Anansesem  
(Storytelling Nights)  
African Maternal Pedagogies

by

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Abstract

Resistance. Survival. Possibility. This is an arts-informed research text that reconciles the stories of African-Canadian mothers with my own story about how we un/intentionally and un/consciously serve as critical pedagogues for African-Canadian children. The narratives illuminate how we mother in the midst of marginalization and impart pedagogies that effectuate cultural, social and identity consciousness within children who will also experience social, economic and political barriers as they navigate the Canadian landscape. Through the Afro-indigenous tradition of storytelling and telling stories, I underscore the centrality of the African-Canadian mother in emboldening African children to become change agents equipped to resist the marginalizing tendencies of dominant society. Thus, the African-Canadian mother through her embodied knowledges and experiences becomes a site from which the African child reads to discover meaning. In effect then I show how the African mother’s body, to borrow from Michalko, “harbours a particular and valuable pedagogy” (2001, p. 351). In entering these stories, you the reader access our joys, sadness, strength’s and weaknesses as we journey through motherhood. Our stories are the research text “complete (but open)...largely free of academic jargon and abstracted theory”. In this regard, this arts-informed dissertation “ privilege[s] stories over analysis, allowing and encouraging alternative readings and multiple interpretations” (Bochner & Ellis, 2000 p. 745). In this spirit I share with you stories of lives told, and my life as I remember. Welcome.
Acknowledgements

African American feminist intellectual bell hooks was apt in her assessment when she stated that “it is not easy to name our pain, to make it a location of theorizing” (1994, p.74). The charting of this new theoretical trajectory on African maternal pedagogies, like the birth of my daughter, was without a doubt one of the most difficult and painful journeys of my life. However, like Ma’at’s birthing, the journey of pain and struggle, culminated into this moment—a moment of inexplicable joy where I am finally able to proudly hold my baby—the fruit of a labour of love against my bare bosom, eyes brimming with tears, relieved but still in disbelief that she is here—complete, whole, real.

I did not labour alone. While enduring the labour pains, I held firmly to the hands of living theorists who embody bravery, resistance, hope and love. I am eternally grateful to my epistemic community—African mothers and community/othermothers who “courageously exposed their wounds” (hooks, 1994, p. 74) and shared with me the memories of their lived experiences so that I could create stories that theorize about the value of African women’s maternal pedagogies. To my supervisor Gary Knowles, thank you for being my epidural when the pain became too intense and when I dashed all hope of being able to ride the waves of pain to the end. Thank you for your patience, wisdom, creative insights and for your constant reminders to trust the process. I am extremely proud of this amazingly beautiful scholarstistry. I would also like to thank the external examiners Dr. Rita Deverell and Dr. Jean-Paul Restoule for their careful reading of my thesis, and for their overwhelmingly positive feedback.

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My precious Ma’at, thank you for the nights of relentless gymnastics in my womb as I trudged through the mess of course work; for being the reason I knew I could not give up; for demanding nothing but my physical presence when I was typing away at the computer. Joan was correct when she referred to you as my Ph. D baby. We journeyed this road together. Only strangely enough it was you carrying me all this time.
Dedication

To Ma’at,
for liberating me
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Note:
All illustrations were conceptualized by Adwoa Onuora in collaboration with Jacqui Terry.
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Prologue
The bath water is hot. I resist being lulled to sleep by the aroma of lavender-scented incense mixing with quiet notes of peppermint oil. With each exhale, fog droplets ascend, coating the bathroom mirror. I lie on my back, water covers all but my protruding stomach. Blissful, I bask in the last few moments of “me time.” I imagine what it will be like when she arrives. No more silence perhaps? I think that I will soon have to surrender what was once my time to this person I carry in my womb. I embrace the deafening silence, waiting for the lesson that it brings, realizing that there will be fewer of these in the years to come. My body grows weary. I close my eyes and am carried away. I remember.

Growing up in Jamaica, I was fed a rich diet of Big Boy and Anansi folktales (also referred to as Anancy in the Anglophone Caribbean regions) (Pedraill, 2007). Neighbourhood children regaled each other with these stories shrouded in language that craftily masked curse words and that allowed them to playfully explore taboo subject matters. In my mind, Big Boy and Anancy stories were simply a source of entertainment and great hilarity. But there were other stories. Stories told by adults couched in proverbs and folk sayings imbued with deep literal and symbolic meaning and that relayed important information about our cultural codes, morals, and values. They also told stories that may not have seemed like stories at a first glance. These were the ones women for instance in our community found therapeutic value in relating to friends as they sat in hair salons, in kitchens and on washdays. These were their personal stories. Stories that helped folks cope with the issues faced as they negotiated relationships and daily life.
The practice of storytelling is common throughout various indigenous communities across globe. Among African people, it is an important medium for articulating cultural values, history and ancestral memory and for learning how to survive and navigate our environment. Storytelling thus serves as an important pedagogical tool for the celebration and reclamation of African heritage and for making sense of our experiences. Storytelling continues to be and important site from which we resist and survive neo-colonialism, racism and various forms of social oppression (Banks-Wallace, 1998; Pedraill, 2007; Marshall, 2006; 2007; 2008). The works of critical race theorists (Bell, 1987; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas 1995; Delgado, 1989, 1995; Lorde, 1984; Matsuda, 1996; Parker, Dehyle, Villennas, & Nebecker, 1998; Soloranzo, 1998; Williams, 1991; Wing, 1997) affirm the socio-political significance of storytelling to oppressed peoples.

Within the North American context where African people continue to face multiple and intersecting forms of oppression, our stories become particularly important because as Dalia Rodriquez explains, they function as a means of psychic self-preservation, for lessening subordination, understanding and healing from oppression. Citing Delgado (1989) and Freire (1970), Rodriquez asserts that our stories “can illuminate the material and social conditions that provide a means to usher in social change.” (Rodriguez, 2006). Despite these scholars theorizing on the significance of storytelling for the oppressed, our stories remain marginalized and devalued within formal spaces of learning. Often rooted in oral literary traditions, they are dismissed and/or subject to credibility test by “experts”. Notwithstanding these challenges, marginalized people continue to give voice to our stories. As researchers within the academy, we continue to use our stories as a method of study to enact resistance (hooks, 1990), engage in meaning making and “assert our subjectivities as creators, theorists and interpreters of texts” (Lawrence, 1995, cited in Rodriguez, 2010, p. 494).
So, what makes a story a story? Is storytelling simply a narration of experience? Do cultural stories differ from everyday narrations of experience or self/personal stories? These are some key questions that I think warrant some clarity before I lay out how it is that I came to writing this collection of stories.

Banks-Wallace (1998) offers the following conceptual framework:

A story is an event or series of events, encompassed by temporal or spatial boundaries, that are shared with others using an oral medium or sign language. Storytelling is the process of interaction used to share stories. People sharing a story (storytellers) and those listening to a story (storytakers) are the main elements of storytelling. (p.17)

I often think of stories as constituting three different modes: i) metanarratives of cultural groups ii) personal/self stories and iii) cultural stories. The first type serves to tell a larger story about a people. For example, the story of Africans in the Diaspora typifies a story about a larger story—a story of Africans as an ethno-cultural group. Another example is the dominant cultural story that reinforces the identity of European "superiority" in relation to other groups (Delgado, 1989). We can therefore see such stories as a large fabric, and each of our individual personal stories, our folklore, proverbs, parables and sayings, become the tiny threads interwoven through this larger piece of fabric. The result is a work of art that distills a people’s ideas on morals, ethics, social knowledges and cultural identities. The second type—self stories or narratives of self—are narrations of a series of events that an individual or individuals (within a given cultural group) experience. These include poems, fictional novels, autoethnographies, autobiographies and memories (Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner 2006). Personal narratives allow the individual to become both the subject and object of study in the examination of social phenomenon and social perspectives (Rodriquez, 2009).

The third—cultural stories—I conceive of as falling within the category of folklore, proverbs, sayings, parables, music and other oral literary mediums. Whereas narratives of the self may or may not have symbolic significance, cultural stories carry the folk philosophies of a people and have deeply embedded symbolic meaning(s) and significance beyond their literal
meaning. Anancy folktales are an example of a cultural story. Moreover, what sets cultural stories apart from those previously mentioned is that they are often seen as an embodied performance art requiring dramatization and a keen sense of how to use and manipulate cultural languages (Mello, 2001). This is why in Afro-indigenous societies in particular, when collectors of folklore enter these communities, they are directed to a chief storyteller who the community has named as the person versed at distilling these types of stories.

Take for example the Jamaican Anancy stories told by the late iconic folklorist Louise Bennett. These stories have been in the public domain in parts of the Caribbean since Africans began the journey along the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Anancy stories are part of the historical memory of formerly enslaved Africans brought to the “new world”. Although the stories have been told and retold by Jamaicans throughout the generations, they have for the most part been associated with Louise Bennett so much so that still today, they are thought of as “Ms. Lou’s Anancy stories”. This is so even though we know that the Jamaicanized version of the Akan Anancy stories are not owned by any particular individual.

One might ask the question: What sets her apart from others as a chief storyteller? Louise Bennett was especially gifted with the ability to narrate the Anancy stories with dramatization, vocalization and mimetic action (Mello, 2001b). She had an uncanny ability to playfully manipulate the language in a way that captivated audiences of all ages so much so that she became renowned as one of Jamaica's chief folklorist. From this we see that in indigenous communities the storyteller (at least the one who tells cultural stories) is a socially sanctioned role. While anyone can narrate his or her personal experience (which then forms part of the larger story of a cultural group), not just anyone can be a teller of cultural stories. Additionally, not every narration of one’s personal experience (because of the element of symbolism) can be seen as a cultural story.
This is not to say that an individual’s personal story could not become institutionalized as cultural memory and perhaps folklore in the future. Nelson Mandela’s life story—even with all the critiques of his life and work—serves as part of a larger cultural story that testifies to the indomitable spirit of African peoples. Mandela’s story when located within the broader historical and social context of anti-colonialism becomes more than simply a narration of events in a person’s life. His is a story that (similar to Anancy folktales) because of the interrelated conditions at the time has deeper symbolic meaning(s), and therefore serves a larger purpose. My point here is that narrations of the self, left uncontextualized, do not necessarily amount to a cultural story. They remain simply oral or literary text without contexts (Dundee, 1966).

So how did I come to writing an arts-informed narrative representation on African women’s maternal pedagogies? The catalyst for this storied remembering emerged from my self-reflections as I journeyed to biological motherhood. As I became visibly pregnant, I began experiencing readings of my body which constantly reminded me of my “M(other)” status within various spaces. I was puzzled by the occasions when suitemates would express passive aggressive behaviour towards me, infuriated by a clerk’s asking while I waited outside my dorm one morning “Are you waiting for your baby daddy?”, saddened when physicians who having never met my partner, felt comfortable voicing “concern” about his whereabouts wanting to ascertain that he was “responsible”, and disappointed when I walked the halls of my department—the one space I naively thought was free of this type of judgment—and was met with the occasional disappointing eyes.

During this time, I was mid-way through a graduate seminar with Professor Njoki Wane entitled Black Feminist Thought. There, I became exposed to a small sample of literature on the subject of African women and mothering. I found solace in the works of African feminist writers like Stanlie M. James, Patricia Bell-Scott (1993), Patricia Hill-Collins (1986,
1987, 2000a, 2000b), bell hooks (1981, 2000, 2007, 2007b), and Audre Lorde (1982, 1997, 2007) who reminded me that I was not alone. I realized then that African women had been resisting and learning how to navigate the spoken and unspoken poetics of racism I related above that reconstituted us as always and already “mammies”, “jezebels” and “welfare queens” (Collins, 2000), who to paraphrase Jenkins (1998), emasculated our sons and defeminized our daughters (p. 204). Inspired by their ideas I thought: What better way to rupture the established knowledge (both inside and outside the academy) than to pursue research that would continue this legacy of counter-storytelling (Delgado, 1989; Soloranzo, 1998; Soloranzo & Yasso, 2002) in the context of mothering. The weaving of Anancy stories into our personal stories of African mothering is foundational to continuing this tradition of resistance through reclamation of African ways of knowing.

In the fall of 2008, after giving birth to my daughter (and in preparation for the writing of my comprehensive examination), I scoured the University catalogue for resources on African women and motherhood. Not only did I find literature on African women’s diverse experiences of mothering, I was relieved to discover a research centre (the Association of Research on Motherhood/ARM, now the Motherhood Initiative for Community and Research Involvement/MIRCI) that housed a growing body of literature exploring various aspects of mothering from diverse subject locations. MIRCI provided an outlet for the voices of activists, scholars, and academics of all genders, cultures and social locations who had an interest in theorizing and developing scholarship on motherhood.

This research account is influenced by feminist scholarship on mothering, motherhood, maternal theory and maternal thinking that I have in five years come across. It is informed by the works of theorists such as Sara Ruddick (1989), Adrienne Rich (1986), Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucy (1989), Fiona Joy Green (2004, 2006)and Andrea O’Reilly (1998, 2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) whose ideas paved the way for
more complex readings of motherhood that challenged earlier feminist paradigms wherein motherhood was seen as an automatically patriarchal and oppressive space. It was their (re)visioning of mothering and motherwork as a female defined site that could potentially afford women agency and power, that propelled me to continue my quest for works that spoke to how I too could practice empowered mothering.

Although I utilize the ideas of these theorists, it was the African feminists maternal theorists who “peopled the writing” (Morrison, 1981, p. xiv) of the stories you are about to read. Their interpretations and perspectives resonated more with me because of my own personal location as an Afro-Jamaican woman and mother. At another equally important level, I had made it my political and academic project to center voices such as ours that are traditionally silenced in mainstream discourses. Worth noting are the writings of African women like Patricia Hill-Collins (1987, 1991, 1994, 2000b), Stanlie James (1994), Njoki Wane (2000) and Arlene Edwards (2000) who not only cemented ideas that mothering had and continues to be a site of empowerment, resistance and agency (particularly for African women and the children they mother), but also ruptured the Eurocentric, patriarchal and gendered conceptualizations of motherhood. I found the ideas espoused in theirs and other writings of African women in journals such as *Jenda: Journal of Culture and African Women’s Studies*, particularly useful in terms of providing alternative readings of motherhood that extended beyond the male/female binary and the Western nuclear family model. These writings illuminated a long-standing African centred tradition of “mothering” through the phenomenon of kinship networks and community/othermothering (see also the works of Nzegwu, 2005, 2006; Oyewumi, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Rabenoro, 2003; Sudarksa, 2005 for more extensive discussion on the concept of community/othermothering in parts of the continent). For me—a child of the eighties, having experienced this “it takes a village to raise a child” model in the context of the Caribbean where it was still valued—reading the
works of African women who theorized about mothering through this prism was familiar and comforting.

My work is also shaped by the constellation of African maternal thinkers whose work explored the interconnection between the scholarly and motherly work of African women (Bernard & Bernard, 1998; Bernard et al., 2000; Mogadime, 1998; PerrymanMark, 2000; Thomas, 2000) as well as those that connect motherwork to identity formation (Mackey, 2000), examined African women’s mothering and activism (James, 1994), African women's mothering at the intersection of spirituality (Duncan, 2005) and writings that focused on the symbolic and literal representations of African mothers in mediums such as cinema (Duncan, 2005) and literature (Anatol, 2002; Lawson, 2000; Patton, 2000; Steele, 2000, Willey, 2000). Later, as I began to learn and develop creative writing skills through writing courses, I immersed myself in the work of African women writers who used the framework of the creative imagination to theorize about the literal and symbolic significance of African women as mothers and community/othermothers (Kincaid, 1985, 1997, 1998; Hartman, 2007; hooks, 1992; Morrison, 1981, 1998, 2000).

Even as I immersed myself in these creative and academic perspectives on African mothering, I felt that very few works explored the link between mothering and teaching with the exception of course of Andrea O’Reilly who had already begun writing on African women, cultural bearing and the motherline and scholars like Fiona Joy Green, Deborah Lea Byrd and Dolana Mogadime who made connections between mothering and critical and feminist pedagogies. I had not come across (at the time) literary or scholarly writings that dealt directly and at great length with the learning associated with and influenced by women of African descent who engaged in the practice of mothering. As an educational researcher this was a critical gap that naturally piqued my interest. I began to think critically about the possibilities of marrying feminist pedagogies with the motherwork of African women and
decided much later that storytelling would be the form through which I would engage with and theorize about the learning that took place while African women engaged in what Sara Ruddick calls maternal practice and thought.

_Anansesem (Storytelling Nights): African Maternal Pedagogies_ is a metanarrative that uses personal and cultural stories to focus on the contemporary realities and complexities of African women’s maternal practices—described as the work that mothers engage in when they set out to fulfill the demands of mother-work (that is, nurturing, protection, training and cultural bearing) and their maternal thinking—the specific discipline of thought, a cluster of attitudes, beliefs and values that arise out of engaging in motherwork (O’Reilly, 2004; Ruddick, 1989). The work focuses then on how self-identified women of African descent through a combination of maternal practice and maternal thinking produce maternal pedagogies.

Before addressing further the general framework and interrelated issues that the work touches upon, I want to first explore the meaning of maternal pedagogies (or mothering as pedagogy) as spoken about by Fiona Joy Green and employed throughout this work.

In _Feminist Mothering in Theory and Practice, 1985-1995_, Green describes feminist pedagogies in this way:

Feminist pedagogy is about teaching from a feminist worldview; from a perspective on the world which is in favour of the sharing of power, privilege, property and opportunities; which recognizes the systematic and systemic oppression of women; which believes in the possibility of change; and which understands the need to organize collectively to make change. By definition, feminist pedagogy challenges what is seen to be obvious, the natural, the accepted, and the unquestioned. (2009, p. 145)

Maternal pedagogy then, speaks to the specific ways in which mothers use and model the above described feminist pedagogical theories and practices in their motherwork (Green, 2009). It is as Green asserts, the art, science and/or act of teaching that one engages in through
motherwork and that is un/consciously informed by a critical feminist consciousness, *that challenges all forms of oppressions and is geared toward social change and equity* (2011, p. 198 emphasis added).

In thinking about feminist pedagogies as necessarily encompassing an intersectional approach that challenges the varying manifestations of oppression, Green’s work touches on an issue not taken up in Rich’s groundbreaking *Of Woman Born* where she distinguishes between mothering as experience (a female defined site that can be potentially empowering) and institution (a male defined site of women’s oppression) (1986). In theorizing about how motherhood is both an institution and experience, Rich does not address how even within this patriarchally governed institution of motherhood, all mothers are not created equal. In other words, some women are not even thought of as mothers and are therefore not extended the "courtesy" of having their mothering scrutinized through this patriarchal institution in the first place. Therefore, a key illuminating idea for me in Green’s examination of the relationship between feminist mothering practice and pedagogy is her acknowledgement that the feminist mother and educator (because of their different experiences) work differently across different contexts. As such, they necessarily use different pedagogical tools as they teach children to be critically conscious of and challenge various forms of oppression that intersect and interlock to maintain the larger patriarchal matrix of domination (Green, 2008, 2011).

Adding to hers and previous motherhood scholars who examined the interconnection between maternal thinking and feminist maternal pedagogies (Ruddick, 1989; O’Reilly and Ruddick, 2009; Green, 2003) I use race based theories (specifically African centred feminism(s), indigeneity and Afrocentricity) to examine the specific contexts and experiences of the feminist maternal pedagogies of mothering peoples of African descent. These frameworks become particularly useful in analyzing how African women practice feminist
pedagogies within the context of their culturally defined feminist mothering. The research account contributes in a new way to motherhood scholarship in that it provides (using the medium of stories) real life examples of how maternal pedagogies work in general and more specifically some of the characteristics and expressions of maternal pedagogies rooted and informed by African cultural traditions, experiences and worldviews.

Even as the research text uses the framework of the creative imagination, it is important that you the reader see them as more than just fictional recreations. The following quote by Toni Morrison on the use of fiction serves to stem such impulses. She elaborates:

[The writer's] job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'. The exercise is also critical for any person who is [African], or who belongs to any marginalized category, for historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavy in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. But memories and recollections won’t give me access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me... No matter how ‘fictional’ the account of...writers, or how much it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory...remembering where you used to be... It is emotional memory... What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection to yield up a kind of truth. (Morrison, 1987, pp. 111-119, emphasis added)

Morrison's ideas are illuminating in that she reinforces the theoretical significance and larger material (and maternal) implications of creative non/fiction and art in general. Because I toy with imaginings to present to you a “story within another” (Walkerdine, 1989, p. 2), I am cognizant of the potential for audiences to see these stories as “make belief”. With that in mind, I would say that these stories originate from African women's individual and collective memories of living in a context where a larger (though fictional) cultural story dominates. This dominant story (though emanating from European imaginations about the backwardness, savagery and darkness that is African peoples) has had lasting material implications. Moreover, this dominant imagined story continues to overshadow our experiences of resisting and navigating negative stereotypes. Therefore as Morrison suggests,
the act of storying, of imagination is inextricably connected to our emotional memories and by extension our lived realities. It is connected to our experiences living in a space where we are silenced, where primacy is given to empiricism, objectivism and positivism, and where the stories of African mothers (biological or social), our multiple subjectivities and ways of knowing are subjugated in a patriarchal and racist educational system (Matsuda, 1989, Razack, 1993).

The text thus starts from a place of recognizing that as Afro-indigenous people in general and as African women who mother in a highly racist, sexist, classist, homophobic and ableist context, our stories have been taken, appropriated and misused. More importantly, because “the Western academy has denied our intellectual agency” (Dei, 2006, p. 4) my political project is to reclaim and use our stories to transform ideas about what is considered valid knowledge. Telling multiple stories about African women who use mothering as a site of empowerment, resistance, reclamation, teaching and survival is my attempt at presenting counter-stories (Delgado, 1989) rooted in African conceptualizations of mothering and that disrupts the imagined dominant Eurocentric cultural narrative.

The stories’ framework holds firstly that the African mother is an important site of cultural retention. As creators of knowledges, African mothers and community/othermothers are actively engaged in challenging the epistemological inequities of a Eurocentric master narrative. Secondly, that personal and cultural stories, when placed within the broader socio-political context of systemic whiteness, become vitally important in theorizing about collective, self-knowledge and the empowerment of African peoples. And finally, the stories attest to how empowered feminist maternal pedagogies are both modeled and taught (O’Reilly, 2008). They reinforce the idea that African mothers and community/othermothers through feminist maternal pedagogies informed by cultural consciousness, become central to the African child’s social, identity, educational development and survival.
This is a fusion of collective rememberances and interconnected experiences (Sbrocchi, 2008) about the struggles and joys that accompany African-Canadian women's motherwork. It is different in that it uses the medium of stories to explore and wherever possible offer up some answers to the following questions: How do African-Canadian mothers teach children to make sense of their existential situation? How do mothers of African descent draw upon and reproduce cultural knowledges as well as knowledges on varying forms of social marginalization? To what extent do African-Canadian mothers in and through their everyday maternal practice and maternal thinking engender individual and social transformation? In other words, what are the epistemic consequences of the learning associated with and influenced by our maternal identities and our motherwork? Finally, what is the potential of our feminist maternal pedagogies for rupturing neo-colonial alienation and for changing the patriarchal paradigms of teaching and learning?

