. He suggests that students would:

- be seen as a collective group and be more interconnected

- see themselves more as a group than as individuals

- be seen as cooperative learners

- cultivate feeling intellect (Schiele, 1994:157-158).

The conception of Africentricity in higher education offers us an alternative to the Eurocentric view of the world and on higher education (Schiele, 1994:165). It provides a vehicle for the expression of cultural identity and ethos among African educators and students, and a buffer from the psychological and cultural misorientation that occurs in the education system. Schiele offers three distinct locations for the infusion of Africentric thought in the academy:

- promoting Afrocentricity¹ among students, colleagues and administrators

- integrating Afrocentric content in the class[room] and

- applying Afrocentricity in scholarly and professional activities (Schiele, 1994: 160).

In this paper, academics and students discuss the ways in which they try to

promote and integrate African centered perspectives and Africentricity in their study and work plans. One example is the repositioning of othermothering, locating it in the academy.

Othermothering

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) coined the term othermothering, which she uses to effectively describe the role that Black women play as community othermothers. She says that community othermothers build a different type of community in what are often hostile political and economic surroundings (1990: 131-132). In addition, their experiences as othermothers provide a valid foundation for the development of Black women's political activism. Bernard and Bernard (1998) talk of the highly politicized nature of Black motherhood. Referring to both biological and othermothers, they assert that Black mothers have been given the responsibility for providing education, social and political awareness to their own children, as well as the children in their communities. We suggest that Collins' definition of othermothers extends to the work we do in the academy. Othermothering in the community is the foundation of what Collins calls the "*mothering the mind*" [emphasis hers] relationship that often develops between African-American [descended] women teachers and their Black female and male students. We refer to this as othermothering in the academy, and see it as work that extends beyond traditional definitions of mentorship. It is a sharing of self, an interactive and collective process, a spiritual connectedness that epitomizes the Africentric values of sharing, caring and accountability. As Henry (1998) asserts, Black women teachers, who are also activists, are othermothers who assume responsibility for their communities.

Education is considered a cornerstone of Black community development, and as such Black women, as community othermothers, have placed a high value on education and have used it as a site for activism (Collins, 1990: 210). Academic othermothers also value education, and use their location to facilitate the education of others. As Schiele (1994) asserts, academic othermothers who operate within an Africentric framework, are change agents who promote student empowerment and transformation. This is the case for the two academics here who are engaged in reflective dialogue with students of African descent about their experiences in the academy. Motherwork in the academy is an inclusive process that strives to meet the holistic needs of students. The *mothering the mind* is also reciprocal, as students share their knowledge and expertise with faculty. The mentorship and nurturing helps to lay the foundation for the students' future roles as community and/or academic othermothers. Both groups of othermothers are marginalized in the academy and their respective invisibility gives them the determination to fight for space and a reclaiming of their visibility.

Claiming visibility

[B]ell hooks (1989) says that oppressed people resist by defining their

reality, naming their history, and telling their story. Each of the authors will claim visibility through the presentation of their brief biographies. Ekpo (2000) asserts that narrative discourse allows space to tap into forgotten memories and to revisit history. This provides us with the tools to *define* and *fight* for our space in the academy. As students we are isolated and marginalized in our respective programs. The two faculty members are also isolated, with few other colleagues of African descent teaching in the same program, or within the institutions where we work. Participant bios are presented in alphabetical order.

My name is **Candace Bernard**. I completed my undergraduate and graduate studies in Social Work at Dalhousie University. I am currently pursuing a Masters of Arts in Education also in Halifax in Mount Saint Vincent University. I am the only African Nova Scotian in my MA program. My thesis focuses on the intersection between race, class and gender and how that impacts on the school experiences of African Nova Scotian students. I interviewed people who have graduated from the system and I asked them to reflect on their experiences. I found that process very rewarding, but at times isolating and difficult.

I am **Wanda Thomas Bernard**, an Associate Professor of Social Work at Dalhousie University. I have taught at the University for ten years, in both the undergraduate and graduate programs. I am also a member of the Women's Studies Faculty at Dalhousie. I am the only African Nova Scotian faculty member at my School, and one of few African faculty at Dalhousie. I am frequently approached by graduate students from many sectors of the university for assistance, guidance and advice. I have had the opportunity to supervise many African students' research projects.

