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## The Relevance of Homeplace Narratives in the Academy

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In this article, Williams-Christopher calls for greater awareness of the educational import of non-traditional texts, specifically black women's memoir, for college composition and rhetoric courses. Williams-Christopher contends that including texts that illustrate the various ways black women have transcended forms of oppression, abuse, and disenfranchisement helps to validate the experiences of black women inside and outside of academe. In doing so, the university becomes a space where the transaction of knowledge is multi-directional rather than merely from teacher to student. The goal of holding both community literacy and academic literary in equal regard is to create a space where students can start to break down sharp divides between academic spaces and local communities.

### Considering the Relevance of Homeplace Narratives within the Academy

We who believe in freedom cannot rest.

—Ella Baker

The downturn in the economy has created a burdensome demand on many universities in urban areas. Community colleges and public universities in particular are feeling the strain of higher enrollment from segments of the population that have largely been historically excluded from higher education. As working-class families



are feeling more pressure to obtain increased levels of higher education, it is important for educators to continue thinking about ways to acclimate the underserved population to academic literacies. *A Piece of Cake* by Cupcake Brown is just one example of the homeplace narratives that are continuing to proliferate that are able to help do such important work. Memoirs like Brown's concisely and eloquently point to the ways structures of domination decimate the psyches of many Africana women. Homeplace narratives show that Africana women—many of whom represent the working class experience—have much to say and much to teach concerning the difficult task of circumnavigating an oppressive system meant for their obliteration. Such life writing can thereby help Africana women coming into the university to have a greater grounding in academic literacies in a way that affirms or at least acknowledges some of their experiences and world views. Moreover, it is absolutely necessary for Africana women students to be exposed to these traditions so that they may learn not only how to improve their writing but how to use writing to forge new and creative ways to change conditions which limit them in the first place.

Both Africana scholarly and folk traditions stress the importance of education and reflect interest in the ways in which formal educational institutions can be revolutionized in order to meet the needs of Africana people. While I am not at all arguing that education alone will reverse the racism that is deeply embedded in American culture, I do believe that the university is a potentially powerful space in which to strategize about concrete ways to challenge systems of domination. After all, much of the scholarship of Africana women has endeavored to prove that the university has the potential to be effective in catalyzing social change. There continues to be a need, however, to equip Africana students with the knowledge that will help them make formal education a formidable force in eradicating oppression, while still valuing their home communities.



The university has the potential to be transformed to become such a site of political empowerment for Africana women students, at least in part, by using self-representations of women of color as a critical literacy tool. Clearly, the images of African American women are exploited in the media every day and continually work to undermine the worth of Africana women. It is my contention that exposing Africana female student writers to revolutionary representations of African American women—early on in their college career (as in first-year composition)—has the potential to empower these students politically, help them to maximize university resources and also help them to compete against negative images through the written word. Indeed, composition classrooms, women’s studies programs, community-based writing groups and research institutes that encourage the writing and reading of homeplace narratives are just a few ways that safe spaces can be carved out within the university.

Patricia Hill Collins eloquently declares, “while domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology where Black women speak freely” (95). She further contends, “this realm of relatively safe discourse is a necessary condition for Black women’s resistance... [and] forms a prime location for resisting objectification as Other” (95). Africana female-centered composition classrooms and writing groups are not meant to be separatist moves but instead as means to help remedy the ways higher education fails Africana women students.

Communication scholar Olga Idriss Davis, in her article “In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy through Safe Space of Resistance,” speaks to this situation, commenting that Africana women continue to “strive to illuminate the liberatory function of African American women’s communication and its continued legacy of struggle in American society” (379). Although Davis does a great job of showing the ways Africana women have been alienated from the academy in which they struggle and work, she also demonstrates that particularly within a womanist framework these women must be committed to being centered



in community. Such a coalition is vital for all involved because it multiplies and fortifies the voices of Africana women. It demonstrates the complexity and diversity of such voices, but also shows the common goal of uplifting and strengthening Africana communities. Although scholars like hooks and Davis point to the fact that Africana women are so often relegated to spaces marked domestic or private, they profoundly assert that we must transcend such limitations by creating a united front in battling the constricting negative renderings of Black womanhood. Writing and reading the narratives of Africana women who have spoken out against such constraints leave evidence that it is possible to break free of these boundaries and to create new possibilities. As such voices proliferate and the demand for such work intensifies, Africana women scholars will be in a better position to intellectually engage texts such as Brown's and give them more of a presence in academic settings. In addition, it will continue to be important for Africana women to create publications that will feature such voices in a space that will not eclipse these works with competing, delegitimizing ideologies of the dominant culture.