I had conversations with eight women identified persons of African descent living in Canada (Toronto specifically) all of whom identified as having engaged in motherwork. Participant one was a mother of Jamaican nationality in her early thirties who was also the biological mother of a male four year old child. Participant two, was a mother in her mid-twenties of Kenyan nationality and who prior to becoming a biological mother had engaged in motherwork through mentoring young girls. She was also entrusted to care for her very close friend's child for months while the biological mother was unable to. My third participant was a grandmother in her late sixties of South African nationality who grew up during the apartheid struggle. She is also the biological mother of three adult children (two girls and one boy) raised partly in South Africa and in Canada. Participant number four, also of South African nationality, was the biological mother of a teenage male and an infant male child both born in Canada. She is a community activist and was very active in the anti-apartheid struggle in Toronto. My fifth participant was a queer identified mother
of two male boys under the age of ten born in Toronto. She is of Jamaican nationality and has engaged in motherwork for many years by mentoring and educating young African-Canadian women through her work in the theatre and performing arts. Participant number six was also a queer identified first generation African-Canadian person in her late twenties and a biological mother of a male child under ten years. Participant number seven was born in Mauritius, in her early forties and mother of an eleven year old female child. Finally, participant number eight was a first generation African-Canadian mother of a male child born in Toronto. Her parents were originally from Trinidad and Grenada.

In the initial narrative inquiry co-participants were asked to speak about: i) how they conceived of the term mother and their perceptions of their role as mothers ii) changes in their experiences of being mothered as compared to their own mothering experiences and practices in the current context iii) the effects of social identity markers and their own social location on these changes and iv) whether they conceived of themselves as key cultural bearers and educators for African-Canadian children. I later transcribed our conversations and organized their stories around substantive themes consistent with the findings of current feminist research on motherhood, African centred feminism(s) and indigenous theorizing. The data yielded from our conversations were further analyzed and presented through the writing of creative non-fictional stories on the themes of i) cultural bearing, spirituality and the motherline ii) conceptions of mothering iii) surviving, negotiating and (strategically) surrendering to individual, cultural, institutionalized and systemic forms of racism iv) resistance to the master narrative as well as hegemonic and normalizing tendencies of society and v) the consequences of African women's culturally defined feminist mothering and maternal pedagogies. Each chapter thus represents my getting at some essence of these salient themes.
What you are about to read ruptures conventional social science canons on what is viewed as research within the academy. This is an offering to you, the reader, of a creative and emotionally engaging alternative for representing contemporary educational research. Using arts-informed narrative representation—that is, research whose primary empirical data is informed by the literary genre and comprised of self/personal narration and cultural stories, I (the educational researcher turned creative writer) engage in what Toni Morrison calls “literary archaeology”. I use some information from my co-participants transcripts, do a little bit of guesswork and reconstruction in order to take you on an exciting narrative journey through our lived experiences recalled from our emotional memories (Morrison, 1987, p. 112).
Note to Readers

I like to think that this work has a little bit of something for everyone. After all, one of the broad goals of arts-informed research methodology is to make scholarship more accessible in a way that connects with wide and diverse audiences (Cole & Knowles, 2000, 2008). For the everyday reader who picks up this work, you may first want to immerse yourself in the first section that entails the five storied chapters. One way to read these stories (particularly the Anancy folkstories) might be to read them out aloud. If you choose to start there, you will first notice that there are multiple layers embedded within the research representation.

The first layer or main body of text consist of storied memories re-created from transcribed conversations with the eight women of African descent on their lived experiences and practices of mothering. Here, you will also access my personal stories of being a recipient of African women’s mothering and community/othermothering. Frequently, these are punctuated by stories where I am engaged in nurturance, motherwork, and cultural bearing with my daughter Ma’at through the practice of Anancy folk storytelling. This approach of intertwining multilayered stories, is inspired by Susan Sbrocchi’s methodological approach—one that evidences the process of theorizing and making knowledge claims from stories. She explains:

To be able to listen for the story the other person is telling I need to know my own story. I need to see where the line of my story takes a pause, intersects, and deviates from their stories. I need to be able to see the sketched lines of their lives in this place. The strength of their reflexive process is depicted in the fusion of collective remembrances and, although, the sketchy line that becomes the central organizing construct are the lines of my life, the representation of the interconnection of our shared experiences is crucial to the rigorous quality [and educative possibilities] of the work. (2008, p. 204).

Similarly, this layered storied representation is my attempt to sketch lines that facilitate the type of self-reflexivity that the arts-informed researcher necessarily undergoes in order
to make meaning (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Through it, I am able then to pinpoint the convergences and divergences in our larger collective stories on African maternal pedagogies.

Throughout the work, I also use footnotes as an additional layer of text to: i) expand on my thoughts external to the main narrative ii) give conceptual clarity and expand on terminologies used in the discourse on equity iii) provide English translations to the Jamaican language and iv) to connect the storied memories to theories of African centred feminism(s), maternal theory, and indigienity. I also utilize a series of epigraphs before each chapter to provide framing for the overarching theme of that chapter.

You will also find a third layer of quotes, (and English translations of the Anancy folk stories) in the right hand column. While many of these quotes speak to me on a personal level, these are not just included for mere thrill. Rather, they are intended to speak back to key occurrences in the main narrative and to provide theoretical and conceptual grounding for our personal stories. In other words, the right hand quotes and the epigraphs that precede each storied chapter, serve to provide theoretical insight and clue readers into the analytical tools that ratify the personal stories. For instance, where I present a story about a personal experience of racism, the right column quotes serve to reinforce the experiences named by co-participants in our conversations. This is done intentionally because often times marginalized groups are asked to offer up evidentiary support to demonstrate that they are recipients of various forms of oppression. This is sometimes challenging especially in instances of racism for example, especially when the racist oppression is neatly masked in prevailing liberal discourses. In our society, common sense notions of what constitutes racism (that is, actions that manifest through varieties such as extreme right wing Klu Klux Klun hangings) are easily identifiable as racist acts. However, the more sophisticated, covert and institutionalized forms of racism that present themselves through unspoken rules are harder to pinpoint and are usually dismissed as mere over reactions. In these instances, the
right hand quotes serve to validate these personal “feelings” or experiences (often dismissed) when individuals may not have the conceptual toolkit to name and articulate these instances of oppression in a language that dominant bodies will accept as evidentiary support. More importantly, these right column quotes serve to reinforce that there is theory in our personal/self stories. Indeed, scholars and theoreticians assemble their conceptual toolkits by using the everyday stories of individuals.

For readers schooled in the language of the academy, you might want to begin by reading the prologue. Here I lay out the central thesis, intent and impetus behind this research account. Here, I also begin to discuss of key concepts and methodological issues, questions and challenges. If you have not sufficiently wet your palate after reading the prologue, you may want to delve right into the section entitled "Narrative ‘Matters’". Again, here you will find two concluding pieces that delve more deeply into the methodological and theoretical frameworks, as well as other conceptual and theoretical issues of the work.

To some, “HERstory is OURstory: The Narrative of My Method” and “The Celebration: Making Sense of the Journey” may seem somewhat disconnected from the first five storied chapters. Do not despair as there is a method behind this seeming incongruence. These chapters are in effect postscripts intended to stand separate from the first five storied chapters, even as they frame, situate and contextualize them.

A key thing to note here is that this section is my attempt at fusing the language of traditional social science with the languages, processes, and forms of the literary art form that inspires, frames and defines the research inquiry process (Cole & Knowles, 2000). The representational framework—that is my choosing to story the methodology chapters—is purposeful, meant to give methodological consistency to the chosen art form and to fit the broad agenda of arts-informed inquiry whose expressed goal is to inject life into what I feel would have otherwise been a section written in language “wrung dry of emotion, of
sensuality, of physicality [and humanness]” (p. 57). The goal of this section (what would in a conventional thesis be the methodology placed up front) is to enhance your understanding—in an accessible and engaging manner—of the phenomenon of maternal pedagogies as viewed through the prism of African women’s maternal identity.

Whether lay or academic, readers should take cues from Cole & Knowles (2000) on the criteria of “research goodness” used in assessing the worth of the research account you will read:

*Intentionality, intellectuality and purpose:* research purposes to improve the human condition and is driven by a moral commitment. It therefore must stand for something. In other words, the research should provide opportunities for transformation, revelation, or some intellectual and moral shift. These stories are more than just good stories (Cole & Knowles, 2000 p. 65). Through the work’s acknowledgement and validation of the moments of meaning making that occur through African women’s embodiment, their everyday experiences, their shared stories, memories, maternal practices and motherwork, the research account creates space for bodies generally not thought of as sites where important knowledges are produced. Therefore, to speak about these subjugated knowledges, to put them on an esteemed pedestal, is to consciously and intentionally give epistemic saliency to African women who have and continue to contribute to our survival as a community.

*Researcher presence and reflexive self-accounting:* the researcher is present through an explicit reflexive self-accounting. This presence is implied and felt and the research text should bear the signature or fingerprint of researcher-as-artist. In this work, the chosen artform (creative non/fiction) evidences my interests in the use of storytelling to speak about and represent social phenomena. The intertwining of cultural stories I grew up hearing necessitated a reflexive process wherein I had to reflect on how my own personal experiences and draw connections to the stories of my co-participants. Through writing this research account, I
was forced to slow down time spent with my daughter in order to make sense of and map the consequences of my feminist maternal pedagogies. Moreover, the storying process facilitated my reflection on the deeper meanings of my experiences as well as the experiences of the eight women with whom I spoke.

**Aesthetic form, quality and appeal:** the central purpose of arts-informed research is knowledge advancement through research. However, art is the medium through which the research purposes are achieved. The question to ask then is: How well does the artistic form serve the research goals? This work combines creative-non fiction, storytelling and images to examine the relationship between mothering and teaching. Through these mediums, I make visible African women’s epistemic saliency and intellectual agency. Throughout the work, the illustrations are an attempt to synthesize key elements of each chapter. They in some sense encapsulate part of the heart of the chapter. Importantly, they witness my getting at some essence of meaning or interpretation that is embedded within the chapter. At another level, I wanted the work to be inviting for readers who are not of an academic background. Illustrations aside, the storied form of the thesis has a certain aesthetic that hones key themes that come out of the stories the women shared with me.

**Methodological commitment, principled process and procedural harmony:** evidenced through a principled process, procedural harmony, and attention to aesthetic quality. The stories are created from data gathered in a study on African women’s experiences of mothering in the Canadian context. Working with narrative information from transcribed conversations, I identified substantive themes related to the larger research purpose (spoken of previously) and scholarship on motherhood. After hearing co-participants stories, it became clear that the best way to preserve the integrity of the research and honor their experiences, would be through the form of storytelling. This storied research account is my attempt at remaining true to the narrative and emotive quality of the stories shared with me in our conversations.
Holistic quality, internal consistency, coherence and authenticity: a rigorous arts-informed “text” is imbued with an internal consistency and coherence that represents a strong and seamless relationship between purpose and method (process and form). Given the nature of what the work is about (storytelling and telling stories about how African women use feminist mothering as pedagogy) it was appropriate to find a way to cast or tell a story that honors the African origins of the participants as well as the cultural stories. The storytelling form of this work mirrors the storytelling of the participants. Therefore, the presentation of the thesis comes out of the subject matter and the general context of the work. In other words, I am telling an African story from an African point of view through an Afro-indigenous medium of storytelling.

Communicability, issues of audience and the transformative potential of the work: This quality is primarily concerned with addressing the following key concerns: Does the form and language in which it is written, performed or presented allow for accessibility to a wider audience? Is it evocative and does it resonate with diverse audiences? Accessibility is also related to the potential for audience to engage and respond to the work. In this text, accessibility is evidenced in the way in which I have chosen to present and relay the key themes that came out of the conversations with co-participants. Rather than saturate readers with academic jargon (and without excluding the language of the social sciences) I use images, colourful illustrations, emotive language and imagery to connect to the heart, soul and minds of audiences.

Knowledge advancement and claims: made with sufficient ambiguity and humility to allow for multiple interpretations. In other words, does the research advance knowledge (however broadly defined)? Additionally, the knowledge advanced is generative rather than propositional and based on assumptions that reflect the multidimensional, complex, dynamic intersubjective, and contextual nature of human experience. This is achieved through the
layered story form evidenced in the research representation. Through the intersecting lines of my experiences and other African women’s experiences, I am able to make certain knowledge claims: that African women use our identity as mothers as well as our epistemologies honed in and through our motherwork as a site of self empowerment. Motherhood thus becomes a platform to engender critical consciousness and resistance necessary for the survival of our cultures and our communities. Audience and researcher develop a knowing about African women’s maternal pedagogies through the art of narrative representation (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

**Contributions:** in assessing this work, readers must also ask: To what extent does the research have theoretical and practical contributions? How does it inspire possibility and new heights of response or action? What are the educative possibilities? As I have alluded to elsewhere, the stories’ framework start from the premise that there are theories in stories. Through the personal and cultural stories presented here, readers gain insight into, explore and learn more about the embodied knowledges of African women who engage in mothering. Additionally, the research account contributes to theory building on the value of storytelling in the context of maternal theory and motherhood studies. In terms of its practical contributions, the work’s underlying assumptions open up new possibilities for future researchers to further explore the potentialities that inhere in African women’s maternal pedagogies within formal educational settings.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have offered a general guide that I hope will better orient you as you journey through this work. However, understand that this is only a guide. So, when you read, please feel free to chart your own course. On a final note, in anticipation that you may wonder: How is this scholarship? How can you hand in a thesis that’s merely a series of stories? Can stories advance knowledge especially when they arise from what is often construed as “fictional” representations? Though these questions are valid and warrant
some attention, be forewarned that this research account is not intended to reflect how we actually experience and process the world around us (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 59). I do not and cannot claim to depict my participants lived experiences as it was because as Mark Freeman reminds us “our picture of the past is inevitably filtered through the eyes of the present”. Having said this, I ask that you enter these stories with an understanding that they are my creative interpretations taken from my fragmented memories, stitched together with the memories of the experiences of eight other women. Of course, there are other interpretations possible. With this in mind, I invite you to offer up your own (creative) interpretations or better yet, tell other stories on African women's maternal pedagogies.
CHAPTER ONE

Pedagogies of the Spirit
The Crossing: Anancy Encounters Nyame the Sky God
Story tellers: Gatekeepers of history, dream weavers of fantasy.
(Goss & Goss, 1995, p. 21)
In [African societies] the motherline represents the ancestral memory; traditional values of [African culture]. [African] mothers pass on the teaching of the motherline to each successive generation through the maternal function of cultural bearing...the very survival of [people of African descent] depends upon the preservation of [their] culture and history. If [African] children are to survive they must know the stories, legends, and myths of their ancestors. (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 12)
the words in the computer screen screamed
blood red
deafening!
bleeding echoes off the walls
the umbilical chord
our unborn child
they shouted
when the child asks where is my father
tell the child your father did not
agree with my revolushun
(Anitaafrika, 2007, p. 1)
Anancy is the spirit of the rebellion, he is able to overturn the social order; he can marry the Kings’ daughter, create wealth out of thin air; baffle the Devil and cheat Death…. For an oppressed people [Anancy] conveyed a simple message from one generation to the next:-that freedom and dignity are worth fighting for, at any odds. (Beckwith, n.d)
Tell Me A Story

One more story please, please Mummy?” Ma’at’s small beady eyes glisten, she smiles knowing that I will give in.

“Alright, alright,” I say. “But after this one it’s time to go to sleep.” Her eyes gleam with excitement. We lay close in the night, burying our bodies under the fluffy white cotton duvet. She stares out at me in anticipation, waiting for me to tell her a new tale.

“This is the story of How Anancy came from Afrika to the Americas.” Looking down at her I ask, “Can you say Afrika?” I hear her not-yet-three-year-old voice clumsily utter “Afr-ee-eka”.

“Not bad for a first try kiddo,” I say giggling.

She smiles pleasingly and repeats “Afr-ee-ka” twice more.

“Afrika is a beautiful place where all the dark skinned people of the world like you and me come from.”

She listens, moves in closer and nestles her face deep into my chest. My heart beats passionately against the side of her cheek.

“Well, that is where Anancy is from,” I continue. I hear my voice pierce the quiet black night as I begin to string together from memory words that tell a story of how we got to this place.

In Africa, storytelling has been one of the most significant ways to preserve the history of culture of various groups. It is also a vehicle for teaching values, strengthening community and family bonds, and sharing the practical information necessary for daily living. (Banks-Wallace, 1998, p. 17 citing Chinweizu, 1988)

A long time ago Anancy lived in a village in the Kingdom of Asante. One morning, before the cock crowed, Anancy picked up his machete and spear and went into the bushes. He walked for miles and miles until he came upon some fresh tracks of a warthog. Anancy was a very curious little spider so he decided he would follow the tracks deep into the grassland. Some time later, he stumbled upon more tracks. Anancy was smart. He knew by the shape of the imprints left in the dirt that the warthog mustn’t be too far away. His mouth began to water and his stomach growled. GRRR! He dreamt of sinking his teeth into juicy roasted warthog meat.

Upon reaching a patch of tall grass, Anancy saw the warthog lying on its side. Someone else had killed it. “What is this I see?” Anancy asked himself. “A dead warthog and no one here to claim it! Ah, I wonder who was so kind enough to leave this meat here for me?” Anancy scratched his head and thought and thought.

In Toni Morrison and Motherhood, Andrea O’Reilly speaks to two key concepts that underlie the stories in this chapter: the motherline and cultural bearing. Citing Morrison and Lowinsky, she refers to the motherline as cultural maps or historical compasses from which female children refer to and draw on in order to know how to navigate the future. Also connected to this concept is the notion of cultural bearing: “the task of raising children in accordance with the values and beliefs of [African] culture.” (2004a, p. 34) Both frameworks become central particularly for female children in terms of facilitating a literal and symbolic journey back to their roots. Through this journey, female children may uncover key survival tools and strategies used by their female ancestors that can help them navigate issues such as racism, classism and sexism that their female ancestors also encountered. I consider this story of Anancy’s crossing (as well as the personal narratives that follow it) as motherline stories to the extent that they allow the African child to tap into their African ancestral memory. I tell my daughter this Anancy story with the hope that it will help her locate herself firmly within this motherline of storytellers and storytelling so that later she will, in learning about the herstory of Africans crossing the Atlantic, develop a sense of self and connectedness to her African identity. This is especially important for me because, I grew up in a context where I was taught to loath Africa and my African self. It was not until much later upon leaving Jamaica and becoming exposed to ideas of Pan-Africanism and Black consciousness espoused in the writings of Black freedom writers, that I began to consciously decolonize myself and nurture this part of my selfhood. My experience reinforces O’Reilly’s argument that mothers, in this case African mothers, must have a strong sense of self and identify with their ancestral memory and ancient properties of the African motherline in order to be able to teach their children to be proud of their ancestry. This motherline story serves as a pedagogical tool for engendering in Ma’at a conscious knowing of her historical rootedness in Africa.
“Oh I know,” he exclaimed rubbing his hands together. “It must be Nyame the Sky God. Nyame must have seen that I was tired and hungry, he took pity on me and struck the beast down with lightening so that I would not have to do the hard work of killing it myself. I must thank Nyame.”

He quickly picked up some dry sticks, made a fire and mounted the warthog on a wooden pole over the flames. Soon the warthog was roasting. But before the roasted meat had time to cool, and without giving thanks to Nyame, Anancy quickly devoured it. He ate and ate until almost all the meat was gone and there was nothing left but a piece of the warthog’s foot.

Suddenly, Osebo the Leopard appeared out of the bushes carrying some firewood, a large drinking gourd filled with water, and a cooking pot. He looked around for the warthog he had killed but it had vanished. All Osebo saw in its place was Anancy the spider, lying asleep and stuffed with a pleasing smile on his face.

It was then that he realized what had happened. Anancy had eaten all the warthog meat by himself. Osebo got so angry he threw down the firewood and sailed the pot and drinking gourd high into the heavens. They both landed with a loud CRASHHH!

Anancy, startled by the loud noise jumped out of his sleep only to see Osebo standing over him. He leapt to his feet and bolted off into the bushes with Osebo chasing closely behind him. Osebo ran and ran into the bushes chasing Anancy until they both came upon a crowd of men carrying large guns, prodding and poking people shackled to one another at the neck.
“Oh no a scary monster is going to get the leopard!” Ma’at’s eyes widen. She leaps forward, sits poised in the middle of the bed and tugs at my blouse.

“Will they catch him Mummy, will they?” she asks donning a half-frightened half-questioning look on her face.

“Well honey bunny, you’ll have to continue listening to find out what happens next.”

“Ok, Mummy.” She lies on her side tightly clutching my arm. I continue.

Since Anancy was but a wee bitty spider, he managed to crawl into a medicine bag tied around the neck of one of the women held captive. Upon noticing the men Osebo stopped in his tracks. He had heard the stories from the other animals of the men who carried guns and took people into a wretched life of slavery. He knew better than to continue chasing Anancy. He did not want to be caught or worst shot by these dreaded men.

“I’ll catch up with you another time Anancy.” Osebo mumbled to himself as he retreated into the bushes.

Anancy grinned and marveled at how fast he was able to move and how easy it was for him to escape Osebo.

“I’m way too tired after all that running to go back home at this hour. I think I’ll just lay here and allow all that tasty warthog meat to digest in my stomach.”

Anancy then falls asleep and is unwittingly transported onto a slave ship bound for the Americas.
The next day, he awoke to find himself at the bottom of a ship stacked up against hundreds of humans. Some cried, others sang, but most uttered strange words he could not understand.

During his perilous journey in the hold of the ship, Anancy had an encounter with Nyame the Sky God.

“Oh great Nyame,” pleaded Anancy. “Please, please send me back home to my village in Asante. I do not want to be here among all these people wailing and crying sick and dying.”

Anancy begged and begged, but Nyame refused.

“No Anancy, because of your selfish ways I have other plans for you. I am sending you somewhere, Anancy, but not to Asante. You must go with these captives to the place called the New World.”

“But, but Nyame,” Anancy stuttered, “These people are slaves! I may have fooled Osebo and taken his meat but I did not have anything to do with them being here. They were the ones who brought me here. It is their misfortune to fall into the hands of the slave traders.”

Anancy tried to bargain with Nyame for hours. But Nyame did not listen.

“Oh Nyame, punish the people who deal in slavery, but please send me back to my people.”

“No!” repeated Nyame in a loud, stern voice. “I have watched you all this time outsmart all the animals in the forest and do things even great big animals were not able to do.”

Nyame scratched his head and thought some more. “I have an important job for you in this new place. Here you can put your craftiness to good use to help people other than yourself for a change.”

Anancy pleaded some more but this time his fate was sealed.
Anancy was not sent back to Asante. Instead, the Sky God sent him away to the New World. Just like the enslaved people, he arrived in Kingston Jamaica against his will where he became known as “the comforter of the enslaved”.

“The beginning…”

In the darkness, I search for her once cheery eyes. They are now closed.
Webbed Toes and Fingers

She bolted up the pathway towards their house. The glass shutter on the storm door swung back and slammed into her back. Cradling her books, she turned the keys inside the lock with the one free hand, pried open the door with her foot, squeezed through the opening, tossed her keys on the narrow glass table, leaned against the wall of the short hallway entrance, and darted toward the bathroom. She heaved into the toilet—violently.

“I made it just in time thank God.”

She sat with her head slumped over the white ceramic bowl examining its content. Specks of yellowish pink and transparent liquid floated like miniature jellyfishes swimming on the ocean bed. She grabbed hold of the rim, pulled herself up off the floor, wiped the sour drool from her face, flushed the toilet and turned the tap on. How—she wondered as she gazed into the bathroom mirror—could she feel so sick, so quickly?


Trent University: April, 2005. Their meeting was one of happenstance. The sun shone brilliantly in the bright blue sky. That spring, they kissed on the park benches under the big tree, shared stories about growing up, and listened for hours to the droning sounds of him drumming on his Akete drums. As music junkies, artists, and spiritualists, they were kindred souls.

“Why don’t we move in together?” Chakka asked.
She ran her hands through his tousled, black mane before replying. “Aaah, isn’t it a bit too soon? We’ve only been dating a few months now.” Her voice cracked, she cleared her throat. “It just feels like things are happening so fast.”