My name is **Chioma Ekpo**. I'm a graduate student at Dalhousie University, in the Women's Studies Department, completing my Masters degree. My undergraduate degree was obtained from the University of Toronto, with a double major in Sociology and Women's Studies, and a minor in Social Anthropology. I moved from Toronto to Halifax, Nova Scotia because of the rich Black Heritage in Nova Scotia and its overall contribution to Canadian history. So I thought that Nova Scotia would be a great place to obtain my Masters degree, as I was originally interested in African women writers. When I got there though, it was a different story entirely. My thesis addresses Black Nova Scotian women's narratives. I am the only African student, from Nigeria, in my graduate program.

My name is **Josephine Enang**. I recently graduated from the Masters of Nursing program, Dalhousie University in Halifax. I graduated last October. My thesis focused on the childbirth experiences of African Nova Scotian women. I'm a midwife by background so I have an interest in childbirth and am currently working in the IWK/Grace Health Centre. I also had a struggle not having role models or mentors in the program that we can look up to. I was the only African student in my program. My interest in looking at Black women's health was more of the result of lack of research or information around those

issues. Each time I wanted to write a paper I went through the literature and I found nothing relating to Black women. This motivated me to do something, at least to get something in the literature.

My name is **Bertyln Joseph**. I'm an Afro-Caribbean student at McGill University. I have Bachelors degrees in Sociology and in social work and I just completed my Masters in social work last year. I'm in the process of pursuing my PhD. The reasons why I chose McGill I guess is because of convenience; I live in Montreal. When I tried to get into the program there were a lot of difficulties to get into the program and when I got there, there were no Black faculty members and that was a struggle for me and it became a challenge up until my graduation.

I am **Njoki Wane**, an Assistant Professor in the Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto. I have taught at the University for two years, first as a sessional and as a tenure-track faculty in both the pre-service and graduate programs. This year I introduced a course on Black Feminist Thought. This was the first course that focused solely on Black women's issues. My hope is to design other courses that will examine in depth the many structural and systematic challenges that Black women face in their everyday lives.

Telling our stories through our own voices enables us to claim space and visibility. Sharing these stories in academic scholarship allows for others to develop an understanding of the struggles, barriers, and challenges we face in academia. We are also able to then analyze the gifts and strengths that we embody, and through this we hope to make a difference for others in the struggle. We agree with Walker's assertion that

...it is a great time to be ... a Black woman ... because from day-to-day our lives are touched with new possibilities, [and] because the past is studded with sisters who, in their time, shone like gold. They give us hope, they have proved the splendor of our past, which should free us to lay claim to the fullness of the future. (qtd. in Beaulieu, 1999: 21)

Our aim is to continue the journey, and to lift as we climb, in a way that assures others the opportunity to climb.

Barriers and challenges

It is well documented in the literature that Black academics and students face a number of challenges and barriers in the academy and in professional fields. Bernard, Lucas-White, and Moore (1993) discuss the triple jeopardy that Black women face in society, particularly in professional careers. They posit that "[W]e must still work twice as hard to build our credibility, to prove our competence, to attain whatever goal we have in sight, and then to hold onto it.... The expectation, usually unspoken, is that we are representing our race and

our community, that we are the experts..." Such challenges place additional burdens on Black women in these roles. A similar perspective is provided by Carroll (1982) whose research revealed that Black women report working twice as hard in education and employment, yet they only get a minute portion of the opportunities available to white women and Black men. Black women professors and students are isolated, and have few people to share their experiences with (Carroll, 1982). Additionally, they are assumed to be experts on "minority" issues, and are expected to be willing to provide advocacy around those issues. Cook (1997: 100) says that the isolation that many Black women in white academia experience contributes to their self-doubt, confusion, anger, and oftentimes shame, as they attempt to sort out the emotional toll that they bear in being Black, female, competent and alone in white academia.

Similar findings are shared here. Black women are affected by both racism and sexism. Wanda asked the students to reflect on some of the barriers and challenges they faced as graduate students in their respective responses. Their poignant responses follow:

Josephine... As the only Black woman in most of the courses I took in my program, I found that my experiences were sometimes distinct from the dominant group and sometimes my reality was interpreted differently. Based on these experiences I perceived my location to be at the margins or periphery of society. To me, the centre of society is where activities of the dominant culture take place and many Black women, like myself, are located at the margins as a result of our identities such as race, gender and class. This is reflected in the validity of voices and whose points are regarded as relevant even in classroom discussions. The literature acknowledges that identities are given meaning and value based on their proximity to the centres and margins.