To create an arena for the intellectual engagement of Africana women inside of the academy and beyond, Layli Phillips and Barbara McCaskill created the publication *The Womanist*, "a newsletter for Afrocentric feminist researchers" (1016). The spirit behind the publication was the notion that if you have a need for something that does not exist, you create it. Such resourcefulness and ingenuity are what drive much of the intellectual and folk traditions of Africana people. The statement of purpose of the newsletter is as follows,

*The Womanist* is meant to be a gathering place for Afrocentric feminist researchers who are struggling to devise, develop and disseminate womanist methodologies within traditional academic disciplines...a place where we can share ideas, ask questions and engage in supportive criticism in order to strengthen our mission,



de-marginalize our activities and provide wider access to our perspectives (1016).

With the hostility that Africana women scholars face in an arena in which they are continually devalued and their forms of knowledge are delegitimized, it is extremely important to have publications that validate non-traditional ways of knowing. It is a forum wherein homeplace narratives can be intellectually engaged and where their usefulness as tools of empowerment can be highlighted. The viability of such endeavors will also create empirical proof that Africana scholars exist and make a case for further acknowledgment within the academy. It is the obligations of scholars like these to continue to be committed to the valorization of the voices of women in the community so that they can continue to gain further access to knowledge-making apparatuses.

### **Examining Cupcake Brown's Homeplace Narrative**

Cupcake Brown has truly overcome an abundance of obstacles. She has gone from being a crack-addicted sex worker who narrowly escaped death to a successful attorney, motivational speaker and *New York Times* best-selling author. Her amazing story caught the attention of Oprah Winfrey's *O* magazine, and she was subsequently featured in the September 2001 issue because of her miraculous testimony. The profile eventually led to a book deal, and *A Piece of Cake* was born. In a relatively short period of time, Brown went from virtual anonymity to a highly successful example of recovery, redemption and inspiration. To be sure, the odds of an unknown publishing a memoir are improbable at best, but Brown seems to do the impossible.

Cupcake Brown's attempt to make peace with a difficult past and to show others the possibilities of transformation, even under the gravest circumstances typifies an effective homeplace narrative. Her work is particularly powerful because she gives voice to those children who



have been quite literally left to die, both spiritually and even sometimes physically, in the foster care system. She also demonstrates that one can be successful within the academy even if one's lifestyle is completely incongruent with that of a traditional student. In this way, her work becomes part of the longstanding Africana women's rhetorical tradition that sees narrative as a viable tool for not only commenting on the ills of society but also for social change. She bears witness to the miraculous possibility of shedding the stigma and sting of stereotypes and creating a new, more affirming identity for oneself in both the written word and action. The act of writing her life story, then, becomes not only life giving for her, but for others who suffer from some of the same tragedies that she has endured.

Brown's choice to highlight her brutal experiences as a foster child creates a homeplace narrative by giving voice to a segment of the population of society that is often silenced and disregarded. She writes about the horrors she encounters with painstaking detail to expose how broken the foster-care system is. She is careful to not overdramatize the events for effect. Instead, she tells her tales of woe plainly. For example, when Brown describes her first encounter with her foster mother, she rather calmly recalls how Diane begins complaining about having to move to Lancaster because she could no longer be a foster mother in Los Angeles. Brown writes,

“[Diane] angrily ranted about how, a couple of years before, L.A. wrongly took her foster license; something about some twins that had died in her care. Something about giving them aspirin when they had the chicken pox or measles. She was talking so fast, and with all the cussing and fussing, the details were hazy. But the bottom line is she did *something* to them when they were sick that you *ain't supposed to do*. (Brown 24)

Later on in this same passage, Brown just as evenly conveys that Diane takes the opportunity to add that she realizes that she had gotten away



with murder and that she was confident she could do it again. Instead of Brown sharing any fears or emotions she might have had as a result of her future caregiver basically threatening her life, she instead briefly acknowledges the threat and continues to describe Diane and her new home.

This is the matter-of-fact tone Brown uses to tell much more horrific episodes of her life. By sharing what must be terrible memories, she helps to create a sense of belonging and engenders hope in those who can identify with her plight. She achieves establishing this common ground, however, without pleading for sympathy from outsiders (just by stating the facts, she shows she is worthy of being shown compassion). In this way, she is able to tell a heart-wrenching story with dignity. She uses her memoir to prove that she has survived such inhumane brutality and is able to still, eventually, create a life for herself where she is fulfilled and whole.

Brown's text also bears witness to the overall unwillingness on the part of the court to hear her voice as a child begging to stay with the man she knew as her father. She shares her reaction in court when the decision is handed down that her biological father, whom she knew nothing about, would be taking custody of her. Brown recalls exclaiming, "That ain't my daddy!" as she motioned to her stepfather, "[dis] my daddy!" (16). Brown's feelings were disregarded, and she was instead seen as little Black girl who was to be ignored and put away.