He sensed her uncertainty. “I know this sounds cliché but we are made for each other. I mean… you’re always saying that time waits for no man.” He paused. “I love you Ngozi. Plus I feel like we’ve known each other all our lives. Shouldn’t that be enough?”

His lips broke and parted into a teasing smile that stretched across his oval shaped face. He waited for her answer.

Five months later they moved in.

Six weeks into the new semester she began to notice changes in her body. He suggested that they take a home pregnancy test just to be sure. They stared at the plus sign as it grew brighter and stared back at them through the transparent window. Their blissful world was shattered.

Dazed and confused she gazed into the bathroom mirror struggling to come to terms with what she now knew. “What was she going to do?” she thought.

Twenty minutes passed before she managed to peel herself away from the aberration that was her face in the mirror. She walked slowly into their bedroom, pulled the heavy black curtains closed, stumbled into bed and burrowed in between the comforter and pillows.

Clutching the pillow closest to her chest, she laid in the darkness, closed her eyes and drifted off into a dream like trance. Shadows danced up and down the walls.
In the fire are … spirits that show us the way to live in the world … there is a secret in the flame that is ongoing and everlasting. (hooks, 1996, pp. 87-90)

hands, they leaned in toward her. In her frenzied mind, the shadows took the form of women in her family that had passed.

“Where am I?”

She opened her eyes and realized she was unable to move. Still anesthetized she caught a fleeting glimpse of a ball of fire looming in the dark. The flames grew bigger, taking the shape of an elderly woman. She recognized the figure but could not distinguish her soot-eaten face.

The old woman moved in closer, grabbed her hand, and whispered in a comforting voice. Ngozi gave herself over to the woman’s beckoning voice telling her “do not be afraid”.

The old woman muttered on in an unfamiliar language. Ngozi tried, but couldn't hear anything but the maddening scream of a baby calling out “Mamma”. Its piercing cry was like the that of a wounded animal. As the old woman spoke, a speck of flame leapt from her tongue and caressed Ngozi’s face like the warm summer sun. The thick smell of parched skin filled her lungs.

Smaller specks of fire floated in the air, merged and grew into a separate ball. The old woman’s phlegmed voice wrinkled like paper as she whispered, “Look”, and pointed in the direction of the smaller ball of flames.

Ngozi watched as the image inside the flame took the form of an infant child. “His face looks like his,” she thought. She noticed his black wooly hair, how his skin glistened like a shiny new copper penny and how his small beady eyes shone distinctly from his oval shaped face.

Suddenly, her eyes are drawn to his tiny webbed toes and fingers. She noticed that although
he looked no more than six months old, he spoke to her with the voice and wisdom of a seventy-year-old woman. She stared into his eyes just as she did earlier when she gazed into the bathroom mirror. In that moment, she knew he was hers. She knew what she must do.

* 

In the midwife’s office weeks later, she already knew before she heard the words, “You’re having a boy”.

Standing before the bathroom mirror that night, she admired the smoothness of her body hoping to feel the first flutter.

… dreams are messages sent to us by guardian spirits, the wise one learns to listen to the message, to follow its wisdom… [We] will live the truth of the dream in time. (hooks, 1996, p. 51)
Nine-Night

I was eight years old when I learned that a spirit world existed. I knew about ghosts—people who were once alive, who never crossed into the spirit world for one reason or another—and was petrified of them. Theirs were the souls that I became familiar with through the many duppy stories that my cousins told by the kerosene lamp at night.

I grew up hearing stories about Obeah, about people who performed witchcraft or 'black magic' on those they coveted or hated, about women who mixed things into food to keep their husbands or a straying boyfriend faithful, and farmers who placed trinkets under fruit trees to ward off potential thieves who ambushed their crops at night. I was told to beware of evil spirits; that the most effective way to ward them off was to wear my clothing inside out or adorn myself in red, to walk backwards when returning home after dark so that I could watch for spirits that would attempt to enter the house with me, to look away from hearses leading funeral processions, and to spit on a stone and toss it behind me if I called a dead person’s name anytime during the day. Though the efficacy of these ghost-repelling rituals remain for me today a puzzle, I never failed to do them since I dreaded accidentally summoning a bad spirit that would keep me permanent company.
Later I came to learn that there were also good spirits. Spirits that had crossed over and were contented. Spirits that became our guardians—our ancestors who protected us from harm. Spirits that came offering wisdom and guidance. Spirits that spoke to us through our dreams.

I was on summer holiday visiting my mother in the ghettos of Kingston. Daddy always seemed apprehensive about sending me to Mummy’s house for the holidays. I would hear him tell my stepmother that the area was too dangerous especially when turf wars broke out among rival gangs.

Mummy lived in an area of Kingston called Payne Land, an area known for its gang rivalry, peppered small concrete slab roofed houses, and its working class dancehall culture. For a long time, I tried to figure out why the houses looked like photocopies of each other. I later found out that they were built as part of a government project to provide housing for low-income earners many of who worked in the foreign owned garment factories. The factories, appropriately called *The Free Zone*, employed people in the surrounding ghettos (mostly women) who were paid very little per day for piecemeal work. The women—who served as a ready pool of exploit labour—would sit in overcrowded work areas slumped over sewing machines, buried beneath mounds of pre-cut cloth awashing in sweat as they worked away. These women unable to organize or form unions to demand better working conditions, performed their work with a faint hint of pride knowing that with the few dollars a day, came a level of security and financial independence to
provide the basic necessities for their children. Though they were aware of the true value of their sweat, for these women, working for close to free was better than no income at all.

Mummy’s house was small but it was comfortable and clean. The floors always glistened with the shiny newness of a silver coin. I later discovered that the cheap bulk “Wipe and Shine” polish mixed with a powdered red oak was what gave them its opulent sheen. Every Friday, Mummy would send us to the shop to buy a gallon of this white liquid. I would watch in amazement as she mixed it with the red oak dye and diligently applied the red mixture to the concrete floors. “Yu suppose to can mek a part inna yu scalp once dis floor clean,” she would say, as she instructed my sister and I on how to properly apply the treatment to the floors.

Mummy’s home was a place of discovery, a place of freeness, a place for which I yearned. In the daytime Payne Land would come alive swelling with the vibrant energy of children playing, dancing in the streets to the latest dancehall reggae hits that blared from sound systems. Adults and children rocked, whined and gyrated to the beat of the vulgar dancehall tunes. I absorbed the lyrics of Shabba Ranks’ “Trailer load a girls” and Buju Banton’s “Batty rider” with relish. By the end of summer or Christmas holidays, I would return to my father’s home eager to showcase my newfound talents. I would teach my cousins the latest limbo, tatty and, my specialty, the dance named after one of Jamaica’s national heroes Paul Bogle—the Bogle.

At Mummy’s there was always someone to play with. Even when one of my friends were not allowed to play, I was sure to find company in another child who lived just steps away. We

Language as culture is an image-forming agent in the mind of a child. Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place. But our capacity to confront the world creatively is dependent on how those images correspond or not to that reality, how they distort or clarify the reality of our struggles. (Wa’Thiongo, 1989, p.15)

Translation: “You should be able to make a part in your scalp once you are done cleaning this floor.”
would play hopscotch, water war, dandy shandy, hide and seek, bend dung stucky—the Jamaican version of tag—and run around with neighbourhood boys in the streets without the annoyance of cars driving by.

I could enter and exit my mother’s house in the daytime with little restraint. Mummy never worried. She knew that my sister and I were at some neighbour’s house just a few doors down, that we were safe, and that we would come home once it began to get dark or we were hungry.

My mother’s house had a small kitchen sandwiched by two bedrooms that also served as living and dining rooms. My older sister, Terry and I shared a small bed in one room, my mother and her boyfriend, Franky, slept in the other room. In bed at nights while everyone was asleep I would lie awake disquieted, as I listened to shots bellowing, penetrating the night’s sky. I was astonished at how my sister managed to sleep through the sounds. At first I was afraid. But after a few visits, I became inured.

We did not only hear these sounds at nights. On occasions, they would reverberate through the high-rise buildings on the adjacent street. In the daytime—no longer shielded by the fortress of Mummy’s concrete slab roofed house—I was more afraid.

One day in the middle of our of hopscotch game, a hail of bullets erupted from the housing projects across the street from where we lived. My mother came running out the house with frantic eyes searching the streets for us.
“Go inside quick.” She screamed, grabbed both our hands, pushed us inside and bolted the door behind us.

Panic-stricken, she yelled, “Go dung pon unu belly, get flat!”

“What’s going on? Why are we inside?” I thought. I wanted to ask, but dared not question her at that time.

“Soun like dem deh bullet deh connek,” I heard Franky say to my mother.

She nodded. I was amazed at how he was able to tell the difference between the bullets that hit the open air and the ones that penetrated a building or another person’s body.

An hour later, when Mummy’s friend came by to tell her the news, we learn that Franky was right. My mother’s friend, Coolie Man, had just been killed. Mummy wept.

* 

I observed my first death ritual at Coolie Man’s wake. Although my Aunties frequently talked about attending so and so’s “nine-night,” as my luck would have it, the ceremonies always happened while school was still in session. Because of this, I was never allowed to go. Since this time I was on summer holidays, I went to the wake every night with my mother and sister.

The wake was called a nine-night because the ceremony literally lasted nine nights. Everybody who knew Coolie Man gathered at his family’s home on Top Road. Each night, the adults would share condolences, women exchanged memories, chanted old burial hymns, told

*Translation: “Go down on your bellies get flat.”
*Translation: “It sounds like those bullets connected.”
* In the Jamaican vernacular the wake is called a “nine-night” as opposed to a ninth night.
Anancy stories, while men played Dominos and drank overproof Jamaican rum until sunrise. The final night—the ninth night—was most important. This was the night when the family of the deceased prepared lots of tasty food. The night when children were given a small cup of “Red Label Wine”—I was never allowed to drink alcohol on any other occasion—to beckon the spirit of the deceased. Under a big tent, on a table lay in the middle of the yard laid kettles of cocoa tea, two thermoses filled with coffee, and six large aluminum baking tins stacked with loaves of hard dough bread. In the centre of the baking tins sat two larger ones brimming with fried sprat fish smothered in pickled onions and red and yellow scotch bonnet pepper.

I salivated. The smell of the vinegar laced with pickled garnish seduced and pulled me in the direction of the food table.

Suddenly, I heard Mummy’s voice call out to me reminding me that I am not allowed to touch the food until midnight when the spirit had passed through.

The next day, the undertaker brought Coolie Man’s body to Top Road for the final viewing. I held my mother’s hand. My sister followed closely behind. The small procession of people marched slowly from Bottom Road to Top Road gradually ascending on the already swelling crowd.

Every person in the neighborhood came to pay their respect. Some stood gathered around the casket forming a circle, others waited in a queue to view the body, and I stood in silence anxiously waiting for my turn.
Mummy stood beside me holding my hands. When I am next, I hesitated, not sure I wanted to see, fearful that I would not be able to erase the image of his face from my memory. How would I sleep tonight?

Peals of crying interrupted my thoughts. Fear edged my eyes, I shuttered at the thought of looking, a lump formed in my throat and I mustered up the courage to take a peak. I stood frozen.

Lying there still with his eyes shut, he looked as though he was sleeping. I wanted to touch him. I reached in and placed my index finger on the back of his hand. His skin was taut and cold. I quickly pulled my hand back and placed it by my side.

Women sobbed, wailed, and moaned, disturbing the silence. I scanned the crowd. My eyes became drawn to a woman in a dark blue frilled dress donning a black hat with a meshed veil covering her eyes stretching across her nose. She fainted. A group of women carried her away.

A lady dressed in all white—one of Coolie Man’s relatives—grabbed his son, only months old.

“Di spirit haffi ear di pickney cry or him wi come back and play wid im,” she said before tossing the baby over the casket towards the other side. A lady clutching a black silk handkerchief to her face reached over and caught the child, then threw him back to the other side. The baby sailed in the air and landed in another woman’s arms. He belted out a loud cry.

*Translation: “The spirit must hear the child cry or he will come back and play with him.”
The woman sighed, caressed Coolie Man’s forehead, leaned in and kissed him on the lips before saying, “Alright Coolie Man, wi mourn yu, yu spirit can cross ova now.”

*Translation: "Alright Coolie Man, we’ve mourned your spirit, you can cross over now."*
CHAPTER TWO

It takes a

“Chorus of Mammas”
Anansesem (Storytelling Nights)
... A person cannot feel right in their heart if they have denied parts of their ancestral past, that this not feeling right in their heart is the cause of much pain... She tells me the stories over and over again so I will know them, so I will pass them on. (hooks, 1996 pp. 49-50)
She needed what most coloured girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbours, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—the humour with which to live it. (Morrison, 1977, p. 311)
my tear-pierced world stopped
shot
by ammunition
deadlier violent than the bullets of
fresh flesh
clots
shooting their way past a closed
cervix
in that first trimester
thought I was/we were having a
miscarriage
but not
now
this ancestor spirit-our child
insists on returning
persists on belonging
you. (Anitaafrika, 2007, p. 1)
The Jamaican [Anancy] tales tell of how [Anancy] the small spider, gets the better of powerful animals such as Tiger and Alligator or powerful white humans like Massa (master).... Oral history and the journal of plantation whites clearly indicate that [Anancy] storytelling was a prominent part of plantation life. The trickster folk hero became a medium through which the greed and discrimination at the heart of plantation society were criticized and acts of defiance and lawbreaking against Backra were legitimized. The tales were an outlet for the frustration and anger experienced by slaves but they also nurtured...and inspired a form of psychological resistance to plantation oppression. (Marshall, 2008, p. 3)
“O honey, which song do you want us to sing tonight?”

“Ummm,” Ma’at pauses and thinks before responding,

“How about Manuel Road?”

I sing to her the call and response digging song she has heard countless times before…

9 The stories in this chapter speak to the theme of othermothering and community othermothering. In African cultural traditions, mothering is organized as a collective activity wherein women share responsibility for children in both informal and formal arrangements. Wane (2000) tells us that mothering is not necessarily based on biological ties, and children belong to the community. In addition, as Bernard and Bernard (1998) explains, African women are also charged with the responsibility of providing education, social and political awareness to entire communities of African people in which they lived. Similarly, Edwards (2000) argues that both roles (that of community and othermother) emanates from a long African tradition grounded in African centered ideas of communalism.

Most, if not all of my co-participants were able to relate to this model of community mothering. When I asked them to tell me how they defined or conceived of the role of mother, many of the women articulated conceptions of motherhood that extended beyond the gendered, nuclear motherhood of Euro/American feminist cultural traditions. African maternal theorists contend that the dominant Western feminist account which reduces mothering to an individual, private, and gendered activity is a problematic framework for African women, because it privileges the patriarchal nuclear family structure as the core social institution (Oyewumi, 2003; Wane, 2000). For myself and co-participants, mothering is and continues to be a role that expresses itself as nurturance, public work, economic and political support within a larger community setting (O’Reilly, 2004). Since this was such a strong theme, I decided to re-create stories around our shared experiences of community/othermothering. In effect then, the stories in this chapter are based on our memories of experiencing and/or functioning in this capacity and where the role itself provided key pedagogical moments. As I was writing these stories, I scanned my daughter’s Anancy and Miss Lou story book, I immediately recalled this Anancy tale presented here (Bennett, 1979). My interpretation of their personal narrations and this Anancy folktale (also expressed through the illustration on the previous page) supports the views of maternal theorists who see community/othermothering as vital to the nurturance, sustenance and survival of African communities and as an alternative to the dominant patriarchal ideology of natural-intensive mothering (O’Reilly, 2004). This Anancy story told here to my daughter also becomes significant within the context of motherhood studies because it reinforces the importance of African women as the bearers of culture who (specifically in the context of Jamaica) are invested literally by Anancy and symbolically by the community with the responsibility of maintaining the motherline. Importantly, they evince the fact that our foremothers as Karol Harroway states “carry the voice of the mother—they are the progenitors, the assurance of the line…as carriers of the voice [African] women carry wisdom—[and] mother wit. They teach children to survive and remember.” (1987, p. 123 as cited in O’Reilly, 2004).

10 Jekyll (1966) describes digging songs as those sung during various kinds of labor under plantation slavery. These songs, along with ring tunes have been passed down throughout the generations. Today they are a mainstay in Jamaican folk cultural tradition.

Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature…the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How [children] perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture. (Wa’Thiongo, 1989, p.16)
Go dung a Manuel Road gal and buoy fi go bruck rock stone
Go dung a Manuel Road gal and buoy fi go bruck rock stone
Bruck dem one-by-one
Gal and buoy
Bruck dem two-by-two
Yu finga mash nuh cry
Gal an buoy
Memba a play wi deh play 11

Most nights she is captivated by the sweet refrain. Her squeaky voice fills the air punctuating mine, and words she has managed to memorize from the previous nights’ recital sputter clumsily from her lips. Most nights, we sing over and over again, until she falls asleep.

Not tonight. Tonight, after dancing, singing, playing and when all my efforts at lulling her to sleep fail, I resort to telling her an Anancy story. I know how much she revels in my telling of these stories.

Once upon a time and a long long time Anancy wasa pass one oman yard, an12 him see her gran-pickney out a de doorway a read one story book. Anancy go sidung side a de pickney and start look ina de book to. De pickney tun ovah one leaf, an Anancy see one big picture a Puss pose off in a de book.

Anancy gi out: “Bless me yeye-sight! Koo Bra Rat! Tun ovah leaf, pickney gal! For if Puss and Rat ina book, me mus een deh to!”

But all de tun de pickney tun, an all de look Anancy look, him nevah see himself.

12 It is important to note that the stories translated in English are based on my own interpretation and understanding of the Jamaican language and what certain words would mean when translated to English. Some words carry different meanings across different spaces even within the Jamaican context. Many words used in Louise Bennett’s Anancy stories are rooted in a rural Jamaican parlance and may not necessarily resonate with Jamaican speakers who live in the urban areas of the country.
All this time, Puss and Rat were very good friends who always played and made mischief inside people’s houses. Anancy made up his mind to put a rift between the two friends.

So, one day he passed by a playground and saw Puss and Rat playing together. When the game was over, Anancy walked home with Puss. On the walk home he turned to Puss and said, “Wait, Brer Puss, how is that you and Rat play so well together and you haven’t eaten him as yet? Didn’t you know that Rat is nice meat?”

Puss responded greedily, “Is that true, Brer Anancy?”

Anancy replied, “Yes it’s true. The next time the two of you meet up you catch him and taste him and you will see for yourself.”

Puss thanked Anancy and licked his mouth all the way home. They parted ways and Anancy headed towards Rat’s yard.

Anancy said to Rat, “Brer Rat, I have bad news for you. A while ago I was passing by Puss’ house and I heard his mother telling him that whenever he sees Rat again he should catch him and eat him because you are very good meat.”

Rat started tock seh himself from Puss, an Puss start meck aftra Rat, an de two a dem min so deh pon one anada dat dem nevah got time fi tief.

One day one ole oman seh to Anancy: “Bra Nancy, me hear seh dat is yuh meck Puss an Rat fall out, an me haffi tank yuh.”

Hear Anancy: “Is me, yes, De two a dem pose off ina story book and me cyan go in deh.”

De ole oman seh: “Cho, Anancy, dat shouldn’t worry yuh. Me wi put yuh eena story.”

Anancy seh: “How comes?”
De ole oman seh: “Me an all de odder ole oman dem wat yuh help wid Puss and Rat gwine tell yuh story to we gran-pickney dem a night time, an demo won’t fegat it.”

Hear Anancy: “Every night me wi come memba yuh something bout meself fi talk.”

So every night wne de ole oman dem a put dem gran-pickney to bed, Anancy come an show up himself pon de wall or de ceilin so dat de ole oman dem can memba fi talk bout him. Sometimes wen de ole oman dem sleepy, Anancy tie up dem face wid him rope and wake dem up, meck dem talk bout him. So dem tell dem pickney Anancy story, de pickney dem tell smaddy else, dat smaddy else tell and tell, so till me an all dah tell Anancy story.

Is Anancy mek it.

The story ends and I turn to her and say, “Jack Mandora, mi nuh choose none. Mi did lef something fi yuh, but storm-warnin blow it weh.”¹³ ¹⁴ Her eyes flicker like the flame of candle on its last leg of life. She blinks, smiles faintly before surrendering to the world of dreams. Finally!

Anancy replied proudly, “Yes, it was I. After all, the two of them have been posing in story books and I wasn’t in these stories.”

The old woman said, “Oh Anancy, you shouldn’t be worried about that. I will put you in the story books.”

“How will you do that?” Anancy asked the old woman.

“Well, I and the other women that you helped with Puss and Rat, we are going to tell your story to all our grand children every night. This way they will never forget them.”

“Alright”, said Anancy, “Every night I am going to come and tell you something about myself to tell your children.”

So from that day, every night as the old women put their children to sleep, Anancy appeared on the wall or the ceiling and reminded the old women to talk about him. Sometimes when they forgot because they were tired and sleepy, Anancy would release his web, tie up the women's faces and awaken them so that they could tell his stories. So from that day onwards, they would tell their children Anancy stories. The children would tell somebody else, that somebody else tell somebody else until everybody was telling Anancy stories. That was Anancy’s doing.

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¹³ Translation: "Jack Mandora, I do not choose any. I left something for you, but the storm blew it away."

¹⁴ Within the context of Jamaican, this line is usually repeated following the telling of an Anancy story. The reason for this is that Anancy in his stories sometimes did very bad things. This line is often repeated by the storyteller as a declaration to Jack Mandora (the doorman who was believed to guard the entrance of heaven’s doors) in an effort to distance him/herself from the Anancy’s actions. It was also a way to announce that the story-teller was not in favour of Anancy’s cunning ways. “Mi nuh choose none” literally translated means, “I don’t choose to behave in any of these ways” (Jekyll, 1966, p. viii).
In her examination of the role of mothers among the Akan of Ghana, Stoeltje tells us that “the position of mother takes on a value beyond its biological function and becomes an important symbol because of its power to define persons, to situate a person within the large system, and also because of the knowledge that is associated with that power… the significance of the mother in a person’s life is thus not only based on emotional bond but also on the impact the mother has on the child’s public identity. (Stoeltje, 1997 as cited in Watson-Franke, 2004, p. 78-79)

Sweet Shop

“I can’t believe you did this. Taking sweets from a store? I just can’t believe it. I raised you better than to go out into the world and embarrass me. Mama Mueni is my name. Do you know what that means child? My name goes by your name. They all know you’re my child. What you do reflects on me. I would have given it to you had you just asked. But to take something that doesn’t belong to you is wrong. You know this Mueni.”

Ten minutes of Mrs. Muttimos’ rambling passed while they awaited punishment. Celia twirled her blonde, curly hair, gazed at her feet and fidgeted with the tail end of her skirt. Mueni hung her head in shame. She wanted to do something—anything but stand and listen to the painful thrust of her mother’s words of condemnation piercing her flesh.

“Turn out your pocket right this minute!”

They exchanged glances before emptying the contents of their pockets onto the glass-top kitchen table.

Mrs. Muttimos’ lips folded in outrage laced with a hint of disgust at the sight of the sweet wrappers. There were blue ones, green ones, purple ones, even the red liquorice ones her mother declared taboo—like beautifully crafted rainbow beaded necklaces they laid strewn across the table. She stood silently for a moment with her eyes riveted to mountainous stash of forbidden...
sweets, pausing just long enough for Mueni to get a word in.

“But Mamma….”

Dredges of shame surged from Mrs. Muttimos’ lips stupefying Mueni, “Look at this mess here. Greed. Pure greed. This is no way for a child of mine to act.”

Mueni stood dumbfounded trying to avoid eye contact with her mother. Stomachs churned, saliva knotted in their throats as their bodies groaned and crushed under the overwhelming weight of Mrs. Muttimos’ interminable rant.