The lack of nurses from marginalized groups in positions of authority, supervisory capacities or faculty positions often makes me wonder about my future. Sometimes I question whether there will ever be an opportunity to realize my full potential as a professional nurse. The absence of role models (no point of reference) decreases ones' confidence in her ability to succeed and it is stressful having nobody around who truly understands what it like to be Black in a position of authority. Another challenge in most of my training is the limited information available on the care of people from marginalized groups (lack of incorporation of racial and multicultural issues in schools' curriculum). All these issues create stress and isolation for marginalized people who constantly struggle to "push the margins" away from them, and those who cannot maintain their strength to keep pushing the margins, give up and stop creating their desired future.

Chioma... I was a newcomer to Halifax, in the province of Nova Scotia ... I didn't know anybody...I just knew that I wanted to go to this province that would embrace me ... For an entire year I really didn't know what I was going to do for my thesis work. I originally wanted to do something on African

women writers, but I changed my mind and so for the entire year I was struggling with developing a thesis topic. I knew I wanted to focus on something that would be celebratory in nature, where Black women were concerned. I didn't want to pick an aspect of Black women's lives that was a problem, problematize it as was typically done in research. I didn't want to say, "Okay, Black women have this problem and what do we do about it?" I wanted to celebrate who we are as Black women and celebrate their achievements and accomplishments, without necessarily glossing over some of their concerns. I realized that for me to get to that point meant that I had to sincerely look inside myself and access how I was going to do that. I was going to have to do something that would enrich me; that would allow me to grow as a graduate student and as a Black woman; that would centre me in the research and allow me to learn in the process without just picking a topic for the sake of doing a Masters thesis and getting a Masters degree and leaving it at that.

I still remember the moment of rupture, when I found myself objectifying Black women and the issues in their lives, just so that I could get a topic and do this thesis and get out. I remember that I would be walking down the street and be looking at Black women and start thinking of what part of their lives I could pick out for my own academic purposes. Painfully, but luckily, I came to see that that was not the way to go about this process. I saw that I was actually doing something I had critiqued other people in white academia for doing, which was objectifying Black women for the purpose of doing research. So I had to stop immediately and brutally assess the implications and underlying message in my struggle. So, in that sense, mothering came into play in that I was able to talk to some great Black women in the community.

I learned some interesting things through this harrowing experience. What I learned most importantly was that I had to engage in research that would be impassioned, which means doing something that I wanted to do, really do. To do something that would be academically and spiritually affirming; that which would celebrate who we were, are, and aspire to be as Black women. It's extremely hard, to say the very least, to do that when there is an extreme paucity of Black female and male professors in the university. It then means that your choices of people to share your pain with are limited, because it is burdensome on the very few Black professors who are present to be the sounding board for our cries and pain. When your white-centred feminist research and methodology texts do not have examples of Black women doing research, or when they do it is merely one or two pieces as if that speaks to the entire diversity of research carried out by Black women, you don't have anything to build on; you don't have anywhere to expand from. Those are some of the problems I had in this journey.

Josephine... For me, I think that some of the barriers that I encountered was not having people in teaching positions that understand the issues you are interested in. You have to be explaining to your professors what it is you want to do. I remember when I first identified my topic, and I thought of this one

professor that I respected so much and I went to her to get her opinion on my research topic. I talked about my research ideas and I had two options. And she asked me, 'Why do you want to ask these women about their experiences, is there something wrong with the system is there something that is prompting you to look into this area?'. I said well certainly there are issues and I just gave an example of when I went in and had my own baby as a Black woman and I gave an example of some of the things that I did learn and she said, "How do you know that white women don't experience this?" So I just felt like, she doesn't understand this. And it's an issue that I dealt with throughout that whole process of my thesis writing. That is really difficult, when you are in the position of a student you have to educate your professor and have to say, this is why I think this is necessary. And she keeps challenging and telling you "I don't see the connection." The need to constantly try to educate them was the big challenge for me.

Bertlyn... My thesis stems from my personal experiences of racism in a child welfare agency. I was so frustrated by the experiences I had at the agency at the time, as well as from observing other Black workers going through similar experiences, I decided to write about my experiences of racism. I had written a paper based on this and received feedback from my professor who encouraged me to pursue this as a thesis topic. I think he's the only person in the university who tries to support Black students in terms of their research interest. However, you still have to deal with the other professors who are not supportive. For example, one Black student who was interested in Africentric research was given the impression by her advisor that it was an interesting topic to pursue. After formalizing the agreement that she would be her main advisor, subsequent meetings were discouraging, as the advisor decided that an Africentric approach was no longer important. She was devastated and frustrated because it was too late to change advisors.