Brown constructs her narrative to illustrate the inadequacy of the very system supposedly designed to protect her. She further asserts that she was virtually enslaved. As we have seen, she was not only forced into what can only be called hard labor in her first foster home, she also became a sex slave as well (27). Brown divulges that the first night she stayed in Diane's home, after she had already been physically attacked by Diane, she remembers her foster mother and her foster mother's nephew Pete getting drunk. Shortly after, Brown discloses that Pete



came to her and offered her a drink. Brown submits, “whatever it was I liked it—instantly” (27). Here, Brown shows how her later dependency on alcohol and harsher substances originated and how her addiction was fueled by her low self-esteem, grief, as well as what would become her constant brutalization. Brown reveals,

The more I drank, the better I felt about myself. After a while, I didn’t feel so dark, black and ugly. After a while, I didn’t care that my momma was dead and my daddy and Uncle Jr. were gone. I didn’t care that I could get punched simply for being in the wrong room. I was h-a-p-p-e-e! (27)

Brown then shares that 21-year-old Pete instructed her to meet him in the bathroom in five minutes. She admits that she acquiesced because she wanted more of the exhilarating drink to which she had been introduced. She was not at all prepared for what would be a brutal rape. Here, we again see her rather straightforward language. Brown discloses,

As Pete lay on top of me humping for what seemed like forever, my mind began to wander. I needed something else to think about besides this nightmare on top of me. First, I wondered why they didn’t make little girls’ panties stronger. Then, I begin to recall my hatred for God. I didn’t know Him, but one thing I did know is that people said He could see the future. Well, that told me that God must have known that if He took my mother all of these fucked-up things would happen to me. Besides, not only was it fucked-up for God to take my mother, I felt like it was extremely fucked up for Him to allow me to find her dead body. So, I figured He couldn’t like me very much. I resolved again, right there and then on the bathroom floor, that I hated God because He hated me. I decided again, once and for all, that I would not be bothered with Him (28).

Brown’s austere language further highlights the atrocity she conveys, unencumbered with embellishments to act as a buffer for the reader. She





also is able to project her strong-willed personality that would sometimes lead her to success and would at other times be her downfall.

As Brown establishes, it is dreadfully ironic that the reason she could not be with her stepfather or uncle was because the authorities believed such an arrangement would lead to molestation. Brown uses her detailed account of her abuse in Diane's care, along with the fact that Diane is able to continue to have a series of foster children, to illustrate the ineffectiveness of a broken system. Brown maintains that every single foster child that she came into contact with during her stay at Diane's was subjected to the same kind of brutalization. During visits from social services, however, Brown recalled having to put on an act. Brown submits, "[Diane] had several things working for her benefit: she was such a good actress and she lived in a nice big house. What's more, she was always willing to take children that were 'difficult' to place" (71). Brown writes of how social services loved that Diane's home was kept immaculately, but they did not realize that she was maniacally overworking the children to keep the house in that condition. Brown also suggests that the authorities were unaware that Diane removed the lock, which was usually placed on the refrigerator, during these visits. According to Brown, at all other times the children were nearly starved to death, only being given a meager diet of rice and beans. The foster children would then have to watch Diane and her biological daughter, Connie, eat elaborate meals that they often had to prepare, while they remained hungry. Brown reveals how Connie would make the foster children miserable by flaunting the fact that only she and her mother had the key to the lock. Brown writes,

Connie's key hung on a gold chain around her neck. To taunt us, she'd walk around winging the chain in a small circular motion. This was especially torturous on extremely hot days when we'd pass by staring at the fridge and freezer, knowing there was ice-cold water, sodas, and multi-flavored Popsicles inside. (70)



Sharply contrasting the authorities' perceptions of Diane with Brown's recollection advances a bold indictment of the structure. Brown bears witness to the reality that while Diane seemed to be masterful at duping social services, her façade was only surface level. In this way, Brown's homeplace narrative highlights the fact that if the officials who had been charged to protect these foster children investigated thoroughly, they would surely have seen that there was more to this tragic story. Brown is clear to point out that the authorities did not conduct surprise visits or engage the children in any meaningful way that would have uncovered the abuse and neglect.

Aside from her troubles in her foster home, Brown also effectively communicates how the family lawyers, judges, psychologists and social workers that she came into contact with dismissed her cries of abuse. Brown declared that she could actually pinpoint the exact moment in her youth when she believed the system abandoned her. She tersely remarks, "the system unequivocally confirmed it really didn't give a shit about me" (71). Brown is careful to point out the specific incident where the system failed her, to bear witness to the maltreatment of foster children. In this particular instance, she had a random examination from the school nurse who found whip marks on her back (67-68). Brown writes,

When [the nurse] removed the paper dress to listen to my back, she gasped.

"Where did you get those marks?" she asked.

Diane's recent whipping was fresh in my mind.

"My foster mother," I replied matter-of-factly.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed.

Her outburst startled me. I hadn't expected her to care. (71)



Interestingly, while she admits that she encountered apathetic people in social services and family court, she also—at least briefly—points to other problems within the system. In Brown’s discussion of how she was returned to Diane (even after there was evidence that she had beaten her with a bull-whip), she highlights that her assigned social worker was overloaded with cases, and a substitute brought her the news that she would be removed from the temporary shelter in which she is living to be sent back to Diane (72). Brown recalls that the substitute social worker was genuinely grief-stricken about the decision but had no power to do anything about it. Here, Brown shows that a lack of caring does not account for all those in social services, but that instead a lack of resources, being overworked and not having decision-making power is partially to blame for social workers putting children in harm’s way.