Mrs. Muttimos’ gaze fell on Celia. “That is no way for any child for that matter to behave. You shame me you bring shame to your mamma’s name as well. Mueni, go and get me your Baba’s belt!”

Mueni looked sideways at her mother. She knew better than to resist as doing so would only add to her mother’s swelling fury. She scampered reluctantly towards her parent’s bedroom. Moments later, she emerged through the kitchen door trembling, her hands held out with her father’s belt dangling in between her thumb and index finger.

They cowered in fear. Their bodies jolted as Mrs. Muttimos’ hands grabbed the belt folding its buckle into a fist. The black leather tail end passed swiftly over their thin dark brown and pale pink skin. Long red welts formed on Celia’s legs. They both sat trembling, shoulders slumped, sobbing bitterly at the kitchen table.

Tears of shame welled up in Mrs. Muttimos’ eyes as she plopped down in the chair next

James (1999), in her article Mothering: A possible Feminist link to Social transformation, defines othermothering as acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal. (p. 45)
to them. Her heart slowed and sunk in her chest. She could not remember the last time she was this angry with Mueni.

* 

The Jones—Cynthia, Celia and Bill—lived next door the Muttimos’ in an odd-looking-baby-blue-painted detached house with a white picket fence and beautifully manicured lawn at number 9 Haisley Place. Despite being the smallest house on the block, it loomed over the uniformed rows of drab brown-bricked townhouses.

Mrs. Jones was very friendly and quick to talk. She was, unlike Mrs. Muttimos, a conservative Christian who did not smoke, drink, or curse. She prided herself in being a homemaker. Her very existence hinged on how useful she was as a wife to her husband. She spent much of her days while her husband was at work, weeding her yard, tending her roses, sunflowers and daffodils, or cleaning. Her predilection for gossiping about other folks in the neighbourhood kept her buzzing from one house to the next house of any woman who would spare time to listen to her talk about this one and the next one who she had heard did not have their household in order.

Mrs. Muttimos did not care much for gossiping. But since she was home most days and since Mrs. Jones was the only one in the neighbourhood who bothered to stop by and welcome them when they first moved in, she tolerated her and eventually took a liking to her. On the hottest of days, they would gather around the glass kitchen table while Mrs. Muttimos brewed her special Chai.
“Where did you buy that lovely dress Cynthia?”

“Oh at Sears, it was on sale. Half off.”

“Wow that’s a steal, it’s lovely!”

“I can take you there later today. They have them in different colours. And it will give me a reason to pop buy and pick up a pair of sandals I have been eyeing. You know the flats ones you sling on just for walks around the town.”

“Oh yeah. You mean flip flops right?”

“Yeah, those ones.”

They would chuckle and tease each other about whose retail addiction was worst and how they were going to find a cure for it.

On occasions, Mrs. Jones would take her daughter Celia with her to the Muttimos’. Since Mueni was new to Canada, had not started school and did not know anyone else, her and Celia became best of friends.

The Muttimos’ was an open house for the Jones’. Celia would play the entire day with Mueni, have dinner and watch television until it was time to go home. The two families became so close that before long, Celia was spending the weekends with the Muttimos’.

It was the end of summer—almost four months after the Muttimos’ moved to the neighbourhood—when Celia and Mueni went on their sweet shop rampage. Mrs. Jones came by
for her usual visit, only this time the conversation would not be about their husbands, children, or household items on sale in the Canadian Tire flyer. This time they had serious business to discuss—the thing that was on the lips of all the folks in the neighborhood: “Did you hear that Mrs. Muttimos spanked the Jones’ daughter?”

Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Muttimos sat across from each other in the kitchen staring in silence.

“Can I make you some Chai?” Mrs. Muttimos asked trying desperately to break the tension that lingered in the air. Before Mrs. Jones could answer, Mrs. Muttimos leapt up from her chair, moved towards the kitchen cupboards, rummaged through the dish drainer, slammed cupboard doors shut and banged pots and pans. Moments later, she propped her head up holding her special teapot.

Mrs. Muttimos was a chai tea connoisseur. She knew just the right amount of milk and water to add to yield the perfect flavour from the dried tea-leaves. Her hand moved with precision as she measured tea-leaves, placed them in the soon boiling milk and watched with transfixed eyes as the froth rose to the top of the uncovered tea-pot before quickly removing the blend from the heat just in time for the froth to fall instead of boiling over into the stove. Seconds later, she would place the pot back over the medium-high heat for a second rise and fall. She would repeat this a third time before adding a ground spice mixture of ginger, cinnamon, cardamon, cloves, black pepper, and nutmeg, followed by a careful pouring of the brew into white China tea-cups.
Eventually, her stirrings in the kitchen were drowned out by the awkward silence that hung like a dampened white cloth in the gloomy air.

“Sugar?”

Mrs. Jones nodded with indifference as she eyed the supple movements of Mrs. Muttimos’ hand dolloping sugar into her tea-cup.

Except for the sound of the stainless steel spoon scraping the bottom of their tea-cups, the air between them was damp and heavy. Quiet made Mrs. Muttimos uneasy. She finally gathered up the strength to intrude on the somber silence that filled the room.

“I don’t suppose you came here today to drink so you might as well say what’s on your mind.”

“Well, Celia came home with welts on her legs last night. Was that really necessary? Couldn’t you have called me over or spoken to me about the situation?”

“Look Cynthia, the girls went out with me to the store yesterday evening.” She paused and gasped for air before saying, “The whole ordeal was just so embarrassing. It was enough to see that store-owner looking at me with his nose turned up, talking down to me as if I were deaf or something, as if I didn’t understand what he was saying. Then he had the nerve to tell me flat out that I couldn’t control my children.” As she spoke, her face bore the scars of the previous day’s humiliation.

“I get that. I do. But there are other ways to discipline a child. Celia has never been

Within African communities, mothering is not necessarily based on biological ties. Established African philosophy suggests that children do not solely belong to their biological parents, but to the community at large. This philosophy and tradition inform what we refer to as “other-mothering” and “community mothering”. Significantly, even in the face of Western conceptions of mothering, which often view community-mothering practice as deviant and negligent, African understandings of mothering continue to thrive. Throughout the African Diaspora, Black women care for one another and one another’s children regardless of their cultural backgrounds. (Wane, 2000a, p. 112)
punished like that you know. Her father and I were very upset when she came home and told us last night.”

“Look here Cynthia,” Mrs. Muttimos hesitated before saying, “I understand why you are upset and I am sorry. But where I come from it’s perfectly okay to discipline children in this way. When Celia is in my care, she is my responsibility. I treat her the same way I treat my own child.”

Mrs. Jones’ now red with anger paused and inhaled before spluttering, “Well you are not back home anymore.” She plopped her tea-cup into its saucer spilling some of its contents as she

15 In Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life, Annette Lareau examines how individuals in social institutions selectively validate certain parenting practices as legitimate while designating (culturally determined) approaches such as belting unacceptable even as “spanking children was universally practiced in other historical periods” (Lareau, 2003, p. 230). In keeping with this critique motherhood theorist like Walkerdine and Lucy (1989), Ruddick (1989) and O’Reilly (2004c) provide two useful conceptual frameworks (namely sensitive and natural-intensive mothering) that helps us unpack why this occurs.

They tell us that sensitive mothering is the ideological viewpoint that emanates from a white middle class perspective and which holds that the child should always be front and centre of the mother’s domestic life, that there is no power struggle, overt regulation or insensitive sanctions that would shatter the child’s illusion that the mother is the source of all the child’s wishes (Walkerdine and Lucy, 1989, pp. 20-24). Similarly, O’Reilly drawing from Ruddick (1989) explains that within the ideology of natural-intensive mothering the defining belief is that good mothering entails selfless and unconditional love for one’s child/ren. “The ideology of natural-intensive mothering”, O’Reilly contends is “enacted in the patriarchal institution of motherhood [and] has become the official and only meaning of motherhood, marginalizing and rendering illegitimate alternative practices of mothering. In so doing, this normative discourse of mothering police’s all women’s mothering and results in the pathologizing of women who do not and can not practice intensive mothering.”(O’Reilly, 2004c, pp. 6-7).

Through both frameworks, we are able to see how individuals also partake in maintaining the ideology of sensitive and natural-intensive mothering, ultimately designating African women as m(others). Small wonder my co-participant (depicted as the character Mrs. Muttimos) displayed feelings of anxiety and confusion after this confrontation. The “fictional” character Mrs. Muttimos, now policed by the “gaze of others” (Ruddick, 1989, p. 111), begins to question what was for her an acceptable practice. Now under the microscope of Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Muttimos loses confidence in [her] own values” (O’Reilly, 2004c, p. 6) and culturally determined mothering practices.

Therefore, Mrs. Muttimos’ “failure to use reasoning and her adoption of a belt made her vulnerable, since she moved in a field that privileged reasoning. If she lived a century earlier [or in another geographical context], the use of a belt would not have been so problematic. [In this context], however, it carries a potentially catastrophic risk: ...she could be arrested for child abuse, and her [child] be put in foster care temporarily or permanently.” (Lareau, 2003, p. 229-230). Mrs. Jones’ expectation that Mrs. Muttimos use “other methods” such as reasoning (identified by Lareau as dominant cultural practices and standards of child rearing) to deal with the girls’ infraction is indicative of her un/conscious obeisance to the idea that the parenting styles of certain groups of people are always and already out of sync with dominant cultural practices.
raised from her chair. The jolt from her quick thrust sent the chair flying a short distance behind. The iron legs screeched against the wooden floor scratching it.

Mrs. Muttimos’ lips wrinkled in shock.

Mrs. Jones snatched her purse and folded it under her arms. Her voice erupted, “Next time, I would appreciate it if you would run it by me before taking it upon yourself to spank my child.” She started hurriedly toward the front door, turned back to Mrs. Muttimos and said, “if there ever is a next time.”

Mrs. Muttimos trudged over following shortly behind her. Standing by the door, she peered out through the opening at Mrs. Jones as she careened down the pathway, hopped across the dark green-carpeted lawn before disappearing inside her house.

Tears edged Mrs. Muttimos’ eyes. Confusion and shame teemed inside her.
Washday

It was just after sunrise, about 6:30 am, and my Stepmother was already up.

“Sweetie, wake up!” She yelled as she hurriedly entered my room. “We av nuff tings fi do before di sun go dung.”

She fussed and frowned as she peeled the white cotton curtains apart and opened the windows.

Bold streaks of sunlight forced their way through the curtains landing on my eyelids. I squeezed them shut. When that did not work, I covered my head with the blue blanket next to me.

“Wake up mi seh.” Mummy shook, prodded and poked my flesh before dragging the cover from over my head. I shuffled not wanting to get out of bed. I clawed my way from under the floral sheets, and climbed noisily out of bed knocking over the large goose figurine on the chest of drawers.

I planted my feet on the cold tiles.

“Ouch.”

I squirmed. The cold penetrated their bareness like icicles forcing them off the floor and up toward my chest. I sat curled up on the bed's edge with my chin resting on my drawn-up knees and my arms cradling my body.

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16 Translation: “We have alot to do before the sun goes down.”
17 Translation: “I said, wake up.”
I studied Mummy's movements as she floated around the room hurriedly, peeled curtains one by one, and removed them from the silver hooks holding firmly in place on the painted white steel rods.

My stepmother kept herself busy when something troubled her. She paused, momentarily, and gazed at my father leaving through the front gate for work. Suddenly, she brought herself back to the present. She managed to escaped her own musings but avoided eye contact with me when she said, “Mi already saat out di laundry in di bathroom. Wen yu done washing yu face and brushing yu teet, gada up yu panty dem and put dem ina di sun fi soak inna some soap wata, yu hear mi?”

She continued, “Likkle girls mus know how fi wash dem undawear.”

The words fell from her lips and lingered like a heavy brick on my head.

“You getting bigga now and nobody fi see weh inna di seat a yu panty dem.”

“Yes Mummy,” I nodded in embarrassment. I threw off the sheets, placed my feet on the cold tiles again and meandered down the hallway towards the bathroom door.

Today I would miss the smell of thin dirt mixed with water from making mud puddings. Julie, Clive—the son of my father’s friend who lived across the street—and I always played together. I especially loved playing house with them, but my cousin Julie, being older than I, always got to

Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which [we] come to view [ourselves] and [our] place in the universe. Values are the basis of a peoples’ identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a peoples’ experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next.

(Wa’Thiongo, 1989, p.15)

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18 Translation: "I already sorted the laundry in the bathroom. When you are finished washing your face and brushing your teeth, gather your panties and put them in the sun to soak in some soap water, do you hear me?"
19 Translation: "Little girls must know how to wash their underwear."
20 Translation: "You are getting older now and no one should see what is in the seat of your panties."
be the Mamma. Each day, her and Clive would sneak behind the bathroom stall in the old house while I pretended-to-be-baby-sleeping-in-my-crib, to play dugu dugu—at least that was what we called it since we did not have the words to describe what it was we knew grown ups did at night.

Our play was restricted to the old house outside the view of grown ups. As children, we knew well that this sort of play was forbidden. If caught, we would be severely punished. I learned very early that that kind of play gave me a sense of pleasure that in my child’s mind was incomprehensible. On occasions, I would hear Julie giggle excitedly behind the bathroom stall as Clive placed sweet kisses on her lips.

Sometimes I managed to sneak a peak through a hole in the side of the stall as Clive fiddled with the small tufts of hair on Julie’s privates. I delighted in observing Clive’s hands moving lasciviously up Julie’s skirt as he explored the dark narrow spaces of her body. In my pubescent fantasies, I wanted him to kiss me. Kiss me the way he kissed Julie. I’d watch as excitement collected inside me, and a pleasurable tingle surged through my body accompanied by the warm wetness that trickled into the seat of my panties. I thought to myself, “If this was what it was like being a grown up woman, I couldn’t wait to be grown up.”

Yesterday when Clive and Julie resurfaced from behind the bathroom stall, I fell out of my pretend play and confronted them.

21The word ‘dugu dugu’, meaning sex/sexual play, is derived from West African languages of the formerly enslaved peoples (Reynolds, 2006). It carries similar meanings to what is referred to as “the nasties” in the North American context. Even though we explored each others bodies as children, there was never any actual penetration. Because we were socialized to be chaste, little girls carried the added burden of ensuring that the boys did not go too far. Though this play was taboo to adults, it was very much a part of our informal learning about sexuality as Jamaican children. Generally speaking, adults were aware that this occurred. However, such explorations of one’s sexuality were discouraged and suppressed.
“How come yu always get fi play di Mamma and mi always a play di baby?”

“Well dats because mi olda dan yu,” Julie responded in a voice filled with authority. I let out a loud “stewwpss” before replying, “Who cares anyway. Wi jus pretending. Tomorrow mi waan fi be di Mamma, or mi a go tell Aunty and Mummy pon unu.”

With surprised eyebrows and nostrils flared, they reluctantly agreed. I walk away thrilled, forgetting that tomorrow would be Friday.

Friday is washday—an important ritual for Mummy and her friends. Soon my stepmother’s friends will gather in our yard, huddled over large plastic wash basins under the Ackee tree. It is the day for laughing, catching up on the week’s gossip and swapping stories. It is the day when the women fuss about all the things that annoyed them; the day when socks and panties get soaked in the high afternoon sun, shirts get starched and ironed and I am ushered into the cult of womanhood.

Daddy sent me to bed early last night. I sensed that something was wrong. Did they have another argument about the woman that harangued my stepmother each time she saw her on the street? Either I was too sound asleep or they did not erupt into their usual yelling and screaming. The only clue was Mummy’s distance that morning.

At noon the sun was dreadfully hot. I stooped down over a tiny pink washbasin Mummy bought at Coronation market for washing what she called my unmentionables.

Translation: “How come you always get to play the Mamma and I am always playing the baby?”
Translation: “Well that’s because I am older than you are.”
Translation: A sucking of the tongue between the teeth that produces a saliva filled hissing sound signifying contempt or reproach.
Translation: “That’s not fair. And who cares anyway. We are just pretending. Tomorrow I want to me the Mamma or I am going to tell Aunty and Mummy on the both of you.”
The heat blared down on the back of my neck and shoulders. The Ackee tree casted a shade that did not protect me from the sun’s unforgiving heat. I dipped my hands into the soapy water, fished out a bright green panty and squished it between my hands. They do not make that distinctive squishing sound that comes from my mother’s grown up hand washing. White lather from the “Blue bomma” soap swallowed my hands as I massaged the white paste into the seat of my panty. Its acrid fragrance irritated my nose.

I sneezed.

Pixley barked alerting us of an intruder’s presence. The latch on the front gate gave out a shrill squeak, screeching as it swung open.

“Weh Rose deh?” A woman called out in a thin angry voice.

“Do, mi a beg yuh come and get mi before yu mongrel dawg bite up mi foot dem.”

It was Judith—she was always the first to arrive.

“Go weh yu damn dawg.” Mummy yelled scooting Pixley. She picked up a stone and threw it when he refused to move. The stone connected, hitting Pixley on the back-side. He whimpered, howled, and scurried off to hide under my father’s old car parked in the middle of the front yard.

“Something is definitely wrong with Mummy today,” I thought to myself. “She loves that dog. I’ve never seen her do that before.”

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**Translation:** "Where’s Rose?"

**Translation:** "Please come and get me before your mongrel dog bites my feet."

**Translation:** "Go away you damn dog."
Whenever I tried in childhood to compel folks around me to do things differently, to look at the world differently, using theory as intervention, as a way of challenging the status quo, I was punished. I remember trying to explain at a very young age to Mama why I thought it was highly inappropriate for Daddy, this man who hardly spoke to me, to have the right to discipline me, to punish me physically with whippings. Her response was to suggest I was losing my mind and in need of more frequent punishment. (hooks, 1994, pp. 59-60)

“Him si mi every week an every week him bark at me. One a dees fine days dat daag gwine bite mi yu know,” Judith said worriedly.

“Nuh worry yu self, jus gwaan roun a back,” Mummy tried to reassure her that Pixley won’t bite.

Moments later, they both cornered the house. Judith leapt over the steps holding the tail end of her long airy yellow skirt as it ballooned out between her legs.

I gave her the customary greeting, “Good afternoon Aunty Judith.”

“Good afternoon likkle mis. Nice girl washing yu panties. Yu Mummy teaching yu well.” She smiled approvingly, walked over to the wash area and plopped down on a bench next to Mummy and the wash loads.

“Mi seh Judith, one piece a sinting in ya last night.” Mummy continued washing as she told Judith about the argument between her and my father the night before.

The washday rituals were less about washing and more about catharsis. One of the women told the others her story, each woman offered an opinion, contempt, or their interpretation of the details relayed. At times someone cried, other times someone cursed and exploded in a fit of fury. But mostly they dissolved in laughter over some juicy gossip. They did this for hours until all the wash loads had disappeared. After, they would return to their daily routine.

29Translation: "He sees me every week and every week he barks at me. One of these fine days that dog is going to bite me you know."
30Translation: "Don’t worry yourself. Just go on around the back."
31Translation: "Good afternoon, little Miss. Nice girl washing your panties. Your Mummy is teaching you well."
32Translation: "I am telling you Judith, there was one big thing in here last night."
It was all so confusing to me. I did not understand the point of all this especially in my stepmother’s case, and since I, unlike the other women, was privy to the going-ons in our house. Each time Mummy would go through this purging and nothing changed. The next day, she would labour over a hot stove making dinner, Daddy would come home late, intoxicated or too tired from his ‘night out’ to eat, they would argue and she would let it all out on wash day.

Frustrated and scared all the same time, I rose up from my basin and walked over to where Mummy stood, tugged at the end of her skirt, gasped for air before hearing the unthinkable words, “Why stay Mummy, why?” spill from my lips.

There were many improprieties I could commit as a child. This one ranked high on the list. I learned by watching my cousins being scolded or spanked for breaking the code that children were to be seen and not heard especially when adults were discussing ‘big people tings’.

My breathing became heavy and my heart pounded. I stood frozen anticipating a spanking, but instead Mummy replied, “Pig ax him mumma say, wha mek him mout’ long so; him say, ah no mine me pickney, dat something dat mek fe me long so, wi mek you long so too.”

Still stunned by my brazenness Mummy’s voice raised as she belted out, “Now go back and tend to yu washing before I lick you weh di sun don’t shine.”

Relieved, I walked back to my place.

33 Translation: “The pig says to its mother, “What makes your mouth so long?” She says, “Ah, never mind my child, the same thing that makes my mouth long will make yours long too.”

34 Translation: “Now go back and attend to your washing before I hit you where the sun doesn’t shine.”

35 This Jamaican saying has been interpreted in many ways. Anderson and Cundall (1910/1927) provide an aesthetic and literal interpretation which reads: “The young are apt to be astonished at the deformities of the old but later on they experience it themselves (p. 68).” The saying was also used as a pedagogical tool to hone in on the importance of experiential knowledge within Afro-indigenous cultures. Now, years later, as I reflect on this particular incident, I realize that my stepmother was trying to tell me that I would experience some of the joys and struggles that her and other women experienced in their relationships.
Stood over my washbasin I noticed a parade of black biting ants carrying specks of white bread crumbs back to a hole burrowed under the Ackee tree. I thought back to my stepmother’s sullen face, her eyes welled-up, and her incomprehensible words. I sat twirling soapsuds around my fingers—watching the ants march to their nest—trying, but failing, to make sense of it all.
CHAPTER THREE

Bright Eyes,
Brown Skin, Nappy Hair:
Epistemologies of Beauty
Bath Time: The Negation of Self
What kinds of people we become depends crucially on the stories we are nurtured on; which is why every sensible society takes pains to prepare its members for participation in its affairs by, among other things, teaching them the best and the most instructive from its inheritance of stories…. At the core of such stories are creation myths which give the members of society their identity and their historical anchor in the universe (Chinweizu, 1988, pp. xxviii-xxix).
[Mothers of African descent]...are considered “guardians of the generations”. [They] have historically been charged with the responsibility of providing education, social, and political awareness, in addition to unconditional love, nurturance, socialization, and values to their children...the socialization process that characterizes [their relationship with their children] is one which emphasizes resistance, survival, creativity and empowerment. Whilst struggling to deal with their own oppression, [their anguish] is most visible when they have to pass the torch on to their daughters, who are expected to become the...[guardians] of future generations (Bernard & Bernard, 1998, p. 47)
mama di pickney dem mean to mi today
tease mi call mi monkey today
seh dat mi ugly again today
mama I do not belong again today…
we niggers? we monkeys? we whores? we concubines?
we underprivileged? we disenfranchised? we poor? we
fresh off the boat? we refugees? we immigrants? we
homeless? we single parents? we welfare mamas?
…have we forgotten what it feels like to not belong?
(Anitaafrika, 2007, pp. 2-3)
During the plantation era the [Anancy] tales would be told after sunset when inanimate objects were believed to come to life. The telling of the tales was a form of communal bonding, a way of escaping the discordant reality of plantation life into a world where myth and magic, where real power relations were inverted and the weak could reign supreme (Marshall, 2001, p. 131).
Nuttin Weh Too Black Nuh Good

The playground gate swings open. Ma’at runs toward me. Radiating excitement, she soars into my arms and screams.

“Maaamee, Maaamee.”

Her tall slender body weighs heavily on my chest. I am winded. She tightens her grip, muzzles my neck with her tiny hands, and plants wet kisses all over my face.

The daycare teacher appears in the gateway donning a concerned look on her face.