Another example is the experience of an international student from Africa who came to McGill because of its international reputation. She wanted to do her research on child soldiers, the experience of child soldiers in Africa. A few professors encouraged her not to conduct this research because they were not familiar with the subject. She left the School of Social Work and went to another faculty where she found support for her research topic.

Moreover, there were about five Black students taking a qualitative research course and we all got the same grade, which the students considered an *ethnic grade*. Collectively we wrote a letter to the Director of the Department to make a complaint. Most importantly, some of the students went to the Director to talk about how they felt as Black students in a predominately white university. It's a constant struggle for Black students in the academy. Black students encounter frustrations on a regular basis in the Eurocentric academic environment. The one supportive professor we had, who was an *"othermother"* to Black students, went on sabbatical recently, and that left a void in our academic experience.

Candace... For me I feel like we have to work two or three times as hard. Listening to you talk and all the hurdles we have to go through to find people who have expertise in our subject area. That is my experience too... I've had to go outside the university. I wanted someone of African descent on my committee and the university has a general rule that you can't have a person without a PhD on your committee. So that made it very difficult to find somebody with expertise in the area that I was doing. When you're in your classes, in terms of what you're learning, sometimes you feel like you're invisible because your experience as a Black woman is totally negated within the university. In addition, the way you're treated in the classroom can be a problem. I've experienced racism in the classroom. And it's very difficult when you're the only person of African descent in the classroom. You have to challenge that. Sometimes you have to pick and choose your battles, because it happens so frequently. Challenging racism can also be difficult because the professor that's making a racist comment is also grading your work. And it's difficult to speak out against that because it can effect how you do in the course and possibly the entire program, if you get labeled as a troublemaker.

Wanda... Funding, or the lack of funds can be a major barrier. How have you managed to deal with that problem?

Chioma... My Mom, Teresa Hibbert, funds my research, thankfully. If it weren't for her financial support and emotional guidance, I would not have had the opportunity to experience this journey and complete it; a journey that I would later discover was a liberating one in many respects. And I say this acknowledging the privilege of being in such a position as I am in, because juggling financial and academic demands puts a big strain on one's concentration level. How do you think of ways to affirm yourself as a Black woman in academia while worrying about rent, food, and school supplies? The research funding from the graduate studies department is limited and in some cases you have to appeal for more funding, which was my experience. Luckily, I was successful with my appeals.

Bertlyn... I work full-time and I go to school part-time and it's very difficult to juggle both. I can't give up work for school and I don't want to give up school because it's my future. It's very difficult to do both.

Josephine... I can't give up work because I need the money to support my program. But I've also been able to get some scholarships that assisted me. I had to compete with other people for scholarships and I got funding that way.

Candace... It's very difficult because there are so few scholarships. At Dalhousie for example there is only one scholarship specifically for African Canadian students. There is one scholarship per year for both Masters and PhDs, in all disciplines, and for people across Canada so the chances of getting it are very slim. I see a lot of us having to juggle work, school, home, community. Throughout my time in university I have had to work part time during the year, and full time in the summers, whilst a full time student. I have benefitted from a few small bursaries and scholarships, however, it has been necessary to work

to support myself. In addition, a lot of us feel the need to be in the community and that's a lot of work as well, juggling it all together.

Juggling work and study is how we manage to get an education. This certainly affects grades, as you cannot devote full time to your studies. It may also affect your work performance. Additionally, studies are balanced with all of the other systemic barriers, such as those documented in the BLAC (1994) report. They posit that the cycle of poverty, the lack of job opportunities, and racism on the job all form part of the average Black student's reality and daily struggle. There is pain in each of these experiences, but as hooks (1988) says, we learn to theorize through our pain. That which does not kill us, will make us stronger. We each have stories of struggle and survival. To be where we are, and to stay there, means that we have learned to survive and succeed against the odds. But what accounts for that success? We now dialogue about the strategies that helped us find a way to succeed.

Succeeding against the odds

Wanda... As I have stated elsewhere, when I reflect on my work in the academy, I realize that one thing that keeps me there, and keeps me enthused about my work, is *hope*. Much of that hope comes from my community, from the struggle and resistance of my ancestors, and the hope that I imagined helped them on their journeys through very difficult periods in our history. They resisted with fewer privileges, resources and opportunities than I have at my disposal today, and somehow, those memories and reflections help me to put things into perspective. I still work twice, maybe three times as hard, because of the demands from within the academy and the community (Bernard forthcoming). I have learned that sharing my experiences is also an act of empowerment (Collins 1990).