I posit that Brown construction of her narrative demonstrates her continued attempt to wrest a semblance of agency, even if it is by self-destructive means. During the time that Brown stayed with Diane, for example, she ran away many times. As a child, she did not have much power over her life, but she exercised the little that she did have. She repeatedly ran away and tried to get back to her uncle and father from whom she had been removed. Even in Diane’s home, she refused to tolerate certain behavior even though she knew a physical beating would be the result. For example, after returning from one of her many escapes, Brown learned that the foster children have now been instructed to call Diane “momma.” Brown refused, and even though the other children warned her she would be beat, she reasons, “...no matter how hard you tried to be good, sooner or later, you’d get hit” (69). Brown resolved to be defiant and suffer the consequences.

Brown took the same fearless approach on the street. When she was only 11 or 12 and first began running away, she went into full survival mode. Brown boldly asserts,



Running away, turning tricks, and hitchhiking seemed to go hand in hand. Since my experience with Candy and Money, I would never again stand on a corner to get tricks because it was too risky... Besides, it was easy enough getting my tricks hitchhiking because most folks who picked up hitchhikers wanted to turn a trick. For me, hitchhiking ended up being a double bonus: I got to make some money and I got a free ride, although I was never going anywhere in particular; I just wanted a ride that was going from whatever home I'd been placed in. Most of the time, I also got a free high or drink. I was not longer ashamed or bothered in any way by turning tricks. I was surviving and doing what I had to do. If it did start to bother me, I would just get high. By now, I got high on *something* every day. (76)

The fact that Brown was so young when she went through all of these atrocities is unconscionable. It is clear, however, that turning tricks did indeed bother her because, as she indicates, she began to get high every day. While her lifestyle would be difficult for most adults to survive, in her pre-teen mind, she was fighting to take care of herself. Obviously, her resolve led her down a path where she quite possibly could have been killed by any of the strangers who picked her up. But her inner strength would prove to serve her well later in life.

Brown is also able to aptly convey her disenchantment with life and how drugs and alcohol made her forget the harsh reality of her everyday existence. What was the point of doing well in school if this is all that life had to offer? She exposes the process of how she became hardened, as everything she loved had been stolen from her. In this text, Brown bears witness to how a misused child can become jaded by abuse and disappointment and can decide that going through life in a drug-induced haze is better than being fully conscious in a living hell. In this way, Brown highlights the root cause of her drug use and then carefully and thoroughly charts her agonizing journey into years of addiction. Just as it stemmed from Pete introducing her to alcohol, and then was fueled by



her attempt to cope with foster care and sex work, it would continue to be a problem until she finally came to terms with her hardships, sense of loss and lack of self-esteem.

As Brown proves, through sharing her experiences as a young woman on the street, she found herself in a vicious cycle as her drug use began to increase. She began to realize that in her world,

Men want you only for sex; sex makes you money; money bought necessities like food, shelter, booze and drugs; drugs and booze make life—and the sex—not so bad. Most important, doing *anything anywhere* was better—and safer—than just sitting in Diane’s waiting for the next beating. (52)

As Brown writes, with no officials willing to keep her out of harm’s way and no way to get back to San Diego to be with her father and uncle, she could not see an alternative other than sex work to sustain her. As I have argued, Brown gives a very detailed account of her experiences within the foster care system at length to break the silence and to bear witness to the violence that these children often endure, as well as the reasons they might rebel and be labeled “problem children.” Her memoir is therefore successful in evidencing a need to radically reform foster care, and is also successful in creating a community wherein those who have languished in the foster care system can heal from their abuse and find ways to be fulfilled, well-adjusted adults.

Although Brown will detail how her troubled childhood leads to many years of prostitution, drug addiction and self-loathing, she also demonstrates how she turns her life around and embarks on a path of recovery and renewal. As Brown goes through the process of piecing her life together, she saw the importance of surrounding herself with loving people who would become her family. She marveled that “only God could have put this divergent group together and make it work. We were varying ages and races...but somehow our oddly shaped individual



pieces fit into an unusual picture—perfectly” (421). Brown’s homeplace narrative functions to prove that as she let go of the toxic people in her life, the loving family that had eluded her for so long can flourish, and she has the presence of mind to accept its support.

When Brown finally was capable of letting go of all of the pain in her past life and was finally ready for something new, her sponsor from her twelve step program asked her, “What is a dream you had that drugs, alcohol, and the streets stole from you?” (422) After thinking for a long time, Brown remembered her dream to become a lawyer. Her dream took so long for her to remember because she had endured so much pain since being eleven years old, and she had to dig deep into her early child to find a time when she had the luxury to dream. Brown’s sponsor Venita promptly and simply responded to her, “steal it back” (424).