Another recurring theme that resonated throughout our conversations on mothering and/or being mothered was internalized racism. Many of us shared stories about growing up wishing we had lighter skin and all the physical characteristics that we quickly learned garnered respectability and general acceptance. In a 1990 interview speaking to Bill Moyers, writer Toni Morrison explains these experiences through her conceptualization of what she calls the "Master Narrative". When Moyers tells her that he thinks that Pecola Breedlove (the main character in the The Bluest Eye) is one of the most pathetic characters he has met in modern literature Morrison explains: "She surrendered completely to the so-called "Master Narrative", the whole notion of what is ugliness what is worthlessness. She got it from her family, she got it from school, she got it from the movies; she got it from everywhere. The Master Narrative [is white male life]...is whatever ideological script that is being imposed by the people in authority on everybody else: That Master fiction...history. It has a certain point of view. So when these little girls see that the most prized gift they can get at Christmas is this little white doll, that's the Master Narrative speaking; this is beautiful, this is lovely, and you're not it, so what are you going to do about it? So if you surrender to that, as Pecola did (the little girl, that "I" of the story, is a bridge:[she] is ...so completely needful...she becomes the perfect victim."

In the context of our experiences, Morrison's statement is significant because the fictional character Pecola is a mirror of ourselves and the many little African girls who have and continue to be bombarded by this Master Narrative. In reviewing the transcripts, what I found striking was that these experiences (though manifested differently across our various stories) remained. This was so even for those of us who grew up in different parts of Africa and in parts of the Diaspora where majority dark skinned Africans lived. The parallels in our stories of internalized racism are significant in terms of reinforcing the existence of a larger story that tells of the unmoving nature of ideological whiteness. The narrative of the "superiority" of whiteness is so pervasive that it shows up even in our knowledge production through the Jamaican Anancy stories. My storied representations draw from, and are interpretations of segments of our shared memories as we dialogued about and reflected on how this master narrative has shaped our consciousness and the way we read the world.
“Maman, I have not good news for you today?” She says slowly trying to find her words. English is not her first language and her French accent makes it difficult for me to understand what she says. I stand panic struck at the entrance of the playground. Her hands beckon, pulling my eyes towards my daughter’s hair.

“How did this happen? Wasn’t anyone watching her? It could have been worst. It could have been her eyes.”

My anger grows more and more intense and I suddenly explode in fury. The daycare teacher tries to calm me down. She reminds me of how quickly a three-year-old moves and that accidents happen in seconds. I stand and listen, tears form in my eyes as she recounts the moments leading up to the event.

“Mummy look I’m a Princess see,” Ma’at says as she pats her hair trying to get my attention.

Still bilious I look down and fix my eyes on the spot in the front of her head.

“Honey, Mummy is not happy with you right now.”
That evening we walk home in silence. The stroller lurches down the road. I negotiate the cracks in pavement. The wheels trundle steadily, grinding and clacking against the sidewalk penetrating the silence.

* *

The smell of peppermint shampoo fills the air in the bathroom and soothes me. My anger is slowly replaced with sadness. As I lather shampoo into my daughter’s scalp, my thoughts retreat and I am returned to my childhood.

* *

I am seated on a metal bench in the middle of the schoolyard.

We play, we dance, we sing the call and response tune…

“Round and round the ring.

Yes Balinda.

Choose di bouy yu love.

Yes Balinda.

A big head bouy yuh love.

Yes Balinda.
A dry head bouy yuh love?” 37

Laughter rings out. I know next time not to choose the boy with tight dark rolls sprinkled like black pepper grains about his head. It didn’t matter that I really like him.

“Nutting weh too black neva good.” 38 39 I remember hearing folks say about women who were seen as unworthy. Undesirable. Untouchable.

I sit at the edge of the bathtub and gaze at the white ceramic tiles on the walls. For a few moments I am no longer there in the same room with my daughter.

* 

I am seated on floor in the living room nestled against my cousins’ shoulders. The light from the kerosene oil lamp flickers across the concrete walls and six pairs of eyes beam out through the dimly lit room. The wind whistles and howls. The mesh gate on the empty chicken coop swings opens and slams shut. We jump startled. My Aunty Suzie must have left it unlatched.

37 Translation: Around and around the ring. Yes Belinda. Choose the boy you love. Yes Belinda. Do you like boys with big heads? Yes Balinda. Do you like boys with dry hair? Yes Belinda.
38 Translation: Anything that is too black is never good.
39 In formerly colonized spaces such as Jamaica, populated with a large percentage of dark complected people of African descent, dark-skin is not considered the desired skin shade. Under plantation slavery and into the post-independence era there was a premium on lighter skin so much so that persons who were of African descent who possessed a lighter hue were thought to also have skin colour currency which simultaneously brought them closer to European standards of beauty. Because of this, lighter skinned Afro-Jamaicans (relative to their darker skinned counterparts) encountered fewer barriers in accessing employment in certain spaces. Lighter skin colour was a premium that afforded these individuals material benefits and social acceptance. As a child, this saying was repeated numerous times. It meant that a person with darker skin, who may very well possess moral characteristics, could never be seen as the paragon of virtue, goodness and acceptability. Charles (2009) tells us that in Jamaican society, dark skin is negated in various social institutions such as the home, church and school further reinforcing ideas that dark skin should be devalued and light skin should be elevated. This ideology has had a lasting impact in the contemporary context so much so that darker skin Africans internalized these hegemonic representations of beauty—ideas that are very much rooted in a colonial psyche—and have resorted to bleaching/lightening their skin with corrosive substances.
From where I am, I peek out through the window at the star shining brilliantly in the sky. Their glow splashes over my cousin’s face who is seated encircled by us on an old straw mat. He lets out ghostly sounds which are invariably followed by the words, “Once upon a time….”

“One upon a time dere was a gal livin in Jamaica an plenty of man did want fi married to har, but she nevah want no black nor noh dark nor noh brown man; she did a look fi yella skin man. Well, Brer Yella Snake hear bout har, an meck up him mine fi try him luck wid har. Soh one day him dress up himself an goh courtn har. As him kin did yella, she teck awn to him and before yuh could seh “keps” dems married…..”

“Once upon a time dere was a black lady an she had a pretty wite daughta. De lady was a widda, and her husban—wen him was livin—did name Jack, an him wife use to call him Jack-man.

So nung de way how de gal was pretty and wite, all gole teet ina him mout…Well the King hear bout dis pretty gal, an seh him hooda like fi get har fi married to…..”

As little boys and girls, we learned quickly to grab hold of that which was outside our African selves—that the only way to survive in this world was to renounce any traces of Blackness—to straighten, to lighten, to erase, to amputate—to cut off the ugliness, to make room for the things others saw as beautiful. It was in that moment, sitting there slumped over the bathtub that I came to realize that the self-loathing epithets I had internalized but managed to tuck away in my consciousness still marred my childhood memories. I go over and over them in my head.

40 Excerpt taken from Louise Bennet’s Anancy and Yella Snake (Benett, 1979, p. 38)
41 Excerpt taken from Louise Bennet’s Nancy and Dora (Benett, 1979, p. 46)
Ma’at’s singing of the ABC song interrupts my thoughts. Immersed in play, she splashes about and tosses water from her “Mega Blocks” toy over the side of the tub.

Seated on the edge of the bathtub, I caress her head. I am finally able to talk to her about what happened at daycare today.

“Why did you cut your hair today Ma’at?”

“Because, I want to be a Princess?”

“Really?” I pause for a moment to think before asking, “So what does a Princess look like honey?”

“She looks pretty and, and…,” she stutters before continuing. “And she has long hair and she wears pink like a ballerina in dresses.”

My heart sinks hopelessly. I awash in a sea of fear realizing that my daughter has formulated ideas of what a “beautiful girl” looks like. I know it is not the image I have presented to her—not what I envisaged she would gravitate towards. Slumped over the tub, I stroke the short dark patch where four tiny matted strands once hovered over her forehead. A world-wind of thoughts swirl through my mind.

What do I do? How do I make this right? Could she have cut her locks because she thinks it is not beautiful? Maybe her father was right.42

42 I find the word Princess (when used to refer to little girls) highly problematic. Not only does it carry patriarchal connotations wherein girls learn to conceive of themselves through dominant standards of femininity and beauty, it is also a class-informed notion that reinforces sub-personhood relative to those conceived of as more noble.

43 I thought it was important to lock Ma’at’s hair at a young age so as to cultivate in her an appreciation for her African kink. At the time, my daughter’s father cautioned me against doing so. He thought it would be better to wait until Ma’at was old enough to decide for herself arguing that she would better understand the implications of having dreadlocks at an older age. I disagreed as I thought it made more sense for her to see that representation of beauty as acceptable. This was particularly important for me given that she would see mirror images of this identity badge, this articulation of Africaness in both her parents as she grew older and became more self-conscious.
I carefully wrap a yellow bath towel around her. I hold her tightly in my arms and kiss her cheeks softly. Her limber head rests on my shoulder as I walk down the hallway towards the bedroom.

I rummage through her drawer and pull out her favourite strawberry printed pajamas, dress and tuck her under the duvet cover. As I hug my daughter in bed, the feminist mother in me wants to tell her that she is person—not a princess—first; that she is beautiful on the inside and out and that she can be or do anything she wants to. I hesitate. “It’s too soon,” I think. I worry that she may not understand what it is I am saying to her.

As I lie on my bed, I look out into the hallway at the hardwood floors. An ethereal glow escapes through a crack in the bathroom door. It spills out into the well of darkness and glides across the floors. I notice that water from Ma’at’s bathtub brawl has now settled onto the floors in the middle of the hallway.

“I’ll have to clean that mess up before I go to sleep,” I sigh.
In [their] scopic imagination, [their]...psyche is influenced by the wide nose, and red lips of little black sambo figures; of fetishized, artificial niggers on the backs of jam jars; the black mammies in film; ’black bottom’ dance titles; mammies painted on ornaments; Aunt Jemimas; golliwog dolls, and not least of all, the hideous thick-lipped, white-eyed-balled, negro ornaments called ’jolly nigger banks’ that hold out their hands to receive pennies. [Their knowing of the Black self] is a conflation of all these colonial white supremacist fragments, or thingification as Cesaire (1995) puts it. (Doyle-Wood, 2007, p. 28)

The Erace(ing): Trapped in a Pigmentory Prison

Kids shouted. Laughter rang out. Hands married, joined tightly forming a ring. Her eyes welled with tears. Her lips trembled. Rainey edged the circle of girls but there was no way out. The laughter roared louder.

Rainey sat in the dirt curled into a ball with her hands covering both ears.

“Touch her hair Lucy,” Sara urged.

Lucy smiled a mischievous smile before reaching in and yanking the once neatly tied ponytail prominently displayed like a crown on Rainey’s head. She ruffled her fingers through Rainey’s hair.

“Oh! It’s like a scotch-brite.” She paused for a moment, touched some more then continued chuckling, “More like a brillo pad.”

Rainey cried, kicked and screamed, “Leave me alone!” at the others standing by. It was useless. There were too many of them. The circle of girls closed in tighter around her.

Another girl reached in and yelled, “Wow isn’t that something, it’s soooo wild” eliciting peals of laughter as the others loomed menacingly over Rainey.

“How does she comb that thing?” Lucy asked puzzled.

“Forget about the hair. I wanna pinch her thighs, see if they’ll turn pink.”

“Yeah let’s pinch them. Let’s pinch the black off Aunt Jemima.”
One by one they all reached in and tugged at her legs. Their fingers burrowed into her flesh like blunt table knives.

Tears mixed with mucus caressed the sides of Rainey's cheeks, dribbled down her nose and into her mouth. The girls laughed themselves weak and chanted variants of, “Booger face, booger face, booger face,” over and over again.

Rainey looked up at the vast expanse of blue sky. Feathering clouds hovered motionlessly. She squinted her eye against the sun briefly. She wished a black hole would open up and take her into the ground.

Rainey charged again and again and again into their hands until she grew tired and collapsed to the ground. Moments later, she got back up. She tugged, ducked and dove under their hands for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, she found respite in the unclasped hands of a girl who—in efforts to hold her stomach so that she wouldn’t burst into stitches from laughter—left an opening in the circle.

She seized the opportunity to escape. She made one final charge through the opening in the circle, ran clumsily out the schoolyard, through the gate in the direction of her house.

* Running from the implications of our race or the damage of racism is like running on a treadmill, running in place to the point of exhaustion but not getting anywhere. (Boylorn, 2011, p. 179)

That night, as she sat in the bathtub she relived the pain, the confusion, the struggle of feeling trapped in the dungeon of her skin. She reached for the bar of soap and dragged it over the teeth of the wash brush. She scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed; the darkness remained.

A knock at the door startled her.

“Rainey you’ve been in the bath tub awful long. Are you ok?”
No response.

“Rainey can I come in?” her mother asked.

Silence.

The door creaked open. Her mother peeked in at her daughter seated in the bath with her head hung low between her legs. Suddenly, her attention is shifted away from Rainey. Her eyes drop like an anchor into the rose pink bath water. Chilled by the sight of raw flesh with dotted specks of blood, she could do nothing but widen her arms and embrace her daughter.

Pain. Heartbreak. Disappointment welled up inside her mother’s chest. Rainey had been at it again. She tried—but failed—to erase the grief.

The sadness.

The source of her alienation.

The darkness.

...As [she] look[s] upon me in my...state, [she] might see some sign of the racist fragments I have internalized.... (Doyle-Wood, 2007, p. 28)
Silky Straight

Two bottles of “Dixie Peach” shampoo and conditioner sit perched on the side of the sink next to a small glass container of “Dax” hair grease. I eye the big teeth comb. It is mid morning when Mummy summoned us to begin our bi-weekly hair ritual.

My sister would go first. Her hair is softer, easier to manage, and less tiring for Mummy. My sister’s father was of mixed ancestry so she was considered blessed to have jet black, silky soft hair with very loose curls. Even still, my mother decided that she would take all the work out by straightening it.

“Good hair” was what they said she had. I on the other hand had tight African kink with rolls that lined the back of my hair line, stubbornly resisting my mothers’ efforts to tease and tame them so they would lay flat like a new born baby’s hair.

I would watch enviously as my sister came walking out the back door, comb in hand, jumping down the stained red-oak steps, hair flowing in the wind. As she jumped, her hair bobbed up and down like a black silk handkerchief gently caressing her shoulder blades. Bent over by the waist at the cement casted sink, before water touched her head, her silky straight hair limbered.

Mummy applied the shampoo generously and effortlessly lathered in conditioner, passed her hand over the big teeth comb reserved for nappy hair like mine, and clutched the smaller fine
teeth comb made for combing lighter, straighter hair. As she combed through the conditioner, my sister did not wince. She did not let out a sound.

I hated when Mummy washed and combed my hair. I welled up with anxiety as I stood waiting, knowing that the experience would be more eventful, exhausting and painful for me. When my mother’s attempt at coaxing me toward the sink failed, she dragged me howling, kicking and screaming. With my head now under the running tap, she struggled to keep me still.

The moments in between each round of shampooing brought momentary relief. Each time Mummy paused to dab more of the creamy yellow peach fragranced liquid into her palms I managed to wiggle free—temporarily. I shivered as the cold water stabbed the nape of my neck and travelled down the back of my dress.

I screamed. Tears streamed down my face. I flinched each time the big teeth comb scraped my already tender scalp and Mummy sectioned, softened and separated the knots in my hair with the conditioner.

“Hold still unda di pipe nuh,” I would hear her yammer on and on. “Mi nuh know why yuh fada nuh just straighten yuh hair and mek it more manageable.”

Slumped over the sink, I cringed squeezing my eyes shut to dissipate the pain wishing the nightmare would be over.

Hours later, Mummy would let out a sigh and collapse in fatigue. My scalp would be red, sore and pulsating from Mummy’s tugging, pulling and parting. I would emerge with hair

44 Translation: "Hold still under the tap."
45 Translation: "I don’t know why your father doesn’t just straighten your hair and make it more manageable."
sectioned into large plaits or Bantu knots—what Jamaicans called Chiny bumps—neck and scalp swimming in hair grease looking somewhat presentable.

I rose up from between my mother’s legs, wiped my face, gathered the end of her skirt in my hands before asking, “Mummy, yuh can cream mi hair mek it nice and straight like Terry own please?”

I looked up at her face with apprehension. Mummy’s eyes emanated a puzzling sadness. I quickly lowered my eyes towards my feet. I waited, hoping for a favourable response.

Two weeks later Mummy prepared my scalp with hair grease. I had been scratching and picking at it all week, forgetting that the chemicals in it would deliver sharp stings leaving behind a painful soreness that paled in comparison to the sharp big teeth comb.

“Beauty feels no pain,” my mother would say as a biting twinge singed at my scalp. I didn’t flinch. Not once. I sat and endured beauty’s inexorable pain. It was a small price to pay to be free of my naps.

“Just right,” I thought to myself as Mummy based my hair scalp, “Just right.” Like my sister, I would finally have the soft, silky straight hair I had always wanted.

*Translation: “Mummy, can you please perm my hair so that it can be nice and straight like Terry’s?”*
CHAPTER FOUR

The M(other) in the Mirror
Anancy and Survival
Stories are particularly effective methods for talking about issues of race [and other forms of social marginalization] because they invite multiple reactions and responses. Through openness of the stories the reader is able to initiate conversations [thus]… allowing stories to emerge as a way of acknowledging [these] issues and responding to them (Boylorn, 2011, p. 62).
Motherwork is a political enterprise that assumes as its central aim the empowerment of children…mothers’ raising [African] children in a racist society instruct them in how to protect themselves…. The focus of [African] motherhood, in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower [African] children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them (O’Reilly, 2004, pp. 1-4).
we fighting for the right to devovah powah…
and this bedroom/this kitchen/
this bathroom [becomes]
a model plantation
(Anitaafrika, 2007, pp. 2-3)
[Anancy] and other resistance figures inspired slaves and runaways in their struggle for freedom. Through song, music, dance and folktales they preserved their humanity and their heritage, challenged the systems of their oppression and kept alive their belief that one day they could be free. On a practical level, through these cultural forms they learnt how to fight back within the confines of the slave system. Stick-fighting dances trained them for combat, songs and drums communicated defiant secret messages and the [Anancy] folktales illustrated the tactics of survival in the face of oppression. Yes, the irrepressible Brer [Anancy] is alive and well in Jamaica, prowling the bush and reminding us all that 'cunning betta than strong' (Marshall, 2007, n.p).
Im/polite Violence

Thursday is for me the longest day of the week. I wake up at 6:00 a.m., prepare breakfast, get Ma’at ready and off to daycare before returning home with just enough time to complete assignments for my creative writing class and skim readings for afternoon undergraduate tutorials. Moments later I am dressed and out the door.

Tonight is a night unlike any other Thursday night. I am exhausted and relieved the day is over. I wait in line at the front of the class facing the professor’s desk. The ubiquitous emblem of the ivory tower—the blackboard—bears the chalking of today's writing lecture on “Parallelism”. On the professor’s desk sits stacks of papers, an olive green textbook, two smaller white course books, and a dark green file folder stuffed with our recently submitted writing exercises.

A woman leans over and scribbles on a piece of paper strewn across the desk. Students talk, pack away their books, folders, laptops, and head towards the door. The desks and chairs once neatly arranged in a horseshoe fashion are now in disarray. I am next in line.

Commenting on the symbolic significance of trickster figures in Afro-Caribbean folk tales, Daryl Dance notes that, “Anancy is generally a figure of admiration whose cunning and scheming nature reflects the indirection and subtleties necessary for survival and occasional victory of the Black man in a racist [and colonial] society (Dance, 1985:12 cited in Pedrail, 2007). As in the story Anancy and the Cowitch Patch, the African mothers in this storied chapter serve as “resistant subjects” (Pedraill, 2007, p. 175 citing Donnel, 1999), that like Anancy utilize direct and indirect means to subvert (albeit temporarily) the dominant order. Other scholars have described this as an Anancy syndrome: a condition in which the marginalized enacts coded strategies of survival becomming skilled at trickery, deceit, manipulation and craftiness in order to survive the conditions of oppression. Anancyism therefor, is seen as a condition born out of the experience of marginalization and oppression which the oppressed uses to survive (Marshall, 2001 citing Barret, 1976).
I felt a ‘killing’ rage. I wanted to stab him softly, to shoot him with the gun I wished I had in my purse. And as I watched his pain, I would say to him tenderly ‘racism hurts’. With no outlet, my rage turned to overwhelming grief and I began to weep, covering my face with my hand. (hooks, 1995, p. 11)

My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waist, for most of my life. Once I did in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also (Lorde, 1997, p. 99).

I check the time on my cell phone. It’s 8:20 p.m. “Good,” I think. “If I ask my question quickly I should make it home in time to relieve Katie, the baby sitter, at 8:30.”

Suddenly, two white students—a man and a woman—approach and barge in on the queue as I stand waiting for my turn. I am swept up in a familiar cloud of nothingness, taken by an all too familiar feeling of being present but not really existing.

I gasp. I feel air rush into my nostrils filling my lungs. I hold my stomach taut trying to think of ways to contain the liquid hot anger that courses through my veins emptying out into my cavernous organs.

I think to myself, “They must not have seen me. But how is that possible? I’m standing right in front of them. I know I am only 105 lbs but my 5 feet 6 inches of height should make up for what I lack in body mass.” I decide to say something even as I know and fear that any response to the blatant disrespect I am experiencing will only reify the pathology of untamed Black rage.48

“Hello?” I roll my eyes and wave trying to get their attention. “Am I invisible?” I ask out loud.

I catch the woman looking at me. For a quick second our eyes are entangled in each others’. She peels her gaze away and brings them back towards the professor.

48 Johal (2005) in critiquing the white supremacist pathologization of the rage articulated by people of colour, tells us how black rage has historically been used to describe the potential dynamite that is the black underclass (p. 270). Citing Harris, (1997) who reconceptualizes rage through an anti-oppressive framework, he describes it as “the rage of the oppressed ...cultivated in an oppressive environment” (p. 273). Building on hooks’ (1995) earlier arguments, Johal challenges us to move beyond this pathologized common sense understanding of black rage. Like hooks, he calls for the need to recognize the positive, constructive and healing potentialities of black rage as well as how rage can be used to activate agency, power and resistance on the part of the oppressed. Extending hooks’ ideas, Johal further contends that black rage, could become a pedagogical tool or a discursive/analytical framework for working towards social justice.
The man ignores me and continues to speak. I stand thick with anger, I listen and I wait some more. The rage continues to build up inside me rushing through me with such profusion as though a kettle filled with water had reached its boiling point inside me, its contents desperately searching for an escape route.

“This is unbelievable!” I say screaming quietly on the inside. “Being the cool, civil, collected Black woman gets you nowhere. Maybe I’ll go ‘Tryone’ on them, see how they like that.”

“If I yell loud enough, or knock them the fuck out, maybe then they will feel the pain and humiliation I feel right now,” I think to myself.

The man grins faintly and uses his body to block the space between the professor and myself.

“So Jean,” he says, “Do you think you would be interested in doing an independent study with me over the summer?”

The professor responds, “Sure I would, I’ve done this with students in the past. We can talk more about that at a later date.”

“Are you joking? That was what was so urgent that he needed to butt in.”

I look at my cell phone. It is now 8:24 p.m. I will not make it home for 8:30.

Pleased with the response he receives, he gloats and saunters toward the door waiting for his friend.

An awkward pause ensues. I wait to see if the woman realizes what is happening and allows me to go next. She does not. She smiles a thin smile, asks her question, throwing her head back as she speaks. Which each toss of her head her brown hair dances and sparkles under the
halogen light suspended from the ceiling. Together, they walk out of the room with purposeful swiftness.

“Hey Adwoa, how are you?” Professor Jean asks.

“I’m ok.” I hesitate a bit. I want to say how I am really feeling but I am afraid the professor will receive me as the “stereotypical angry Black woman”. Large tears brim my eyes. I hold them back.

“Crying is for weaklings. You’ll never survive crying in this country,” I remember my mother telling me.