Cook (1997:107) asserts that for some Black women academics, finding their way has meant finding ways to express their cultural values and selves within the dominance of white culture. They are solidly located in their communities and committed to their students. They are more likely to spend "...excess hours providing service to students, conducting action-oriented research programs, and using experiential-learning teaching methods" (Cook 1997:102). Both Wanda and Njoki live that experience. However, they also recognize that there are two sides to this coin: their experiences as Black academics, and the experiences of Black students. The students share their stories of resistance and empowerment, as they find their way in the academy.

Njoki... Life in the Academy as an immigrant student and now as a faculty member has been very challenging. Coming to a new culture, a culture that was so foreign to my children, was extremely difficult. I can still recall sitting in a classroom and wondering whether I had made the right decision to go back to

school. Everything was so foreign. Most of the time the readings and examples given in class did not make sense to me. Although I am faculty now, I cannot say that things have changed. In most cases when I go to my pre-service class, I am the only visible minority in my class. I have to constantly validate my credentials as a professor and scholar. It can be very tiring. But, I am hopeful that things will not always be like this.

Josephine... From the difficulties we've talked about that we've experienced in addition to our graduate school workload, you can plainly see that it makes it extra hard for us to perform our other roles. Being a mother, I have two children at home.... that makes it difficult because I have to work extra hard. For example, like Candace, I couldn't get somebody of African descent to sit on my thesis committee. It took me months to look around, searching in the Black community with the set criteria that this person has to have at least a Masters in nursing and I couldn't find one Black nurse with a Masters degree. I was going everywhere in the province. It was my good friend Elizabeth who I'd met in a conference and told me about Wanda, so I went to see her, and that was a big, big help. But in addition to that, you have to constantly keep struggling. But I must say the positive aspect to that is that I met my thesis supervisor, she's a white woman professor, who was very, very supportive, I think she's worked with each one of us here, she basically made me feel like I had the responsibility. She said 'You couldn't even find one Black woman to sit on your thesis committee, who do you expect to do this work for others?' She basically made me feel like I had the responsibility to go out there and do this research because if I don't do it, who do I expect to do it? If I don't go and find the issues, who will look for it?

Bertlyn... Listening to you when you were talking about some of the difficulties you experienced when you were looking for a thesis advisor made me think of a similar experience when I had to go outside the province to find someone. I had a white advisor who was fine, but some part of me was missing. I knew that it would be difficult to do this research without having the support of a Black advisor. I had to go to Ottawa to seek out a Black advisor, at my own expense. The university was concerned because she was a sessional instructor at Carleton. Fortunately she came on board and I was lucky enough to find her.

I then went to a Black Social Workers conference in Atlanta where I met Wanda and I discussed my experience and frustration in finding a Black advisor. We maintained contact and once I had Wanda on board I felt such a relief in that I don't really have to worry anymore. I was comforted to know that I had someone that I could really trust, who would understand, know what I'm talking about. It's a struggle for a lot of Black students who don't have any professors who can support their Africentric research. For example, Wanda lives in Halifax and I live in Montreal, she's going to be my external for my PhD. There are few Black professors available to sit on my committee, therefore I am considering inviting Black social workers to sit in as a community panel, since I don't want to have four white professors dominating my committee. I prefer

to have a diverse community panel, people who have some knowledge and expertise on my topic. I also want to be surrounded by people who will be supportive and nurturing. It is reassuring now that I have Wanda to mother me through this difficult, yet very important journey.

Candace... I was just thinking that in terms of what you all have been saying about the lack of mentorship and connecting with my own experience. Sometimes I feel like I'm not getting the rich experience that I deserve, having to put myself in the educator's role when I'm actually in the position of the student. In my social work program we're supposed to be there to get mentorship and talk about issues related to social work practice, for instance I have often been asked "What camp are you in, what theory do you come from in your practice?" and I said well, I'm an Africentrist and I do Africentric social work and that's my theoretical perspective, and I've been looked at as if I have two heads. So how am I supposed to get any mentorship if my professors do not know anything about my theoretical perspectives? I don't think I've really ever had the opportunity to talk to a more seasoned African social worker who uses Africentric theory and that's been difficult for my own learning process. I've also noticed as a graduate student, the higher up you go the fewer people like me I see. And, listening to our experiences, I know that it's not because we're not capable, it's because we're not being encouraged. And from my research, I see that we're not being encouraged from the time we enter school. Many of us who make it through high school, don't get the encouragement to make it through university. Those of us who make it through university, don't get the encouragement to go to graduate school. The few African graduate students I have met are saying they want out. They're not being encouraged to do PhDs. There's a lack of professors of African descent across the country in every discipline, but there just aren't enough people of African descent entering doctoral programs. Universities should be recruiting people from graduate school and from the community.