This section of the book strongly exemplifies the communal focus of a homeplace narrative. This could seemingly be Brown’s time to toot her own horn, to shout from the rooftops that she is clean and sober and that she is brilliant and will leap through high school, her undergraduate years and law school in a single bound. Instead, she admits how difficult it was for her to get acclimated to an academic setting and how her support system would encourage her not to give up, although at many times she wanted to.

Here, Brown addresses many fears that a non-traditional student would have coming back to school. Firstly, Brown discusses the initial hurdle—she did not have a high school degree. She recalls that she allowed herself to stall for weeks as she worried about how she would overcome that obstacle. However, when she went to speak to an adviser at her local community college, he told her, “Oh, you’re too old to be going back to high school, so I wouldn’t waste my time. If I were you, I’d start right here at the community college. You can get your associate’s degree and transfer to a four-year university” (428). Her next hurdle was overcoming her fear of the placement tests she had to take. She



became highly anxious over doing poorly because she saw her results as a reflection of her self-worth. She would find, however, that the tests were just a starting point and that even though she scored low on most of them, she was still able to be successful and later graduate.

Throughout the next section of the text, Brown highlights her discomfort with being older than everyone, feeling badly about asking questions in class that her classmates would find stupid and dealing with scheduling issues as she juggled her courses and her full-time job as a legal secretary. Although her academic achievement functions as a source of authority to tell her story (the text wouldn't be very inspiring if she flunked out and never went back), the bulk of her energies go to upholding the idea that although going back to school as a non-traditional student is tough, it is not impossible. Brown admits that along the way she lost friends and that because of working full-time it took her five and a half years to obtain her Associates Degree. The point, however, is that she did it. Brown implores that, while she graduated with honors, "I had no special gifts, skills or talents—whatsoever. What I did, anyone can do. All it took was a bit of faith and a whole lotta hard work, perseverance, and dedication—now if I could only keep it up" (435). This single quote embodies the function of homeplace narrative and its focus on community rather than the individual. It is arguable, of course, that Brown is downplaying her abilities, but it is clear that her goal is to uplift, inspire and motivate her readers to achieve their goals by building their faith, fortitude and self-worth. The rest of the section on Brown's academic achievements (which in its entirety is roughly 50 pages of a nearly 500-page-book) reads the same way; she uses her success as her authority to tell her story, while the lion's share of this portion emphasizes how with the help of others, she overcame the obstacles of being a non-traditional student with major time constraints and a lifestyle that was seemingly not conducive to academic achievement.

Even though the process of obtaining her degrees was a long and arduous task, she realized that she is worth the effort. To be exact, it took Brown



eight and a half years to complete her undergraduate studies before she even got to law school. Her discussion about her experience in law school, which takes up only about five percent of her entire memoir, focuses a great deal on her poor LSAT scores. As she has done throughout the text, she continues to subordinate her greatness by admitting how the test proved to be a stumbling block that almost made her give up. Her true accomplishment, as she displays in her homeplace narrative, was summoning strength from the rather sizable support system she had built around her. Brown recalls a pivotal moment when she was particularly dejected that Venita gave her a dose of tough love. Upon communicating her fears to Venita, Brown recalls her replying, “Oh, get off the cross...We need the wood” (446). Although, she admits that the harsh comment was hurtful, she recognized that it was said in love, and she admits she needed to be yanked out of the self-pity in which she was slowly sinking. She recalls that because of her low LSAT scores, she was not going to apply to law school but that everyone around her encouraged her until she did. Brown reveals her disappointment that she only got into one out of the five schools. Again, her support system cheered her on, and Venita reminded her, “How many schools can you go to at once?” (448). The few pages that discuss her actual time as a law student at the University of San Francisco are dedicated to her benefactors, who helped her to meet her financial obligations and who mentored her. She hardly speaks at all about her own achievements except to say that she did receive the “Judge Harold J. Haley Award for Exceptional Distinction in Scholarship, Character, and Activities” at graduation (460). What seemed to be the true source of pride for Brown was her graduation party. She recalled hoping that thirty people would show up but doubting if this would be the case. Instead, the party was packed, a testament to the strong community of loving people that had become a part of her life.

Her authorial choice to subordinate this aspect of her life to the perils she experienced up to this point prove that this text is meant to be a





story of surviving the street, not a tale of self-aggrandizement. While her education is indeed a triumph, what is truly miraculous is her courage and perseverance to fight for her life even though she has experienced so much tragedy. In fact, she no longer practices law; she prefers to go around the country to talk to women about how she has changed her life. She takes great pains to talk about what happened to her as a young woman in hopes that it may impact others.

Brown's work could easily have been written very differently. The memoir could have been an opportunity for her to focus on how she was able to become an attorney. It could have been fashioned much more like the exemplary narratives of attorneys Evelyn Williams and Lani Guinier, for example. While these texts are indeed powerful models of Africana women's life writing, Brown seeks to take a different approach that will be more accessible to a population often not addressed. Brown very intentionally makes an authorial choice to spend the bulk of her narrative shedding light on how many Africana women's bodies and minds are constantly under siege, and she provides an in-depth study into how she overcame her obstacles. In this way, the text becomes inspirational for those who have gone through similar trouble and engenders a sense of compassion, or at least a deeper understanding, in those who have not.