“You don’t let them see how much they hurt you,” I hear her say as I stand before the professor trying to find my words. “I had to fight, to scream to be heard, to be angry sometimes and so will you.”

Suddenly, I hear the words “I’m so angry right now” roll off my tongue like a pair of marbles onto the professor’s ear.

My voice cracks, “You are invisible even when you are a visible.” The blank look in his eyes tells me he is not sure how to respond to what he is hearing. I try to tell him what just happened. He says he’s sorry.

∗

Carl and I walk home from class every Thursday. On the way home, I relay the experience to him. He doesn’t see the violence of racism. He doesn’t understand the pain I feel.

“It’s just plain rudeness,” he says.
For people of colour, Black women in particular, these ‘race reflections’ can be problematic because of the munificent myths that surround Black womanhood, including representations of Black women as inferior, unshakeable, nonfeminine, criminal, promiscuous, and strong and controlling images that label Black women as mammies, matriarchs, Black ladies, welfare mothers, and jezebels. Because of these limited representations, which are race specific, my stories and my studies do not exist without the critical treatment of race. As a Black woman researcher, any representations I write about Black women are ultimately representations about myself. (Boylorn, 2011, p. 179)

His words do not offer solace only more pain. I’m sure he thinks that I am making something out of nothing—that I’ve lost my mind.

“This is how it supposed to play out,” I remind myself as he continues to speak.

It is one of those bone chilling, cold, winter nights. The wind envelops my neck. I shudder, wrap my scarf tightly and pull the hood of my dark green parka jacket over my head. I look up and notice the stars are out. A tiny snowflake falls and lands in my eye. I squint. The warm embrace of my eyelid melts the icy particle. It dissolves.

I need some quiet right now. Carl talks on. I no longer hear much of what he says. I gaze down for a moment. My eyes are drawn to the swift movement of my feet pulling along the snow-carpeted sidewalk. Each step leaves my footprint etched in the snow.

At Bloor and Avenue Road I suggest we take the short cut behind the Puma store. Moments later we enter the lobby of our building.

Carl yammers. I hear him try to analyze what happened through the prism of rudeness. I roll my eyes furtively. My thoughts take me away from his droning. I reflect on the culture of whiteness and the ways in which it manifests in sometimes in insidious ways that render its violence unidentifiable. Maybe Carl is right. Maybe I am crazy to think two white students socialized into the culture of whiteness, who learnt to occupy space, to freely walk in and out

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49 Villaverde (2000) defines whiteness as “a systemic ideological apparatus that is used to normalize civility, instill rationality, erase emotion, erase difference, impose middle-class values and beliefs with an assumption of a heterosexual matrix” (p. 46). In its ideological manifestation and as it relates to peoples of African descent, whiteness is a social system that promulgates the idea that Africans and bodies racialized as Black are insignificant objects and immoral beings lacking agency. This has been the basis and justification behind forms of (neo) colonial violence. The notion of whiteness functions systemically as a racist idea whose premise is that Europeans, our “intellectual superiors” are solely responsible for important and noteworthy economic, social, scientific and political developments within the human family.
Once upon a time, a man had a big pasture of land filled with cowitch. He tried and tried but he couldn’t find anybody brave enough to clear the land because everybody in the neighbourhood was also afraid of the cowitch. So the man sent out a message with a reward. He said that anybody who managed to clear the land would win five golden cows. Well Anancy heard about the golden cows and he was very excited. He wanted the five golden cows but just like everybody else, he was afraid of cowitch. Anancy went to the man’s house and said to him: “Me, me Anancy, me can chop out the cowitch because me nuh fraid a cowitch.”

So the man said: “Alright Anancy, mi a go gi yuh a chance.”

But what him do, di man get one watch man fi go up inna one tall tall tree and watch Anancy. And him tell di man seh if Anancy scratch even one time, him naah go get the five golden cows.
So Anancy went to clear the land. As he started to chop, pieces of the cowitch leaves started to fly all about him. One piece flew and landed right on his forehead. Anancy wanted to scratch his forehead so badly but he had to find a way so that the watch man couldn’t see him. So he called out to the watchman: “Ummm, Mr. Watchman, the cows that the man will give me, do any of them have a spot right here?” He reached to his forehead and rubbed the itchy spot.

The watchman said: “No no no, none of the cows have any spots there.” “Alright.”

Anancy went and as him start to chop di cowitch start to fly. So the fus piece a cowitch fly and clap him so bups right pon him forehead. Anancy waan fi scratch but him nuh waan di watch man fi see him scratch so hear Anancy wid him smart self to di watch man: “Ammm, Mr. Watchman, di cow dem dat the man a go gi me, one a di cow dem have on spot ya suh?” And him rub him foreheard.

Di man seh: “No no, di cow nuh have no spot deh so.”

“Alright.”

Anancy gwaan and him start chop out again and anada piece a cowitch go so bups and catch him pon him knee. Him knee a scratch him but Anancy caan scratch mek di watch man see. So Anancy wuk him brain again.

So Anancy ask di watchman: “Ammm, di cow dem weh di Man a go gimme, di cow dem have one spot right ya suh pon dem knee?”

Di man seh: “No, no di cow dem no have no spat pot dem knee.”

So Anancy gwaan chop again and di cowitch go suh pubs and catch him pon him back. And Anancy seh: “Amm, yuh sure seh di cow dem nuh have one likkle spot right here suh pon dem back

Di man seh: “No, no.”

Anancy seh: “What about right yah so pon da side yah.” Him scratch anada side a him back.

Di man seh: “No, no. Di cow dem nuh have no spot. Di cow dem clean, clean dem nuh have no spot. Den suppose one day dem walking and dem get one cut right yah so,” and him scratch him head, or “right yah so”, and him scratch him shoulda.
And so Anancy spent the whole day chopping and scratching and asking the question, “do they have something right yah so, dem have something right deh so.” As him touch him bady him jus a scratch. Wen evening come, Anancy chop out di whole pasture land. An di man couldn’t believe it cuz him seh everybody who come yah spend di whole day a scratch.

So him seh to the watchman: “Yuh sure she Anancy neva scratch?”

Di watchman seh: “No, no massa: Anancy neva scratch at all.”

_An a suh Anancy chop out he whole pasture lan a cowitch and Anancy get the man five golden cow._

Lying in bed that night, lulling Ma’at to sleep, I struggle to erase the earlier events out of my head. “Am I invisible?” I hear myself say again, and again and again as I pat my daughter’s back. As I sing to her, my eyes fill with tears. They roll down my cheeks and onto my pillow.

Ma’at rolls over onto her side. She sees I am crying. “Don’t cry Mummy,” she says. “You want a smoothie?” she asks. I give her smoothies to cheer her up when she cries.

I manage to smile through the tears before saying, my voice soft, “No baby, Mummy will be Okay. We’ll both be Okay.” I feel like I lie to her. I reach over to the chest of drawers and flick the lamp switch off.

_I did listen to my rage, allow it to motivate me to take pen in hand and write in the heat of the moment. At the end of the day, as I considered why it had been so full of racial incidents, of racist harassment, I thought they served as harsh reminders compelling me to take a stand, speak out, choose whether I will be complicit or resist._ (hooks, 1995, p. 19)
Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation. Members of outgroups can use stories in two basic ways: first, as a means of psychic self-preservation; and, second, as means of lessening their own subordination. These two means correspond to the two perspectives from which a story can be viewed—that of the teller, and that of the listener. The storyteller gains psychically, the listener morally and epistemologically. (Delgado, 1989, p. 2437)

Bending Gender

The sound of the school bus pulling up to the curb brought Sophia out of her writing. She rose to her feet, moved hurriedly toward the kitchen window, and peered out at the snow-covered ground. She noticed a distant patch of grass once carefully planted near the pavement now struggling defiantly under the weight of ice and snow.

The yellow and black school bus stopped. The door flung open. Ziggy scurried down the steps of the bus and zipped up the asphalted driveway. The tattered storm door screeched open then banged shut.

“Ziggy!” she called out in a shrill voice. “How many times must I tell you to hold the storm door when you enter the house?” She paused for a moment looking at him before saying, “And why do you have to run up the pathway like that? You could slip and fall on some black ice and crack your skull open. Then who do you think is going to sit all day on a bench at Sick Kids hospital with you?”

“Sorry Mamma,” he said chuckling faintly, his teeth glistening as a mischievous smile stretched across his chocolate brown-complexion face. “And Mamma, don’t worry you won’t have to go to the hospital with me,” he added as he slowly removed his winter coat, peeled off his grey hat, black scarf and brown wool mittens.

“You know, pretty soon we won’t have anything left of that storm door.” From the doorway of the kitchen, the sun’s phosphorescent glow bounced off her six feet frame casting a shadow that hovered about him where he stood undressing.
“That snow is going to come barreling in through that door right on top of us,” she beamed broadly, looking out at him with devoted eyes.

He finished undressing and swiftly whirled down the hallway in the direction of the kitchen where she stood. Leaning in toward her his still cold hands enveloped her with a chilled embrace. They shared a faint smile.

“How was school today?” she asked.

“Good.” he responded flatly. He looked away, walked in the direction of the kitchen table, swung his backpack from his left shoulders, slung it over the arm of a chair before propping his bottom sideways over the same arm.

“Z,” she said pleadingly, “Please don’t weigh down the chair’s arm like that.”

“Sorry Mamma.”

“How about I make you a snack?” Without waiting for him to answer, she scurried towards the refrigerator, pulled out a bright blue milk box, then reached into the cupboard for a saucepan, his favourite purple mug and a teacup. Her hands moved rhythmically as she poured the milk, added a spoon of cocoa powder, some honey and cinnamon sticks into the pan. She paced casually back and forth from the fridge, to the stove, to the kitchen table where he sat, then back again to the stove where she eyed the liquid slowly simmering in the pot.

She stopped suddenly, in a firm voice she said, “Okay you know the drill, get out your homework.”

He looked up at her and wrinkled his face. “Awww Mamma, can I just watch a little TV first,” he pleaded.
“No Z. Finish your snack then homework, then you can watch TV.” She continued. “I’ll look at the homework assignment while you eat.”

The kitchen filled with the light of the afternoon's sun. Sophia leaned with her elbows pressed against the counter where she stood waiting for the milk to boil. Her eyes moved from the stainless steel pan on the stovetop, to the kitchen table, to the plate where moments before she had neatly layered and plated a tuna sandwich before him. She watched as he toyed with his sandwich, twirling bits of bread between his fingers, examining them from different angles pinching off edges of brown crust.

As he ate, he removed his books, a blue agenda and a yellow slip of paper from his backpack and placed them on the table.

“Finish that sandwich. You know we don’t waste food in this house,” she said commandingly.

He leered at her then replied in a voice filled with annoyance, “Yes Mamma.”

“Boy fix your face,” she said spooning out hummus onto the plate before him. She glanced over at the papers scattered on the table and caught a glimpse of a familiar sheet of paper beneath the small pile of books.

"What's that?" she asked, her hand pointing to the table where his books lay spread out.

“Permission slip for a school trip,” he replied in an even tone.

“Another trip?” she asked incredulously drying her hands with a towel. She extended one arm across the table and picked up the yellow paper. She scrutinized the paper, twirling it around with her face scrunched up. She began scanning it. Her eyes moved swiftly down the page. She
continued, “Didn't I just sign one of these the other day?”

“Yeah but this is a different trip Mamma. Mrs. Saunderson says this one is…”

“Yes, yes I know. Mrs. Saunderson always says this one or that one is important. They all seem to be.”

“It's a bus tour of the city of Toronto. We're going to the Native Canadian Centre and then we spend the whole day riding one of those double decker buses,” he said moving about excitedly in his chair.

Sophia’s eyes stopped abruptly at the bottom of the page. Her face grew tense.

“Fifty dollars this time!” she exclaimed. “These teachers are about to send me to the poorhouse with all these trips. Do they think I have a money tree in my house?” She raised her head as she finished reading, turned her glance toward him and said in a changed tone, “A tour of Toronto from an indigenous perspective. I suppose this is important after all. Even more so than all the other ones they’ve been sending here.” She placed the cup of hot chocolate on the table and settled down in the chair across from him.

“Thanks Mamma.”

She nodded, “You're welcome honey.”

He quickly clasped his hands about the mug before raising it to his head. He gave out loud slurping sounds.

She beamed as she sat staring at him. She caught periodic glimpses of a look of delight on his face as he lifted and lowered his mug.

He was ten years old when he asked her, “Mamma why do you …” he hesitated for a bit
before finishing with, “… look like a boy?”

She paused, flustered for a moment, her dazed glance falling on her son. The stillness of the room left them frozen in time. They held each other’s eyes for what felt like an eternity. His words weighed heavy on her. She lowered her eyes trying to hide the sharp stab of sadness she felt in that moment. She looked up again, reached out and moved her hand gently across his forehead. Her lips contracted tightly closing over her teeth before her mouth gaped open. She uttered calmly and softly, “We are all different Z. That’s the beauty about being an individual.”

He beamed his approval. The luminous sparkle of his dark brown eyes as he looked up at her filled her with hope.

She smiled a radiant smile.

* *

Hours later as they sat on the carpet in the living room watching TV he asked her if she could paint his nails.

“Sure,” she said. “Go get the nail polish from the bathroom cabinet. I’ll do them up nicely for you.”

Stories are the oldest, most primordial in human experience. Their allure will often provide the most effective means of resisting otherness, of forming new collectivity based on shared story. (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436)

Here we see a resistance manifested in Ziggy’s mother’s direct challenging of the dominant status quo ideas around male/female identification. Her presenting an alternative vision of dominant gender dichotomies to Ziggy, lends to a subversion of the Master Narrative (read: the hegemonic constructions of femininity and masculinity) that she realizes has now influenced his consciousness. Embedded in this mother’s maternal practice is the potentiality for an informal teaching and learning guided by a fluid and purposeful philosophical outlook on gender. Even as we can admire her mothering against heterosexist and heteronormative cultural standards, we are reminded by O’Reilly (2006) however that there is a danger in raising our children to be feminist and to be boundary challengers. While Ziggy’s mother teaches him to embrace what is socially constructed as “feminine qualities”, and she herself embodies a model that rejects dominant society’s patriarchal and gendered dichotomies, mothers like her have to live with the “fear of alienating a male child from [this very patriarchal] culture” (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 5 citing Rich).
She lay on her back with her arm stretched out at her side, her head propped up on a green cushion that had fallen from the couch. She looked off pleasingly as he danced across the living room, down the hallway eventually disappearing into the small bathroom. As she lay sprawled out on the carpeted floor, she thought of the question he had asked. She waited for him to return.
Killing Me Softly

I sat on the floor beside the oversized windows with my legs crossed scanning my trove of high school photographs. As I gazed out at the expanse of blue sky, the deceptive sunlight shining through the windows beckoned to me. I do not submit. Having lived here long enough I know better. Even as the sun’s scattered beams caressed my face and warmed my shoulders, I know that it is freezing outside.

I thought back to the summer of 1998—the year I turned 15. It was the year I graduated from Wolmers’ High School for Girls; the year my father received the news that my long awaited papers being filed by Mummy through Citizenship and Immigration Canada had been approved; the year I said goodbye to my Island home and boarded a plane for what was to become my new home, Toronto.

Seated on the floor of the apartment I saw my first day at Weston Collegiate Institute. Mummy and I sat between two girls on a row of benches outside the guidance counselor’s office. A man, in his late sixties perhaps, face blemished by age lines with thin hair stretched pasted across his balding forehead appeared in the hallway. His cherry pink, thin lips parted in a smile that inched wider and wider across his ghostly pale face. He scanned a piece of paper attached to a clipboard in his hand, looked out into the hallway through brilliant blue doe-eyes that glistened through his rounded spectacles before calling out in and unexpectedly harsh raspy voice, “Williamson you can come in now.”
As he walked down the hallway in front of us, his uneven gait drew my attention. He hobbled on one foot dragging the other closely behind him. He led us into his office, closed the door, shook my mothers’ hand, introduced himself (Mr. Albanese was his name) before sitting in a big armed, dark brown leather chair that swallowed his slender frame. Except for the mahogany stained desk intruding on the space between the guidance counselor and us, the office had very little furniture. Even still, the atmosphere inside the dimly lit room weighed heavy.

Off to one side of the desk in a corner stood a vintage coat hanger embossed with ornate vines and flowers meticulously crafted onto a wrought-iron rod. The vines danced around the pole eventually spilling out into an open claw at the top where a felt hat sat comfortably.

On the opposite side, stood a filing cabinet that also doubled as a shelf. On the shelf sat a lamp whose depressing glow flickered into the small space gradually dying as it landed onto the bare off-white walls. I gazed at the odd looking large yellow shade meticulously painted with pictures of horses running in an open field.

He opened his mouth to speak. His words poured with such profusion they surged through the yawning gap that was his mouth, spilled over his crooked yellow teeth before leaping and landing onto my mother and I. As he spoke, the flesh separating Mummy’s freshly plucked eyebrows furled into ripples. They remained unyielding as he continued to speak. My mother, now overwhelmed by the volley of words—words she knew nothing about—offered up the only response she could, her still furrowed brow.

I sat quietly scribbling notes in my notepad. Leaning forward on the edge of my chair, I
glanced at the pile of papers he stacked before Mummy.

She looked away surreptitiously. Reaching down deep into her large patent leather handbag, I could see her greedy air brushed acrylic nails claw through loose change, compact, wallet and a pair of scissors—my mother always carried a pair of scissors in her purse—before making their way to an opening in the side of the purse. Her hand surfaced, clutching a zip lock bag filled with report cards from my old high school, transcripts, immunization cards and immigration papers. She placed the bag on the desk before him.

His eyes darted away from the package towards Mummy’s face. He continued to tell her what courses I should enroll in, quickly mulling over the difference between basic and advance level courses. Mr. Albanese’s words rained on Mummy trickling down like water running off a duck’s back.

“Mrs. Williamson,” then pausing and clearing his throat before continuing, “Hmm, hmmm, it is Mrs. is it?” Mummy nodded, looked at him with disdain knowing that the question he really wanted to ask was, “Are you married?” He continued to speak. Mummy listened intently trying

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...To rationalize slavery and the treatment of Africans as inherently less worthy than Europeans, natural scientists classified people descended from northern European “race” with superior reason and the people descended from Africans as an inferior “race” fit only for labour and subordination... These notions persist today... In contemporary [North] America, it is difficult to think about racial groups without thinking about them as unequally intelligent. Being brought up white typically involves learning to believe that we are smarter than those who are not white; being brought up non-white often means battling the fear that perhaps we will be judged less intelligent than those who are white...educators reactivate this cruel programming every time we imagine, even for a fleeting second, that students' physical appearance signals anything at all about their brain power. (Pollack, 2008, pp. 9-10)

...In this moment, my mother’s silence may be interpreted as her surrendering or conceding to the master narrative that is white supremacy. However, when viewed through a different lens within a racialized context, the Jamaican saying “you play fool fi ketch wise” (that is, you resort to Anancyism: pretend to be foolish to trip up those who are perceived to be, and who think of themselves as wiser and stronger) rings true. Prior to this, I had witnessed my my mother having to deal with social services and other state agents. In those encounters my mother was very vocal in vehemently rejecting the dominant scriptings of her body and the over policing of her mothering practices. Hence, I was quite taken aback and disappointed by her silence here. Reflecting on this event years later, I have learnt that silent or non-verbal rage is also an expression of resistance (Boylorn, 2011). When interpreted through the prism of the Anancy trickster figure, I now see that her body posture, her furrowed eyebrow and her silence spoke very loudly as a camouflaged resistance (Pedraill, 2007, p. 175). I now see this as her way of coping with and navigating whiteness and its attendant scriptings of her body as simply an unwed, unintelligent Black mother. Rather than verbalize her rage in this encounter with the guidance counsellor, I have interpreted this as her choosing to use another tactic which she perhaps thought would help her preserve energy and mental health to fight other battles. Until recently, I had not imagine that there were other mechanisms that I could avail myself of in this fight that my mother once cautioned me I would have to engage in to survive in Canada.
to digest his word. He continued, “I recommend that she take all the basic courses to start just so she could get used to the system.”

He stopped talking. I managed to squeeze a few words in.

“I don’t want to do basic level courses, I can do the advance ones.”

He sat motionless staring at me. His pale face suddenly looked feverish. I leered back at him defiantly.

“You speak English very well,” he said in an incredulous tone.

I wanted to respond with, “The British colonial lackeys in Jamaican schools spent years shoving English down my throat from the moment I started kindergarten. Of course I speak English!” I wanted to let out a scream of protest. A violent fury welled up inside me emboldening me to say in a still petulant voice, “Yes, of course I do. And I will do just fine taking the advance level courses.” I heard my Jamaican accented English weave its way through my words quickly filling the small room.

I shrugged in contemptuous reproach lifting the zip lock bag from his desk before handing it back to Mummy. His recently spoken words rolled around like marbles in my head. I sat and stared off into the grim distance thinking: a man who assumed without knowing anything or caring to know anything about me, who thought I was intellectually inferior was deciding my future. That day, I left the office bereft of hope of surviving in that school. By the time I walked through the glass doors of his office, down the freshly polished corridors of Weston Collegiate Institute, the hurt, the sadness, the despondency slowly dissipated.
It was still light out when Mummy and I left the guidance counsellor’s office that day. A faint glow from the brilliant reddish orange sun setting, pressed against the sky, suspended itself behind the sprawling brown buildings that lined Jane Street and Lawrence Avenue West.

As we hurried down Lawrence Avenue West, I thought about finding something to eat. My stomach growled loudly. Mummy heard. We looked at each other and laughed out loudly.

Strolling pass the Money Mart at the corner of Weston Road and Lawrence Avenue, I saw a car parked off to the side of road with a man seated inside wearing an orange T-shirt. The car pulsated with a hip-hop beat as Lauryn Hill belted out “Killing me softly with his song, killing me softly with his song, telling my whole life with his words, killing me softly.” The car hurled bass into the streets provoking rapid movements from the hips of two girls standing by a bench at the bus stop.

We walked on passing a kaleidoscope of banks, fast food joints, a barbershop, and a store displaying an array of colourful hair weaves and “African beauty products” all closely pressed together until we eventually slowed at the entrance of a store where a sign suspended on metal rods read Chu’s Convenience and Variety store. A smaller red and white “Come in we’re open” laminated sign on the glass door beckoned us. The door let out a shrill ding-dong as Mummy pushed it open. I followed.

The aroma of freshly baked bread bothered my nose. My mouth swelled with saliva as we strode towards the counter where a short small-eyed, frail, 60-ish-looking woman peeked over
the cash register smiling. Mummy placed her order and slid a toonie and a loonie across the glass counter.

The woman extended her hands, punched a few keys on the cash register, deposited the change in the drawer before hobbling off, disappearing into the back of the store. Moments later, she surfaced holding two crispy hot-out-of-the-oven Jamaican beef patties sandwiched between two cocoa breads—just the way we would have it back home. The glass door chimed again as we pulled it open. We continued in the direction towards our apartment building.
CHAPTER FIVE

I Feel therefore I can ... Be/long
The Wisdom of a Child
... The storyteller who comes at night is the interpreter of dreams. She tells me that I should know the storyteller, that I and she are one, that they are my sisters, family. She says that a part of me is making the story, making the words, making the new fire, that is my heart burning at the centre of flames (hooks, 1996, p. 3).
The white fathers told us: I think therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of freedom (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 38).
I would rather belong to the her-story
of outsider outcast warrior womben
who belonged

to nothing and no-one

but ourselves

remembering

we were never meant to survive…. 