Acts of resistance and self-determination permeate these stories. To survive we have to work exceptionally hard, to gain credibility and recognition for our work. We do this with little encouragement from the academic setting. However, those who are supportive, can have life changing impact on Black women in the academy.

Njoki asks... Can we get motherwork or othermothering in the academy recognized? I think this is very difficult question. I do recognize the importance of motherwork in the Academy because the more effective it is, the better the performance of our students. But these institutions are structured in such a patriarchal fashion that would dismiss it without even reading a prepared docier of othermothering at the Academy. I find that most women do othermothering in the academy, and we have here testimonials from Black students about the significance of this for their own survival. I guess this would require research

and verbalization of othermothering by as many women academics as possible. I feel that a collective voice could make a difference.

Wanda... I agree that our work in the academy as othermothers needs to be recognized, but it will only be if we make it visible. Writing and dialoging about it does render it visible work, and scholarly work. I also believe that we should document this in a more formal way, perhaps through a research project. I surmise that we will find that it extends beyond race, that other women and pro-feminist men are also engaged in othermothering in the academy.

Doing African-centered research in white academia

Research is the cornerstone of our work in academe. However, not all research gets equal standing. Hall (1992) reminds us that the political economy of academia actively discourages community based and collaborative or participatory research. Yet, most African centered research is closely linked to communities, and is more likely to be collaborative and involve participants in meaningful ways. How does this affect African students and academics who want to engage in community based research? Reid (1990) asserts that many find it difficult to find willing collaborators, and students have a hard time finding qualified supervisors. Similar views are presented through the evidence provided here in each of our experiences. Stoecker (1998) quotes Hubbard (1996) who posits that community based research is neither valued in academia or the activist community, therefore academics are pressured to construct the research in a way to give it a higher academic profile. How do African students and academics respond to such pressures? What are some of their struggles in doing African centered research from the location of white academic institutions?

Wanda poses the question... One of the things I'd like to hear you talk about is doing the research and working with participants... African communities have been researched to death. They've been researched a lot by non-ethnic academics and students. And not much ever goes back to the communities. So it becomes more and more difficult to get people to agree to participate. I wonder if you'd talk a bit about that, flipping the coin. You've talked about the struggles in the academy, but what about the other side where you're going back into the community. For me, this is another link to the mothering theme as well. Can you talk a bit about what that's been like for you?

Chioma... When I finally decided to do research *with* African Nova Scotian women, the next concern was deciding whom do I select, whom do I choose and how do I go about doing that. I didn't know anybody, and at the time I wanted to talk to Black women activists in the community. So I had to go around asking different people for name suggestions. It's kind of interesting to hear of the names of women who get mentioned frequently as suggestions for me to talk to, and those who get sidelined. I knew I didn't want to talk to

women who get profiled continuously, who are popularly labeled as community activists, inside and outside of the community. I wanted to talk to women who were activists in their own way, not necessarily on a publicized scale, who did mentoring programs and things like that in their own homes and their own private spaces. The women whom I wanted to be a part of my work happily agreed to engage in the personal narrative work. In the process, they ended up mothering me. Their personal triumphs and experiences growing up Black and female in Nova Scotia and Canada encouraged me in my own fight to engage in research that would bring me out and make me feel alive; research that would affirm me and honour our collective heritage. In this sense I got mothered. They opened their arms and encouraged me to do the work that was here, it was very helpful. The three women I ended up working with were just incredible. I mean they would come to my place and pick me up and drop me off, or arrange for my transportation. They fed me and were just accommodating, you know. It was just great. It was like going to an Aunt's home and when I'd address them I felt like addressing them as "Aunty" because that is how we address our elders with respect and endearment. It was nurturing and that was exactly what I needed—to be cradled in this struggle and thus feel validated as I celebrated who they were and who I was. Other women and men from the community also helped enrich this experience and so I got mothered from the community. One cannot forget the extreme support and affirming words that has come from family, friends, fellow graduate students, and professors. They have definitely mothered me.