While there are parts of Brown's life that are extraordinary, many women can learn from her mistakes. Often, young women of color who do not fit into a European standard of beauty are made to feel ugly and worthless just as was Brown. By writing the pain that she felt and the destruction she inflicts on herself, she creates a homeplace for other young women to vent their pain. She also gives hope, however, because she is just as detailed in how she learned to love herself. No, society did not change, nor might a more African-centered standard of beauty be any more valued. Brown, however, proves that one does not have to be enslaved to external standards.



Brown gives a true model of recovery that is possible to achieve. Her life is anything but a piece of cake, but by sharing herself—as tragic as her life has been—she perhaps can equip others to take a path that is a bit sweeter. She establishes her text as a homeplace narrative by bearing witness to the many injustices she faced as a child and how they impacted her adult life, breaking silence about forgotten or misunderstood members of society (such as foster children, gang members and those dependent on drugs), demonstrating the ways her writing has been cathartic in aiding her recovery from addiction and creating a fulfilling life, and by encouraging women in similar situations that they can make similar strides.

## **Revolutionary Representations in Composition Classrooms**

Within composition classrooms, homeplace narratives like Brown's can expand the definition of academic writing in such a way that makes the space more inclusive to those who have traditionally been *personae non gratae*. In addition to using these texts in writing classrooms, they can be used in writing groups that bring together college students and members of the community in meaningful discussion and writing, as well as in adult literacy initiatives. The texts are accessible, in demand by many, rich enough to stand up to criticism and intellectual debate, and productively political. Although there is a great deal of controversy concerning whether or not politics should be introduced into composition courses, I think it is important to draw the line between indoctrination and empowerment (Bartholomae, Elbow, Hairston, Lazare, Bridwell-Bowles, Berlin). There is an opportunity for disempowered individuals to imagine new ways of being through writing in such a space and not be bombarded by the political agenda of the writing instructor. For this reason, I think it is imperative for educators to engage in meaningful conversation about the ways Africana women students might be affirmed and empowered within, say, an Africana women-centered first-



year composition classroom—especially since it can serve as a rite of passage for the entire academic career. Of course, I posit that exposure to dynamic representations of Black womanhood has the potential to bring about such empowerment.

After all, much research attests to the fact that Africana students in general, and Africana females in particular, have negative educational experiences because of being disconnected from the histories and traditions that positively affirm their presence (Smitherman, Delpit, Ladson-Billings, Balester, Richardson). At the same time, I certainly do not want to prescribe for African American female student writers how they should interpret the African American female traditions they have been disconnected from, nor do I want to suggest that I position the teacher as the sole change agent. I do, however, think it is important for these often disregarded students to be exposed to content that helps them to understand their situatedness. They may or may not decide to engage in political action through writing (although I would be delighted if they would), but I would hope that students would be able to understand how their subject position influences how they will be able to maneuver in academic and public spheres.

Janice Chernekoff's essay "Challenging the Constraints of First-Year Composition through Ethnic Women's Narratives" is a powerful example of how life writing can not only teach writing but also politically empower. Chernekoff uses narratives from women like June Jordan and Angela Davis to show her students how notions of academic writing can be expanded by looking at texts that are not "well behaved" (129). Chernekoff argues that such examples allow students agency in their academic writing. She also maintains that our students' writing must be a challenge and a call to action to better address the needs of the ever-changing student body. Chernekoff posits that autobiographies like Davis' challenge the unfair practices within the justice system, police brutality, racism and mainstream history. To situate such works rhetorically, Chernekoff juxtaposes Davis' text to contemporary



mainstream media of the time so that students can have a fuller historical context.

Chernekoff's essay is particularly helpful in demonstrating how her students have been transformed through their writing, which helps develop their critical thinking skills. She stresses that the emphasis is not on forwarding a particular political agenda but on encouraging the further development of sophisticated and independent thinking. Chernekoff concludes, "By working closely with students, we may discover what they can get from our writing classes, and perhaps we can also expand the boundaries of what is acceptable in the context of the writing classroom and in writing discourse" (135). Texts such as *A Piece of Cake* perform a similar pedagogy as the autobiographies of women such as Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown. How they explode notions of who has the authority to speak and the manner in which they impose their Black female bodies into the public sphere in unconventional ways are models of how to transgress through both words and action. Recognizing the validity of non-traditional voices within academic settings automatically calls into question the legitimacy of the structure that undermines such voices to begin with. The ultimate goal from my perspective is to transform the academy so that the value of such voices becomes commonplace.