(Anitaafrika, 2007, p.3)
[Anancy] is also an emblem of creolization as his tales are told in creole vernacular... Creole represents a hybrid form of cross-cultural fertilization unique to the Caribbean and this ‘[Anancy] talk’ displays forms of resistance and appropriation in the face of enforced and imported Standard English. The journey and survival of [Anancy] throughout Jamaican history exemplifies the ways in which slavery failed in its attempts to destroy the spirits of its victims or to eradicate certain aspects of their tenacious cultural practices transported from Africa and retained and adapted in the Caribbean (Marshall, 2001, p. 131).
"Story time Ma’at!” I call out to her in the living room where she sits on a blanket trancedly watching *Dora the Explorer* on a once white comforter now stained by series of grape juice and chocolate almond milk spills. When she does not respond, I waltz into the living room and stoop down beside her. Pulling her toward me, I collect her coiled body into my arms.

She squirms about. Her unfurled legs fall free. They hit the floor, splatter like a boulder and sprawl out.

Playfully tickling her sides and underarms, I pinch her nose and drag her towards the bed. She purses her lips shut. They eventually spill open into a quivering cackle. She tries to wiggle free as I manage to wrestle her to the bed. She tunnels her body under the covers then floats her head up in between an air pocket separating the duvet from its thin white cotton cover.

52The storied memories in this chapter were developed in response to some of the issues and themes raised in the previous chapters. They mark the beginning of my exploration into the pedagogical relevance of "mothering peoples" (O'Reilly and Ruddick, 2009, p. 31) of African descent and in particular women identified African mothers. They illustrate how African women engage in and combine maternal practice—described as the work that mothers engage in when they set out to fulfill the demands of mother-work (nurturing, protection, training and cultural bearing) and maternal thinking—described as the specific discipline of thought, a cluster of attitudes, beliefs and values that arise out of engaging in motherwork (O’Reilly, 2004; Ruddick, 1989) to produce maternal pedagogies—the art, science and/or act of teaching that one engages in through motherwork and that is un/consciously informed by a critical feminist consciousness, that challenges all forms of oppressions and is geared toward social justice and equity (Green, 2006, 2009a, 2011; Green & Bird, 2011).

The stories attest to the potentialities of purposeful feminist maternal pedagogies informed by the embodied knowledges of African women. They show how the African mother’s lived experiences and culturally specific African feminist practices can engender critical consciousness, self-naming/definition and a stronger sense of belonging. Therefore, African women who “mother” serve as site from which the African child learns about their existential situation and subsequently are equipped to critically interrogate status quo ideas, resist marginalizing tendencies, as well as ideas that come from even their own mothers and that may pander to the master narrative in the homespace. Maternal thought and practice that is informed by a race, gender, class consciousness, a consciousness of workings of ableism, sexism, homophobia, patriarchy, white supremacy; a teaching that is shaped by a rootedness in African cultural traditions, in African ideas about the liberation of African peoples and the embracing of an African sense of self is an articulation of African maternal pedagogies.
Once upon a time Anancy thought to himself that he could collect all the common-sense in the world and keep it to himself. That way he could get a lot of money and power because everybody would come to him with all their troubles and he would charge them an expensive price for advice on what to do.

Anancy started out to collect all the common-sense he could find and put them in a big calabash. When he searched and searched and could not find any more common-sense, Anancy decided to hide the calabash filled with common-sense high up in the top of a tree where no one could reach it.

So, Anancy tied a rope around the neck of the calabash and tied the two ends of the rope together, then around his neck so that the calabash rested on his stomach. As Anancy started to climb he discovered that he couldn’t make it up the tall tree where he wanted to hide the calabash. He couldn’t climb properly or too fast because each time he tried, the calabash got in his way.

Anancy tried and tried until suddenly, he heard a little boy stand up at the tree root laughing loudly: “What a foolish man! If you want to climb the tree, why don’t you put the calabash behind you instead?”

Anancy was so shocked. He got so upset when he heard that big piece of common-sense come out of the mouth of such a little boy after he thought he had collected all the common-sense in the world. Anancy yanked the calabash from around his neck and threw it down the bottom of the tree. The calabash broke into pieces and the common-sense scattered all over the world. And from that day everybody got a little bit of common-sense.
Storytelling brings critical consciousness—the act of knowing oneself as the product of a historical process that has deposited its traces in one. The more I try to understand the sense that I am—the continuity—the more stories I tell…The beginnings and endings of stories punctuate me…Our storytelling is an important ingredient of our memory, hope, and imagination, uniting our democracy, political agency, and pedagogy. Telling stories cannot catch up with the future, but without telling stories, ‘our hoped-for future will never come. (Toyosaki, 2007, p. 67)

Well sah, Anancy soh bex fi hear dat big piece a common-sense come outa de mout a such a likkle bit a buoy afta him did tink dat him did collect all de common-sense in the worl, dat Anancy grab off de calabash from roun him neck an fling it dung a de tree root, an de calabash bruck up in minces an de common-sense dem scatter out ina de breeze all ovah de worl an everybody get a likkle bit a common-sense.

I issue the customary: “Is Anancy mek it suh. Jack Mandora, me nuh choose none.”

I close the book and place it on my lap.

“Look Mummy!” Ma’at exclaims pointing towards the crack in the curtains. “It’s dark outside. The sun is gone to sleep.”

“Yes. And you know who else has gone to sleep? Angel, Emma and all your friends at daycare,” I say leaning in towards with the tip of my index finger gently pressed against her button nose.

“Do you know what that means? It means it’s time for Ma’at to go to sleep too.”

“But Mummy, I don’t wanna go to sleep.” She blinks and rubs her eyes even as she protests. Fatigued and frustrated, I blurt out, “Ma’at it is 11 o’clock. It’s much too late to do this. Not when I am tired. Go to sleep!”

The timbre shift in my voice startles her when I continue saying, “THIS IS NOT NEGOTIABLE. NOT TONIGHT!”

Sedated, she looks up at me glossy-eyed, tears leaking from the side of her face.

53 Translation: Anancy made it so. Jack Mandora, I don’t choose any.
Staring down at her, shockwaves of guilt run through me. Even as I speak with my mouth, the voice I am hearing is that of my mothers’ commanding her to do as I say.

“Ave some respek fi yuh eldas,” my step-mother, or some aunt would say or, “Young bud nuh know storm,” words reminding me to unquestioningly submit to their eldership. This was the part of being a child that I abhorred. The part of growing up without even a little bit of freedom to choose—or to at least talk about why it was that I did not want to do something, or eat something, or go somewhere but was still made to because an elder said—without ever explaining—that I just had to.

Suddenly, I begin to imagine myself as a three-year-old. What must that be like? I think to myself. How do I create a balance without contradicting the story I just read to her? Perhaps dictating to her what she ought to do is not the best approach given that there aren’t too many instances—at least for a few more years—that she will be allowed to exercise some degree of agency? The questions float about in my head as I lay beside her listening to her muffled sobs.

I turn to her and ask, “Why don’t you want to go to sleep Ma’at?”

She pauses crying then responds, her small wounded voice quivering, “Because I am not tired Mummy.” A long silence follows. I do not know any other way to respond to her.

54 Translation: Have some respect for your elders.
55 Translation: A young bird does not know how to weather the storm.
56 This essentially spoke to the relative inexperience of youth in terms of their lack of exposure to the sometimes harsh realities of life. The saying was often issued as a call to the younger generation to recognize the wisdom and knowledge that elders possessed. Therefore, the onus was on elders in our community to guide the younger generation in navigating life’s storms.
She looks up at me with a sullen face, yawns widely before saying, “Mummy, baby need you to rock her.”

“Really. I thought this morning you told me you were not a baby?” I asked smiling.

Slaps of my palm lands in the centre of her back carrying with it spiny vibrating sounds whose hollowness hum through the quiet night. I tell her that she is getting to be a big girl and that big girls need their rest so that they can wake up with the sun and be strong enough to play all day.

“Mummy, am I a big girl?” she asks now smiling.

“Sure you are. And soon you will get to do lots of fun things on your own. But now it’s time to go to bed Okay?”

“Okay Mummy.” She turns her head then says, “But there’s something missing.”

This encounter with my daughter provided an opportunity for me to interrogate the method of authoritarian parenting which I was exposed to growing up. Now, being a mother, I take cues from and engage in what Sara Ruddick calls maternal thinking defined more precisely as: “the cognitive capacity to welcome change and to change with change.” She continues stating, “Those who change with change and welcome its challenges acquire a special kind of learning…maternal experience with change and the kind of learning it provokes will help us to understand the changing natures of all peoples and communities.” (O’Reilly and Ruddick, 2009, p. 23). My maternal thinking evidenced here is informed by a consciousness of power relations and their implications for reinforcing relations of domination. I realize that my relationship with my daughter is indeed a relationship of power. However, I am also aware that it may not necessarily be so. As the holder of power in our relationship, I can choose to not exercise the power that I have so that she does not always feel like I am the sole authority whose rules she has to follow without question.

While I am not always able to negotiate this power in the moment, and may revert to the parenting practices that were engineered in me growing up, I consciously try to create space to allow Ma’at to pose questions. Similar to other feminist theorists and teachers, I start from the premise that my daughter is a person who has thoughts, feelings and ideas that matter. More importantly, I have come to value and validate her insights realizing that she also has knowledge to share. I am now able to see her questions as more than mere challenges to my authority but as resources and opportunities for learning as I engage in motherwork. It is in this regard that the story Anancy and Common Sense becomes a piece of feminist pedagogy. Embedded in the story, is the idea that even a small child embodies knowledge that an adult could gain from. Interpreted in this way, the teachings in the story empowers her to ask challenging questions, to think critically and articulate her ideas even if it is not in keeping with the perspectives of others and my own. It provides an opportunity for her to learn that she “is [also] significant in a world where [her] realities are often denied and where adults overpower children.” (Green, 2011, p. 203).
“What’s missing?”
“A lullaby.”
“Ok, which one do you want me to sing?”
Her small, sleep-choked voice selects the song she wants to hear. She yawns the first few words. Whispering, I continue singing the chorus of her favourite lullaby: “Laa, laa, toto lalaa Mamma ana kuja laa laa.”

I croon softly, my voice fades thinly into the night. Eyes now laden, Ma’at falls asleep.

58 Translation: "Sleep, baby, sleep. Mamma is coming, sleep."
Colonial [education] takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies. (WaThiongo, 1989, p. 28)

In My Mamma’s House

Seated on a stool before the vanity mirror, Mandisa peered at the reflection of her hazel-brown eyes, her broad flat nose stretched across the pale yellow skin of her face that she wished were darker, and the hair—the latest source of angst that disturbed the already fragile peace that existed between her and her mother.

A mixture of happiness and sadness flooded her insides. Happiness because she knew that at least one person, the person who she admired the most—her Aunt Njogona—would be pleased with her new do. But she was also saddened—made to feel ashamed because of what it supposedly signified. With her eyes held fixed on the coiled bumps, beeswax dancing in between the tight twisted half soon-to-be-matted hair, she could hear her mother from behind the bedroom door deliver a homily on the virtues of proper deportment.

“Get rid of it!” she said commandingly.

The it her mother wanted her to get rid of was the personification of vagrant marijuana smokers, of good-for-nothing lay-abouts—which was of course not what she wanted for her daughter. It was the identity badge of wayward miscreants and lumpen hormonal teenagers who were rebelling because they had nothing better to do. At least that was the prevailing idea at the time—an idea that was congruent with her mother’s beliefs (which she spared no expense
Mothers and motherhood are valued by, and central to African peoples... mothers and mothering are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African people... [African] women raise children in a society that is at best indifferent to the needs of [African] children and the concerns of [African] mothers. (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 4)

of repeating over and over and over again ever since Mandisa came home from the hairdresser’s donning twists she never removed).

Sometimes, in response to her mother’s droning, Mandisa would say, “Mamma, it’s not how you see it. Kids like me are abandoning the system of mis-head-decaytion, discovering our own truths. We are finding ourselves. Plus Aunt Njogona has beautiful dreadlocks and she doesn’t do any of the things you say people with dreadlocks do, does she?”

“Listen to me Mandisa,” her mother would say in response. “That’s how everybody else around here sees it. Having that hairstyle is calling unnecessary attention to yourself. It’s even worst for Black boys to have dreadlocks and walk around with their facial hair unkempt. You’re standing there telling me about finding yourself. Can’t you do it some other way?”

Her mother’s droning made her more depressed. It was pointless trying to reason with her. She would never approve. Mandisa sighed deeply. A mist of fog from her warm white breath settled coating the mirror before her as she sat studying what would in weeks become fuzzy, matted hair disheveled by wind, rain, sunlight, peppered with fragments of lint that had attached themselves to her golden hair ends. She felt a sense of freeness. Freedom from nights of eye-pulling, scalp-tearing braided extensions which was invariably followed by a tightly wrapped scarf fixing her freshly made cornrows in place in preparation for the next day. Freedom from the early morning rituals of, “I don’t know what to do with my hair today.”

Yes, in many ways, Mandisa’s premature dreadlocks signaled for her freedom from the rules of conformity; it was her small celebration of an example of beauty her Aunt Njogona...
embodied. When she left the salon the day after cutting her once straightened ends, replaced by her now kinky twisted roots, she smiled a dazzling smile as she looked off into the mirror before the exit sign and whispered quietly to herself, “Finally, I can be.”

Now months later, she sat fingering her hair toying with imaginings of what she would look like in a few years when her golden brown locks had grown and stretched down her back edging her buttocks. She thought of her Aunt Njogona. Her thoughts were disturbed by her mother’s thundering voice outside her bedroom door.

She shuddered. With a shriek, she squeezed her eyes closed. She kept them closed until her mother’s undulating voice slowly dissolved. Deep in the silence, she began to summon memories of the last summer spent at her Aunt Njogona’s.

* 

Njogona’s voice carried with the magnanimity of a warrior but was balanced by an effervescent countenance. Her cherry lips would part into a generous chalk white smile that pulled even strangers toward her. She was short in stature but her thick matted hair scooped up in an oversized bun on her head made her appear taller. On any given day she fluttered about the house in a delirium trying to get this task and that task done while whispers of patchouli fragrance wafted the air she left behind. Not today. Today was one of the few days when she rested long enough to let her freshly shampooed locks hang dry as she sat watching the scorched grass and the flowers below the porch bend languidly, welting in the sweltering July heat.
Mandisa watched closely as Aunt Njogona wrapped a towel around a few dampened locks while others fell in different directions about her nape and shoulders, the rest tracing a thick path down the middle of her back. Grayish-silver streaks peppered and coiled through the darker sections. They danced in and out of each lock as if someone were weaving a pattern for a straw basket through them.

Mandisa sat on the wooden steps of the front porch studying Njogona’s mouth as it opened and closed over words that flowed bountifully from her cherry thick lips. When she spoke, her eyebrows arched in excitement and her dark full eyelashes darted rapidly in a way that seemed to be in synchrony with her wildly gesticulating slender hands as she palmed rolled her locks and dug her fingers into the jar of Shea butter softening it between her finger tips all at the same time.

Mandisa’s eyes travelled from the jar of shea butter, up towards her Aunt’s silver-flecked hair where each lock was met with the requisite roll in between Njogona’s soft moistened palms. She listened, swooning with excitement as Njogona narrated stories of rallies, marches, protests and organizing meetings where the Black women in the neighbourhood gathered to discuss social issues.

Enchanted by Njogona’s smell—a scent that stained Mandisa’s clothing weeks after she had returned to Toronto—she would lock herself in her bedroom for hours enveloped by the residue of Njogona’s body oil. She longed to be back in the safety and comfort of her Aunt Njogona’s home. There, the house was redolent with the piquant fragrance of patchouli, lavender
scented oils or sage burning unendingly in a metal plate in the centre of the dining table. There, she did not have to eat food left in the fridge that had to be microwaved because her mother was working double shift three days in a row—again. There, at Aunt Njogona’s, Black folks walked proudly, wore dashikis and sported Afros, dreadlocks, braids and cornrows in their hair; they talked about going back to Africa, about loving Blackness and about the struggle for African liberation. There, she could ask questions, pose challenges to adults without being scolded or made to feel even more self-conscious about the efflorescent bumps on her chest—an insecurity that was magnified by her mother’s stinging reminders that her pubescent parts did not give her license to say and do whatever she pleased. There, she met people who made her language and learning about politics, the music, the stories of Azania—the place where she was from—sound fascinating. There, the stories her Aunt Njogona told made her feel like back home was a place worth being proud of.

It was not that her mother did not have stories about apartheid or of organizing to protest the apartheid system. She did. Mandisa had heard her tell them once before when the pastor of “The Latter Day Baptist Church” at Oakwood and Vaughn, asked her mother one day to speak to the congregation during a Sunday morning service when the church held a fundraiser to support the boycott, divestment sanction campaigns underway in parts of the city.

At the end of her talk, Mandisa’s mother sat down hurriedly in the pew with her back bracing firmly against the church bench, the three of them—Mandisa, her sister Nombie and her brother Thandiwe—looked at her with questioning eyes. It was Thandiwe (the youngest
of the three) unable to quell his aching curiosity, who tugged at his mother’s dress and asked whisperingly, “Mamma, how come you never told us any of this?” at which she shrugged and turned her gaze back towards the pulpit where the pastor stood preaching.

In her mother’s house she was taught that the way to survive was to refrain from speaking Xhosa, to speak the English their father had drilled into them, to become Canadian. And so, her brother, who suffered the consequences of having the name Thandiwe and who was subject to ridicule from salmon-faced girls and boy’s at school, who because he had a name that when shortened easily sounded like a girl’s name in English, began hating his Xhosa name and instead resolved to using his Christian name—Oliver.

At Aunt Njogona’s her voluptuous shape, her large buttocks which seemed disproportionate to her tiny frame, her golden wooly tight curls, her name was envied and celebrated.

“Girl, you’re a real African,” her Aunt Njogona would say smingly. “Not like us folks born in America. Uhh Ahh. Not like us. We’re here in this place desperately searching, trying to recover fragments of ourselves scattered all about. You’re genuine and that’s a lot to be proud of.”

Hearing those words Mandisa smiled shyly and looked down at her feet.

With one palm folded, Aunt Njogona cupped Mandisa’s chin, tilted her face upwards, the other she would use to gently caress Mandisa’s smooth cheeks as she reminded her to hold her head high.

When Mandisa opened her eyes, she was jolted by the still present voice of her mother thundering through the bedroom door.

Empowerment, which occurs through the development of critical consciousness, is gaining control, exercising choices, and engaging in collective social action…To fulfill the task of empowering children, mothers must hold power in African culture, and mothering likewise must be valued and supported. In turn African culture, understanding the importance of mothering for individual and cultural well-being and empowerment, give power to mothers and prominence to their work of mothering. In other words, [African] mothers require power to do the important work of mothering and are accorded power because of the importance of mothering. (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 4)
“You had better take those things out. No respectable young lady wears her hair in dreadlocks. That’s for hoodlums and thugs on the street corner. I swear to you Mandisa, you better take them out. Cuz if I have to, I am dragging you straight to the barbershop.”

Mandisa rose up quickly from her stool, rushed towards the door and turned the lock softly and slowly. She crouched down with her knees propped up against her chin and her back braced against the door.
I’m a Black girl

“Mummy, look the sun is waking up.” She stirs the sheets, nudges my shoulder and sways her legs back and forth under the covers. When I pretend not to hear her, she peels back the curtain slightly. A steady streak of incandescent sunlight splashes over my face.

“Damn it!” I mumble under my breath before covering my head to keep the sunlight out of my eyes. I fall back into sleep mode. She continues to duck and dive under and out of the sheets beside me. A cacophony of sounds in the distance: the roar of the city traffic ten floors below, cars honking a series of interminable honks, dogs barking as their owners take them for their early morning walks, sirens screaming, and wailing drunkards who had been hollering from the night before continue into the early morning pulling me out of my abysmal dream. I lay, now half awake, sunlight seeping in through my once darkened cavern of sleep.

Still groggy, peeling back the sheet a little I peek through half opened eyelids at my daughter kneeling upright in bed, her shoulders taut.

I feel for my cell phone. It vibrates as I try to locate it.

It is 6:30 a.m. And even though I have grown accustomed to the early morning stirrings of my three-year-old alarm clock, I lay crippled by disbelief unable to fathom how it is that no
matter how I had exhausted her the night before or how late I had put her to bed, she would
awake and just like my cell phone, sound off an alarm at that precise hour each day.

“Ok baby, ok,” I say slowly opening my eyes. The curtains screech across the iron rod as
she pulls them farther apart. She returns to where I am laying, jerks my shoulders and pries my
eyelids open with her tiny fingers. I awake to a now unrestrained sunlight barreling through the
neat part in the thick curtains my daughter just created.

In a high-pitched tone she repeats only this time yelling, “Mummy, wake up! The sun is
awake and the moon is gone to sleep, time to get up!”

“Ma’at, Mummy’s tired. Just a few more minutes, I just need a few more minutes, Okay?”

I say pleading with her.

She doesn’t hear me. She tells me instead, “But Mummy, I want something to eat.”

“Alright, alright. What do you want to eat for breakfast?” I ask even though I know she
will say, “sweet honey and peanut butter on bread and chocolate milk.”

Now, having my full attention, she scampers off the bed, skips through the bedroom door,
and twirls down the short hallway into the kitchen.

I slip out from under the covers, quickly tighten the robe about my waist and follow her.

Reaching into the cupboards, I pull out a jar of almond butter and a bottle of agave
nectar. I spoon a dollop of almond butter, drizzle some agave nectar onto a slice of bread before
spreading them both on slices of bread. I walk over to her small play table in the living room area
where she sits waiting. I place the stainless steel plate before her with a glass of chocolate almond milk.

“A sandwich Mummy,” she says doling out a command. “Squish it together like a sandwich.”

I fold the bread in half one side covering the other. She beams her approval.

Seated at my desk I open the laptop, click on iTunes and select a song from my reggae dancehall playlist. I open up the browser and go to my e-mail inbox.

The subject line of fifty unread messages flash across the screen in bolded black—a reminder of people I have yet to get back to. I close the browser, tilt my head and look off to the side where Ma’at sits. I watch as she frets bread edges before meticulously laying them out onto her silver plate in a series of triangular shapes. Our eyes meet. I smile. She smiles back sheepishly with her jaw stuffed. She chews, places her half-eaten almond butter sandwich down, hums, dances in her seat and taps her feet.

A fast beat, dancehall song starts to play. She rises up and the chair careens from under her legs on the floor.

She screams excitedly twirling towards me. “Look at me Mummy. Look. See me dancing,” she continues with her hands at her side, waist twisting and hips grinding in an awkward circular motion.

“Ma’at,” I ask smiling. “What are you doing?”
“I’m dancing Mummy. I’m dancing! Now its your turn to dance Mummy.”

She marches toward me, pulls me up from the chair and screams, “You have to stand up Mummy!”

Bass pounds at the foot of the table. Vibrations travel, shaking pens, books, and bits of papers on my desk jump. The tiny desk lamp perched beside my laptop glides and jerks to the beat. I feel the hardwood floor quake beneath my feet as Beenie Man’s “Sim simma whose got di keys to ma bimma”\(^9\) blasts through the speakers.

“Child, that’s not how you wine. Do like so.” I say crouching with my legs spread slightly apart demonstrating a smooth grinding motion.

She imitates, her waist moving rapidly off beat.

I laugh loudly at her ungainly hip movements.

“You’re way too stiff Ma’at. Free up yu self gyal. Yu dance like a White girl,” I say to her chuckling. She continues her awkward hip thrusting motion.

“No,” she responds giggling. “I’m not a White girl, I’m a Black girl Mummy.”

I stop sedated, my hands spread out to the side still suspended mid air from my half completed demonstration of the butterfly wine. I stare at her quietly, trying to understand whether she knew what she had just said. I wanted to stop the music and probe her. I wanted to explain to her how important that knowledge of self was.