In talking about mentors and othermothers, I have to say that my mother, Teresa Hibbert, has given me the wonderful gift of this opportunity. Her defiant spirit has pushed me to push myself. Also, my friend Ruramisai Charumbira has also mothered me and encouraged me in this journey. I do believe that our ancestors were watching over me and made it possible for Ruramisai and I to meet. She's been there for me, and she's seen me cry and she's cradled me and nourished me even as she struggled through her own journey pursuing her Masters in International Development Studies at Saint Mary's University. She's doing her PhD now at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto and she's still mothering me long distance. For that I thank her very much. My point here is that if we don't have an outlet, a safe space, if we don't have mentors or fellow graduate students that we can share experiences with and get through this process, it will be a very lonely and crushing experience.

Josephine says... Feminist principles and Participatory Action Research (PAR) were the basic tenets that guided this research process. My interest in the use of feminist research methodology stems from my conscious effort to explore the multiple layers of oppression encountered by African Nova Scotian women: racism, sexism, classism. Traditional scientific research is unlikely to explore these concepts. Moreover, although reductionist research methods may be important in contributing to the understanding of the health of African Nova

Scotians, they do not allow for the voices of the participants to be heard. Feminist research on the other hand, employs a critical social science approach which explores various experiences of marginalized groups. Feminist research values both objectivity and subjectivity as ways of knowing, analyzing and understanding, and they should not be independent of one another.

Participatory action research was chosen to enable me avoid the “rip and run” practice of extracting data to support theoretical interests and career advancement needs without a reciprocal process of some research. Marginalized people often feel betrayed when research findings are not used to improve their everyday lives but are instead used to justify policies of subordination. Participatory action research methodology provided opportunity for these women to tell their stories without the language constraints inherent in questionnaires and structured interviews. As clearly articulated in their discussions, this approach is empowering because it overcomes the invisibility and silencing they have been so familiar with. PAR also provided a forum for them to take collective actions to address their needs.

Bertlyn adds... Listening to you share your experiences brings a smile to my face, because I know how that felt, when I connected with Wanda. It was a relief. I felt that everything was going to be okay, that there was somebody who could give me support. It's not easy, it's a very cold world in academia, you're left to struggle and fight for yourself. We need mentors to encourage us to carry on, and without them it is easier to give up on your academic and personal goals. I am elated that I am here and moving forward, and that I have someone that I can call on for assistance and support. At times I feel that I call her too often, it feels like it could be petty, but I know she will never make me feel as if it is unimportant. It is so reassuring to know that I can do that, and because of that I'm moving forward and I thank you Wanda.

Candace reflects... Well I had a very different experience with participants, and I think what's interesting is that you were all interviewing older people and my experience was actually focusing on a younger age group. I had a difficult time getting participants for my study. I didn't think it would be difficult because I've often heard people say “we need more African Nova Scotians doing research, with us instead of on us,” so I didn't think I'd have a problem at all. But I had a very difficult time. I sent out an email to a couple hundred students. I had managed to get the email address for every single African student in the province registered at a university and I got one response from Chioma saying “Good Luck.” Unfortunately she wasn't educated in Nova Scotia so I couldn't interview her. So that was very frustrating. And I sent notices to several of the major community groups, but nothing materialized. So I had to end up going to the people that I knew that fit the profile and asking “Will you please participate in this?” “Are you interested?” I did end up getting people that way. I also had a few no-shows. It ended up being a very rewarding experience, but I was very surprised. And I think it's what you were saying Josephine that there's been so much pain created by the research that's been

done, that has perpetuated stereotypes and participated in the oppression of African people there's sort of resistance to participating in the process, whether you're an African researcher or not. And it can be very frustrating for students wanting to do the work and not getting the type of response that you anticipate.

In terms of mentoring, I think I've been very fortunate to have my biological mother Wanda. She's been an important role model for me because she's the only Black woman in Halifax that I see doing this work. And sometimes I think, if she wasn't around, where would we all be. I see you (Wanda) working two and three times as hard, not only to keep up with the expectations of the academy, but the community has so many expectations of you as well. As one of the few African social scientists at Dalhousie you are in demand, you want to be there for students and you're being pulled in different directions. It's very difficult and we need more people like you out there. We need to be adequately represented in the academy in all disciplines. And we need to change some of the things that are going on in the academy.