In *Meeting the Challenge: Innovative Feminist Pedagogies in Action*, edited by Maralee Mayberry and Eileen Cronan Rose, contributors illumine how practical applications of feminist principles can transform the academy. These scholars "represent the imaginative new pedagogical approaches that feminist educators have implemented in diverse institutional settings across the United States and internationally" (Mayberry et. al. viii). In the essay "Teaching in Environments of Resistance," for example, Sandra Bell, Marina Morrow and Evangelina Tastaglou argue that "in contrast to traditional curricula and pedagogies, critical, feminist and antiracist pedagogies are designed to disrupt the canon of the academy in order to bring about social change" (23). The



authors assert that legitimizing alternative traditions of knowledge and experiential knowledge will help to expand the academy in order to better serve the diverse population within and beyond university walls (23). The authors insist that teachers must challenge the status quo to cultivate critical thinking, positing, “ideally, critical thinking skills should be applied to feminist and antiracist course materials. This makes students engaged and helps move them from reflection to action” (23).

Bell, Morrow and Tastaglou admit that there is sometimes resistance to introducing such non-traditional texts. They say that much of this push back can be alleviated by immediately addressing the distinction between “ideological impositions” and “liberatory pedagogies (26).” A key approach for accomplishing this goal is to encourage students to interrogate the ways their experiences are shaped socially rather than to impose any particular conclusions (Bell et. al. 26). The authors also stress the importance of experiential knowledge, asserting that “identity politics and the authorization of the individual experience can be empowering for those who have never had any public space to have their voices heard” (27). They do acknowledge constraints to such projects, however, and argue that a delicate balance between the personal and theoretical needs to be achieved. The narratives examined in this study, for example, like most ethnic women’s life writing, are more communal rather than emphasizing the self. Brown’s text, among others, speaks to the dangers of being in isolation and the importance of healthy interdependent relationships. These writers also speak more pointedly to a communal history rather than a personal history and highlight how historical societal factors often over determine the lives of Africana women. In this way, Brown’s text can also serve as historical, sociological and psychological studies. For these reasons, such life writing would be ideal content for the innovative classroom Bell, Morrow and Tastaglou envision.

Cinthia Gannett also makes the case for the importance of journaling in the composition classroom. In her essay “The Stories of Our Lives



Become Our Lives: Journals, Diaries and Academic Discourse,” she contends that journaling “develops fluency and generates the habits of observation and reflection, analysis and synthesis,” but she also notes that there is an “anti-journal movement” that does not acknowledge the importance of the personal within an academic setting” (109). Gannett argues that part of the disdain for journaling is that it is perceived to be gendered. Published journals for example are usually male travel logs and eclipse the rich history of introspective women’s journals (109). This displacement, for Gannett, “signals the common historical practice of muting or silencing women as writers, speakers and knowers” (113). Gannett makes the case, however, that because journaling has often been ignored or undervalued within composition, it now has the “potential to empower women outside the purview of dominant discourse” (117). Drawing from Adrienne Rich, who argued that journaling is a tool for empowering women, Gannett posits that the form is transformative when women read and write themselves into critical consciousness and are able to develop their voices. The memoirists in this study are evidence of the efficacy of such a process.

## **Writing Groups as Community Building**

Writing groups represent fertile ground to merge universities, which are often resource rich, with surrounding communities that they, in my view, have a moral obligation to serve. Anne Ruggles Gere, a forerunner in writing group theory, makes a great case for how these groups may carry out such a goal. Gere argues that writing groups in America originated as elite literary clubs exclusively for privileged white men in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (10). She says that they later evolved to become more transgressive spaces as white women used groups to come out of domesticity and into informal academic spaces where they could present essays to each other since they were often not allowed to attend universities (40).



Gere makes a distinction between what she calls “self-help writing groups” which are generally outside of the university, and “in-school sponsored groups” (50-51). She argues that self-help writing groups are usually more focused on “cooperation than competition” and that they are also often non-hierarchical because they are self-led. Gere goes on to argue that autonomy within in-school groups varies with the ideology of the instructor, whereas groups beyond the university are totally autonomous (101). Gere gives a thorough discussion of the function of writing groups and of what their goals should be. She argues that they have the potential to be transformative. Gere’s work is indispensable in showing the shift between the elitist roots of the tradition to the current liberatory possibilities of such groups. I do think it is important, however, to blur this line between those within and beyond university walls in order to show the interdependence of both groups. I also would argue that texts such as Brown’s memoir could become the glue to bring these groups together.

In “Letting Knowledge Serve the City,” Melissa Kesler Gilbert, Carol Holdt and Kristin Christopherson further articulate how writing groups (which they call learning groups) become transformative in the lives of students and communities. They argue that Women’s Studies was always meant to be community-based and that it has now become too centered on the academy. For this reason, they have created a senior capstone project for which their students are required to become involved with a community agency (Christopherson et al. 319). In the study reported in their essay, students worked with an agency to ascertain why young mothers were dropping out of a program that was geared to aid them in development of both life and parenting skills. To prepare for this task, students were asked to be introspective in order to think about the process of going from “self-interrogation” to “self-correction” (325). They then went into small, collaborative learning groups to better recognize and acknowledge the diversity of the classroom and ponder where they fit in. Lastly, the students went out into the community and examined what



role they would play and how they could contribute (327). The authors emphasize that the key to building community is creating a strong support network where “students could share workload, communicate their accomplishments and frustrations and critique each other’s work” (329). The authors conclude,