One thing that I think we all wanted to do in our research was make a connection in the community and the text books don't tell you to do that. They tell you to go and do research on people, not with them. There were no structures in place to help me do research with people and not on them. And that's something I found very difficult. Another thing is the language that's used. Some people that are writing claim to be emancipatory, claim to be writing for people in the community at the grass roots level. But I've asked several people in the community have you read this, have you read that and they haven't because they can't understand it. They tell me all the time that the language used is very exclusionary, so I don't understand how it's emancipatory, when the people they are trying to liberate can't even understand the work. I think that's exclusionary. I think there needs to be more links between academia and the community. It's difficult for us as students to break those barriers.

She who learns teaches

Through pain there's healing. Through struggle there's triumph. Through oppression there is emancipation. What are the lessons to be learned here? What are some suggestions for change? How can we make othermothering in the academy visible?

Josephine... It requires hard work. It requires putting in extra work and it pays off when you persist. The victory for me was getting that connection from the community, and once I had that support from the community we were able to come together as a collective group and do the social action component that was creating a multicultural health program in the health centre that I work for. That program has been quite successful and rewarding.

I'd like to see more incorporation of racial and multicultural issues in the curriculum. Academia should form active partnerships with communities to research their issues. Active recruitment efforts are needed to increase Black

faculty and students. Mentorship programs would help with retention. Regular use of innovative research approaches such as PAR to promote efficient inquiry about the complex health issues of marginalized people.

Bertlyn... I think the victory for me was to document Black social workers' experiences of racism in the child welfare system and other social services agencies. Even though I knew that racism exists, it was important for me to document it so that I could expound on the subject for my PhD. In my doctoral program I plan to continue the research to explore racism in child welfare, but also document the experiences of people of color in academia. I'm trying to challenge the status quo. I want people to know that we are aware of the injustices and oppression in social institutions. I am ready to push forward on this issue. My ultimate victory was linking up with Wanda because there are no Black professors at McGill's School of Social Work.

Candace... I'd like to think that some day I will be able to provide mentorship for somebody else. It gives me the encouragement to keep going. Making a positive contribution to research and to the African Canadian community through my studies empowers me to continue the struggle. Also, the opportunity to dialogue with others and share experiences inspires me.

Chioma... When I look back at the research experience, I wouldn't give it back for anything else, in spite of all the pain and struggle that I experienced. That is why I say it is a gift from my mother, Teresa Hibbert. One great victory has been coming to know what it means to challenge myself and fight to design research that moves me. Even realizing the pain in the process and what that means so that one does not give up, has been a life lesson. We see that we are all going through the same struggles, unfortunately, but we all push on and cradle each other, and that applies to both students and professors. That is the essence of "*She Who Learns Teaches*," passing it on so that we can collectively empower ourselves. And I keep thinking that if we don't do it, no one else will, in terms of contributing to a loving and liberatory Black epistemology. If we sit back and say, there's no information, there's no research, no topics, then we fail to see the significance of insisting on generating Black epistemology and research. So taking the step from myself and saying, I have to do it in spite of everything, I think has been the biggest lesson for me, a moment of rupture.

Njoki... The greatest thing that I have learnt as a Black woman in a western academy, is the importance of being there for each other. The networking, the support system and connecting with other scholars, whether faculty or students, with whom you can engage, both at the ideological level and at emotional level is essential to our collective survival. Scholars whose experiences I can identify with as a Black woman. Many times, I find students come to my office and we theorize about Black women's issues. At other times, we just talk, talk about families, our struggles, our fears and our hopes. Our ideas are great, if only we had the resources! One of the things I regret is the fact that there are far too few people of color who are academics. That puts a strain on the few that are there. Sometimes this strain is not visible—but it is there. One

thing I have learnt is not to give up or lose hope. We have to be hopeful at all times...

Wanda concludes... We are able to be effective mentors and othermothers because others have already done it for us. As challenging as it may be, taking time to help develop the brilliant minds of the future is not only a *privilege*, but a *responsibility*, if we are to truly "lift as we climb." As Africentrists we are cognizant of the struggles and lack of opportunity afforded our ancestors, that is why we believe that "she who learns must also be willing to teach."

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¹There are numerous variations on the spelling of Africentricity. The original spelling is Afrocentricity, however, more recently the term Africentricity has been used in the literature. We use Africentricity, unless in a direct quote. Essentially, the terms mean African centered, and Afri is a direct derivative of Africa.

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