Our community project helped to move our students’ knowledge of the inequities of society from inside of the boundaries of our feminist classroom outside to a community where they lived, worked and went to school...we encouraged them to work through tough issues about diversity and injustice within our microcosm of community in the classroom. (327)

Gilbert, Holdt and Christopherson also contend that through the duration of the course, students devised many plans to bring feminism into the community in productive ways as well as to get first-hand understanding of the difficulties and rewards of activism. Such community projects are generative ways to bring the university and community together, particularly when the focus is empowering young African women to see the relevance of higher education and how it can provide resources that can improve the communities in which they are invested. The memoirs examined here help as a model of introspective writing and how it can be used to help determine the particular needs of a community. When students learn to write like this and find ways that they can contribute to changing their own lives and the lives of those around them, they will be passionate about advocacy.

In *Writing Groups in and Outside of the Classroom*, Highberg, Moss and Nicolas distinguish between community service writing and community service writing groups. The authors argue that in community service writing students write academic essays after participating in service learning projects (101). Contrarily, in community service writing groups, students collaborate with community members on writing projects that address particular needs of specific communities. The authors assert





that during this process all participants “become stronger collaborative problem solvers and communicators” (101). Groups where Africana women within and beyond the academy come together to use the memoirs of other Africana women who have developed critical consciousness through writing as a model to create their own would be stellar examples of a community service writing groups. Moreover, community-based models should valorize home communities and, as bell hooks argues, employ a value system that is organic to those communities rather than of the dominant culture. The importance of such community undertakings in the first place is to lay bare the social phenomena of widespread suppression in order to create affirming models of social change that address the specific needs in local environments. If such a model does not acknowledge and empower the people of the community it seeks to serve, it fails. Of course, even content-sound, community-based literacy programs often have to overcome resource issues if they are to sustain themselves. In addition to spotty funding, the job and familial obligations of participants and the fact that such programs are often located in areas often deemed unsafe are factors that undermine consistency. One way of taking on the task of ensuring the consistency in funding and personnel of such programs is by tapping into the resources that exist in the academy. While universities are feeling the same financial strain that other sectors are experiencing, if such initiatives become part and parcel of the scholarship of those who are cultural workers, there are opportunities for research funding. In addition, there are some costs that can be cut if such initiatives were housed on college campuses. Similarly, there is a large pool of potential volunteers to help with overall operations of these programs from the large student population who often in many programs of study are required to participate in some form of community service. There is also the possibility that students can perform outreach work through the federally funded work-study program. Such programs successfully extend the borders of the university, and in the case of public universities this is a goal that is written into most mission statements.



## Conclusion

While there is much valuable research addressing the ways African American literacy practices reflect the individual struggles of African Americans, history teaches us that organized and concerted efforts are necessary to enact a meaningful challenge to oppressive systems. History also teaches us that although the written word is important, writing alone will not bring about revolution. Scholarship on African American narratives warns us of this fact (Braxton 1989; Stepto 1991; Perkins 2000; Williams 2000; Chinosole 2001). In the introduction to Chinosole's *African Diaspora and Autobiographics*, Anatole Anton defines the goal of many African American autobiographies. Anton asserts,

The struggle for self-definition, then, requires a critique of the other-defined self and of the variety of ways in which power is part of the constitution of the other defined self. Indeed the autobiographical representation of the struggle for self-definition becomes part and parcel of that struggle itself and, perhaps, one of the preconditions for the ultimate success of that struggle (Chinosole viii).

In other words, as Anton aptly delineates, the narrative not only conveys the revolutionary struggle but is an important part of the process.

Despite the increasing numbers of African Americans who attend college, consistently poor retention rates seem to reflect the ways in which African American students are alienated from these institutions. It would make sense, then—as the African American female scholarship across disciplines implores—that action must be taken to ensure that the education these students receive is relevant to and can help to improve their lives. While there are often non-academic efforts in place such as mentoring programs and diversity initiatives, these efforts do not get at the heart of the issue. Instead of making these educational institutions merely more comfortable for African Americans, steps must be taken, in



addition, to change the structure of these universities to better serve the needs of a variety of students. Critical literacy and pedagogy theorists such as Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo accurately assert that if students are taught to think critically, then they will be better equipped and inspired to initiate programs that will enact true change, and not merely reform. Collins agrees with this assumption, arguing, “Increased literacy among African Americans has provided new opportunities for Black women to transform former institutional sites of domination such as scholarship and literature into institutional sites of resistance” (Collins 102). Empowering students with the necessary tools to help revolutionize these institutions can only happen if students are able both to cultivate their political consciousnesses and learn to convey challenges effectively to oppressive systems through the written word in a manner that will demand respect in academic spaces. The homeplace narratives featured in the present study provide just a few examples of works that can help to challenge our thinking about how we legitimate authorial voices and what is at stake when we challenge commonly held notions of what constitutes academic literacies.



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