\(^9\) Translation: Simmer, who has got the keys to my BMW?
Instead, I take her hands and pull her towards me. Lifting her to my chest and lowering her to the ground, laughter spills from her lips as I spin and twirl her rapidly in the air.

Eventually dizzied, we collapse. Her juice stained TV blanket receives us as we meet with the floor. We lay panting heavily. I hear the music selection switch and Bob Marley and The Wailers’ *Babylon System* fades in:

*We refused to be what you wanted us to be*

*We are who we are that’s the way it’s going to be*

*If you don’t know*

*You can’t educate us for no equal opportunities (Talking bout my freedom)*

*Talking ‘bout freedom, people, freedom and liberty*

*Babylon system is a vampire*

*Sucking the children day by day. Yeah*

*Babylon system is a vampire (Vampire)*

*Sucking the blood of the sufferer. Yeah*

*Building church and university*

*Deceiving the people continually….*

There lying on the blanket, the side of my head pressed up against my daughter’s, I feel a strange feeling of happiness and relief overcome me. Reaching for my cell phone, I shoot off a text message to her village Aunties and Uncles. “You wouldn’t believe what Ma’at just told me as we were dancing? I’m a Black girl! She tells me she’s a Black girl. Lol!”

The phone vibrates almost immediately in my hand. A text message flashes across the display screen. “She’s got it, no need to worry Mamma, our little girl has got it.”

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People of colour identify themselves almost always by their colour because race is the first thing people see when they look at us…Black folks’ self-awareness and self-consciousness is oftentimes based on the powerful influence of how we see ourselves as ‘raced’ plus other factors (i.e. female, poor, queer, etc.)…the race of the researcher is an important factor in how we construct the world. (Boykom, 2011, p. 179)

An ideology of liberation must find its existence in ourselves, it cannot be external to us, and it cannot be imposed by those other than ourselves; it must be derived from our particular historical and cultural experience…There can be no freedom until there is freedom of the mind. (Asante, 1988, p. 31)
My heart flutters, my lips part into a faint smile. My mind dissolves melding with the
sweet sounds of the Bob Marley as he wails on…

_Tell the children the truth_

_Tell the children the truth_
EPILOGUE

Narrative “Matters”
My cell phone chimes as I exit the subway. I reach into my coat pocket and pull it out holding my gloved hand steadily. Blowing snow lifts my windswept locks and splatters them over my face. Slipping one glove off with my teeth, I peer into the "Rainey incoming text message" in the cell phone display. I slide my index finger across the touch screen and open the message:

“Dear God, got my daughter’s report card the other day, and she had a crazy amount of ‘lates to school.’ I freaked out, and sent an email to the teacher questioning…I had a meeting with him this morn, and he told me that I was aggressive. Am I?”

I text back: “Of course we’re aggressive. We are women with lots of melanin in our skin. Lmao! There is an automatic scripting of our bodies that takes place once we attempt to assert our voice or challenge any unfair treatment. The actions we engage in on a daily basis are never seen as resistance. It is generally read as a marker of our inherent bestial emotions (Johal, 2005, p. 282). We have to remember that sis.

Seconds later, the phone chimes again in my hand: “Haha! I sent him an email, and that is what he called me…aggressive. He took issue with the fact that I said his lack of communication with me was an oversight and unacceptable. I thought he was going to cry.”

I better be scared of you from now on. LOL!”

Rainy texts back. “He told me that when he got my email, he couldn’t teach and he hasn’t been sleeping. I had no idea that I had that effect on people.”

I write back: “Bullshit! Sounds like he’s fishing for some stress leave from work. Either that or he is a bout to lay some spurious harassment accusation to the school board. What a way to turn this around on you eh? Anyways sista, don’t pay him any mind. If you spend too much mental energy on this, you will drive yourself insane trying to figure out where you went wrong. And trust me you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“So what are you doing now?”

“Just dropped Ma’at off at daycare ... heading back to the building to write. Still trying to polish up the story from our conversation.”

“Adwoa, you’ve been trying to make this story perfect for weeks now.”

“Well, I admit, I am afraid of what you’ll think about it.”

“Listen lady, it’ll never be perfect. I wanna see it. Maybe I could give you some feedback. Why don’t you pop by my apartment in a bit. I made some red velvet cupcakes last night. We could share some over tea.”

“Sounds good. Give me about fifteen. I’ll run up to my place and get my laptop.”

“Ok.”

“Alright. See you soon!”
Fifteen minutes later, I arrive on the fourth floor of our building at Rainey’s apartment. As I lift my hand to knock, the door swings open. Rainey props her feet open and emerges holding a large laundry basket.

“Hey you! You’re here already? I was just going downstairs to the laundry room,” she says settling the basket down before her. “You’re fifteen minutes usually ends up being an hour. I thought I’d have some time to throw in another load.”

“Not this time,” I snigger. “I’m actually here in fifteen like I told you.”

Rufus, Rainey’s old German Sheppard, rushes to the door barking.

“Hush Rufus!” Rainey yells, yanks his collar and drags him in between her legs and the laundry basket.

“Settle down now, it’s only Adwoa.”

Rufus whimpers and crouches down with his tail wagging furiously.

“Good boy,” she says patting his head.

“What’s gotten into him today?”

“Well, some kids have been running back and forth on their way to the recreation room. What with the screaming and sounds of feet barreling down the hallway, I guess he’s a little spooked. He probably thought you were one of the noisy buggers,” she chortles.

“Is there something going on in the recreation room?”
I peer down the hallway and notice children bouncing in and out slamming the door behind them.

“I don’t know,” Rainey responds. “But there’s always something going on in this building. “And,” she continues, “Of course, as my luck would have it, I just happen to live on the noisiest floor where all the action takes place. Anyhow, come on in.”

I pull out a chair and plop down around the dining table. Rainey bobs and weaves into the kitchen. Surfacing moments later, she plunks a cup of peppermint tea before me.

“Thanks, girl.”

“Yeah, I know how much you love peppermint tea.”

“I sure do,” I reply, clasping my hands around the large mug.

Rufus curls up under my legs near the foot of the table. Rainey returns to the dining room with two red velvet cupcakes coated with cream cheese frosting swirled and topped off with pink and red sprinkles.


“Aww. Stop. I like baking. It’s therapeutic. Plus I had a bit of time on my hands, which is unusual, so I thought I would spend it with Taryn baking cupcakes.

“I hear ya.”

“Anyhow, let’s get down to the business of this story you wrote about me.”
“Ok,” I say hesitantly. “You wanna take a couple minutes and read it over or should I read it to you?”

“Nah,” she says. “I think it makes more sense if you read it out aloud.”


I begin reading quickly, but with ease.

Ten minutes later I look up from my computer to find Rainey round-eyed staring at me. She looks down at Rufus who sits with his front paws crossed on her lap eyeing her pitifully. He lowers his eyes as she reaches out for his face and palms his jaw. Rufus passes his tongue over his nose.

I watch as Rainey leans in closer and places her nose slightly against his slobbering wet nose.

“Seriously sis!” I exclaimed glaring at her in slight disgust. “I really thought only white folks did that kinda stuff.”

“Pandering to stereotypes are we?” Rainey adds laughing.

“Guilty as charged,” I say, lifting my hands above my shoulders as if about to swear in. “It’s just not something I can get used to seeing.”

“So, what do you think about the story?” I ask bringing my teacup towards my lips.
She looks at me surreptitiously. “I like it. I do,” she repeats as if to reassure me even as I sense that she has some reservations.

A brief but intense silence follows before she begins to speak again. “But tell me something. We spent quite a long time talking and, uh, I mean there was so much in our conversation so why did you chose to create a story out of that particular memory?”

“I suppose I could have chosen to story some other memory. But I felt this one would connect with audiences and was more compelling. In many ways that part of your transcript really spoke to my experience of wanting to escape the prison of my skin or wishing for lighter skin and straighter hair because I thought it would make people more accepting of me. I also felt that if your story resonated with me, then surely it would speak to others about their lives or maybe someone they knew (Bochner & Ellis, 2000). I guess that’s why I chose that out of nearly twenty pages of transcript.”

“I see,” Rainy responds. “I am also wondering about the details. Well, I guess that’s a bit unfair for me to question the details seeing that I really didn’t give you a lot to work with. I mean, I told you about being the only coloured girl in my school, that I used to get teased all the time and that I would go home and try to rub the colour off my skin or tell my mother how much I wished my skin was lighter. In any case, I think it’s fascinating that you were able to create this whole event from what was really maybe a handful of words about what I remembered of that incident. Even so, I can’t help but wonder about truth.”
She pauses and glares at me in frustration. “I know I am being a bit of a pain right now. And I don’t mean to, honestly. I guess I can’t help it. I am schooled in a different arena where rigour is critical. They tell us it’s the only way to make a claim that your research is solid. Not that I am negating the methodology or implying that it lacks rigour. I am not saying that at all. But I think for us to know that the research tools that we are using are good tools, we have to ask ourselves these questions. Don’t we?” She turns to me looking for confirmation. “What did other participants have to say about the stories you created from your conversations with them?”

“Well, when I shared what I wrote with three of the mothers with whom I spoke, their responses varied. One woman commented in an email after reading the story that it read like I was actually there with her in that moment in her life. The other co-participant just like you, was concerned about the details, and like you asked questions about my creating what seemed to be a new story from my point of view. Even though the story was created based on her memory relayed to me, she wondered about the ethics of my relying on imagination to recreate the fine details.”

“Oh, so I guess I am one of the trouble makers huh? Sorry for picking your brains so much. I mean…Umm…don’t get me wrong, the essence of the memory is still there but…but…I can’t help but wonder given that you had to fill in the details to make the story come alive, is the integrity of my story compromised? What does that mean for representation? Can you really say that this is my true story?”
“Come now Rainey, I wouldn’t go as far as calling you a trouble maker. There’s a lot of learning here for me. Through your questioning, I get to critically reflect on the issues and complexities surrounding arts-informed narrative methodology. Really, don’t hold back this is good,” I say assuring her.

“Well,” she continues. “The trouble for me is this. Let’s say in writing my story you change the objects in the room, then does it still make it my story? Say you offered a description of the furniture, a chair for instance, as being leather when really the chair was an old rickety wooden chair.” She continues laughing. “I know, I know. It seems so insignificant—trivial even—what I am talking about. But what if for example, I actually showered in a bath pan in the backyard and not in a bathtub inside a house as you have depicted in the story? What if in the reconfiguring of the details you present me as having grown up middle class when in actuality I grew up dirt poor, isn’t this an issue we should be concerned about? How can we then say that this is good research?”

“Hmm. That’s an important question Rainey.” I stop to think before rephrasing her question out loud, “Do the details matter and how do we know this is good research?” A few seconds pass before I am able to respond to her question.

“Rainey, can I share with you one of the Anancy stories that I tell Ma’at before bed?”

She nods. “Yeah. Sure.”
The story is called ‘Anancy and common sense’. I usually tell her the story in Jamaican. Don’t look so worried my dear. Of course, I am going to have to retell it in English so you’ll understand even though some words just don’t translate. Ok?”

“Alright. That works for me.”

“Once upon a time Anancy got this idea that he could collect all the common sense in the world and keep it to himself. That way he could get a lot of money and power because, everybody would come to him with their troubles and he would charge them a high cost for advise. So, Anancy started out to collect all the common sense he could find and put them in a big calabash. When he searched and searched and could not find any more common sense, Anancy decided to hide the calabash filled with common sense in the top of the tallest tree in the village where no one else could reach it.

Anancy then tied a rope around the neck of the calabash and attached the calabash to his stomach. After which, he attempted to climb the tree. In trying to climb Anancy realized that he couldn’t make it up the tree where he wanted to hide the calabash. Each time he would jump onto the tree, he would fall down. Even still Anancy kept on trying. After hours and numerous attempts he suddenly heard a little girl’s voice calling out to him at the foot of the tree: ‘Anancy you are so foolish. Don’t you know that if you want to climb the tree, it’s best to put the calabash on your back? That way you can move up the tree easier.’
Anancy looked down in shock at the little girl standing at the tree’s stump. He became so upset on hearing that big piece of common sense come out of the mouth of such a little girl. He was sure that he had collected all the common sense and that there was no more left in the world. Enraged, Anancy yanked the calabash from around his neck and threw it to the ground. The calabash broke into pieces and all the common sense floated and scattered all over the world. And from that day onwards, everybody got a little bit of common sense.”

When I stop speaking Rainey looks at me, and asks, “Ok Adwoa. I know you’re trying to make a point here so….”

I interrupt before she is able to finish. “Well the first thing I want to say is that when I share this story with Ma’at I don’t always tell her the story the same way. So for instance, with each retelling, the child’s gender shifts depending on what other subliminal messages I am consciously trying to impart to her. Sometimes I change elements of the story because I know that stories, much like the cultural space they emanate from are fluid and always in flux depending on who does the telling of that story. I myself grew up hearing variants of this same Anancy story. I have heard one version where the calabash simply falls off Anancy’s back and breaks open as he climbs. In that version, there is no one at the bottom of the tree calling out to Anancy. I also remember hearing another adaptation where the dialogue changes significantly. I am saying all this to say that in each retelling the details have and will continue to change.”
I sat right here, observed an event or were told a story and someone later asked us to write about what we saw or heard would we each render the story in the exact way?”

“I am not so sure that we would,” she responds.

“Neither am I. So, the point I am trying to make in telling this Anancy story is that the changes in the details doesn’t necessarily take away from the fact that Anancy wanted to hoard all the knowledge and that he failed at doing so. It doesn’t change the underlying socio-cultural lessons that are embedded in the story.”

“For me then, it is the lesson that matters, not so much whether the story was told exactly as it happened or exactly the same way each time it was told. The question we need to think about, as Bochner and Ellis (2000) ask: Does the lesson, the experience, the emotions resonate to the extent of ‘enabling readers to understand and feel the experience it seeks to convey’ (p. 749)? Can someone else who was not present in that lived experience glean insight into its larger meaning? Bochner and Ellis suggests that what’s important is the usefulness of the story in terms of inspiring conversation and engendering critical reflection from its audiences (pp. 748–754).”

Still looking doubtful, she says, “Hmm. Now that I think about it that makes a bit of sense. I mean, in my interpretation, that Anancy story spoke to the wisdom of the child. I understand it to mean that the child in effect shatters the dominant perception that you have to be older to be knowledgeable.”
“Oh wow!” I pipe in. "There’s another interpretation that’s just as valid. You know, for me this Anancy story also challenges the very notion that one person can own stories and by extension knowledges. It reinforces the communal aspect of indigenous knowledge systems. Anancy wanted to do what seems natural for us to do when we pose the question: ‘Is this my story?’ What this child then reminds us is this: YOURstory is OURstory. In other words, one individual story is part of a larger collective experience. In indigenous ontologies, stories (like knowledges) live by being shared, retold and recreated. It is in the retelling, in the recreating, that knowledge grows and remains part of our collective historical memory. They don’t survive the generations by being bottled up, fixed in time or place and possessed by one person. Do you feel me?"

She nods and says, “Yeah I feel you on that.”

“On the question of truth, I think our different interpretation of this one Anancy story is very telling. Not only does it shatter any preconceived notions that there is a single ‘truth’ out there floating around that researchers who use stories as text can just reach out and grab. More importantly, it reinforces the fact that ‘truth is polyvocal in as much as it is contested’ (Berger & Quinny, 2005, p. 3). The different renderings and interpretations of that Anancy story reminds us that, ‘every story is partial and situated’ (Bochner & Ellis, 2000, p. 750).”

“Adwoa,” she says. “What you are telling me runs completely counter to what I have been taught about what constitutes good research.”
“Yeah I know. This is why I would encourage readers to approach this research account using a different analytical toolkit. It’s an arts-informed narrative inquiry on African descended women's lived experiences of mothering. So when judging this work, readers have to use different measures of research ‘goodness’ consistent with the ways in which we come to know and think about the world. Cole and Knowles (2001) give researchers and audiences a guide for critiquing this type of work. When doing arts informed research, the key things to look out for are: (a) Intentionality—‘an intellectual purpose and moral purpose’; (b) Researcher presence — how is this presence ‘implied and felt’; (c) Methodological commitment — ‘evidence of a principled process and procedural harmony’; (d) Holistic Quality—‘an internal consistency and coherence’ and a 'high level of authenticity'; (e) Communicability— the 'accessibility of the research account, usually through the form and language in which it is written'; (f) Aesthetic form—'aesthetic quality of the research project and its aesthetic appeal'; (g) Knowledge claims—the research 'must reflect the multidimensional, complex, dynamic, intersubjective, and contextual nature of the human experience'; and (h) Contributions—the research must have 'theoretical and transformative potential' (pp. 126-127). So, when someone picks up my work, I want them to judge it based on these measures.

A brief pause follows. “Now, this is not to say that as a researcher turned creative writer I don’t need details. Obviously the more details I get from participants, the easier it is for me to write a story that reflects as closely as possible the lived experience. But we need to realize that it is impossible to capture an individual's experience exactly the way it was lived. Even so, I try
my best to achieve as high level of ‘authenticity’ as is possible. This is why I go back to the source of my stories: co-participants like yourself. In doing this, I am performing what Bochner & Ellis (2000) call ‘a reliability check’ of sorts. That way I can fill in the dialogue, scenes and include (if any) changes.

"The more details the better. This is every creative writer’s dream. The problem is most people have a hard time remembering the fine details. They remember the most significant life changing parts of the experience, but don’t recall whether the chair was red or green, whether the sky was blue, whether it was partly cloudy on that day or what someone might have said to them as they were going about their day. For others, the memory is so painful that they subconsciously tuck away the details for fear of reopening wounds. What does the researcher turn creative writer do in such situations? I certainly don’t want to push a participant to revisit what might have been a traumatic experience by demanding more details simply because it will make my job of creating a story easier. I would rather be conscientious of my participants’ feelings and allow room for recreating though my creative imagination later on. My sense is that what matters is whether the heart of the story is still there.”

“I guess that’s really what matters eh?” Rainey asks.

“Yup,” I reply. “That’s all that matters.”
They stare at me expectantly. Sweat beads pepper my neck and stream down my back. I stand with one knee pressed against the back of the podium thumbing a stack of cue cards.

A quiet anticipation follows for a few seconds. Swift River flips through her papers then turns her gaze towards me and says, interrupting my thoughts, “Who is your target audience and what is your rationale for writing an arts-informed narrative inquiry on African maternal pedagogies?”

Suddenly I remember that this was one of the questions Grey Owl asked almost two years ago. I remind myself to think of this day as a celebration of years of hard work. Even as I try to settle my mind—to think of it as simply that—I can’t help but feel like this will be more like an intense grilling.

My thoughts retreat again summoning memories of last night’s online search for Youtube videos. It was Senna’s idea to stay up scouring the Internet for videos of doctoral oral exams. I suppose she thought that watching would help stem my swelling anxiety. That clearly failed.

“Stop worrying Sis,” she said, rubbing my bear shoulders from behind where I sat staring at the computer screen. She continued: “It will be like a press conference. Remember, you’re the expert. No one knows the topic like you do.”
I grimace. Shrugging my shoulders slightly I think: Ha! Me? Expert? I sure don’t feel like one now standing before five Ph. Ds—all experts, and more so than I am at this stage. I should have gone to bed early. A good night’s rest would have served me better. Now, possessed by nerves and fatigue, I am about to explode, spilling my insides out in front of my committee.

“Come on Adwoa, you can do this.” I mumble softly under my breath trying to pump myself up. “This is your baby. You have lived, breathed, and carried this project for five years. Now is time to deliver. Just a few more pushes, and you’re there.”

I slurp a mouthful of peppermint tea. As I squish the liquid heat between my tongue and teeth its spicy warmth coats my chest and soothes me. My shoulders fall like dead foliage shedding the tension. I place the thermos on a table next to the podium. Then, slowly tilting my head up, I look over at Swift River and respond timidly, “I wrote this thesis primarily for women of African descent whose embodied knowledges have been the object of debasement within mainstream educational settings and the larger society.”

My voice cracks unevenly as the words pour like ebony black molasses from my lips. “I… I wanted to explore this topic because of my experience of being mothered by African women who carried with them an abundant storehouse of knowledge. This study results partly from my wanting to celebrate these women, to centre their voices, and bring recognition to the vital role they have and continue to play in the cultural, social, identity, and educational development of African children within the home place (hooks, 2007b) and the wider communities in which
they live. Another impetus is, of course, my own journey to motherhood. As an African mother, I am faced with the difficult task of raising an African child in an atmosphere that negates every aspect of her African selfhood. The moments where my daughter said or did something that for me reinforced the reality of her existential situation (that of being an African child navigating a space dominated by whiteness) became moments of critical self-reflection on how I could help her challenge and cope with this reality. I was also curious about how other African women who identified as mothers were able to navigate and critically interrogate systemic whiteness while doing motherwork. Later, dialoguing with other mothers provided me the space to map the convergences and divergences in our experiences. The study thus gives readers from various walks of life access into the struggles and joys that accompany mine and other African-Canadian mothers’ experiences as we attempt to un/consciously impart critical counter-hegemonic pedagogies. It is a study that clues audiences into the possibilities that inhere in passing on what was passed on to some of us by women who functioned as our social and/or biological mothers—the invaluable gift of epistemological and ontological centeredness. In my case, with my daughter Ma’at, the experience of teaching and learning from and with her re-awakened in me a strong appreciation for the very mediums of education (ranging from folk stories to folk songs, ring games and even reggae music) that I as a child was exposed to growing up in Kingston, Jamaica. This research account emanates out of my determination to inculcate in her (and any other African child who may come across these stories) a deeper understanding, knowledge, and appreciation of self. It is
written for my daughter and the generations of African children who struggle for belonging and survival in spaces where they are bombarded with negative images—images that remind them that they have little of value to contribute to the educational system; where they see constantly modeled a Eurocentric standard of beauty that tells them they are inferior because they carry phenotypical markers of Blackness. I wrote these stories so that these children could perhaps begin to feel less alienated and, instead, come to see that someone else out there shares in their experience of alienation. I wrote this account for the African child and for the African mother who continues to internalize, but may also want to learn how to resist Africanist discourses that position us as, to use the words of African-American writer Toni Morrison (1992, p. 52), ‘repulsive, undesirable, history-less, [and] mere blind accidents of evolution’.

“Ok Adwoa, thanks for that response.” Swift River pauses briefly before continuing. “As I sit here, I am curious as to what the data collection process was like. I noticed before that you chose to call them dialogues. Correct?”

“Yes Swift River.” I say assuredly.

“Please,” she says donning a smile. “Call me Swift.”

I nod and smile shyly before responding. “I think of them as dialogues as opposed to interviews because the conversations felt more like the sharing of stories where we (myself and co-participants) sought to make meaning of our experiences of mothering in the Canadian socio-cultural context. Our conversations defied the conventions of linear research interviewing
often taking on a life of their own. By this I mean, there was an atmosphere of freeness in these
dialogical engagements. Co-participants felt comfortable veering off and were open to sharing
memories and stories that I would initially think had nothing to do with the question posed.
Later, we would find that a particular storytelling event took us right back to the initial question.
These storytelling moments were very fruitful in terms of helping us unpack key concepts and
grapple with conceptual issues. This interactive sharing allowed us space to insight each other on
how we conceived of the phenomenon of mothering. I refer to these exchanges as community
dialogues because, like Moen (2006, p. 58), I share the view that ‘all human action [and thought]
is dialogic in nature’. I am reminded here also of Bakhtin (1986), who wrote that humans do
not make meaning in a vacuum isolated from the things and people around them and that
meaning is derived from and through dialogical engagements with the world around us, as we
connect to, interact with, and build relationships with other people. In a similar fashion, there
are other scholars who tells us that even at the level of the mind the individual may through
self-reflexivity—a process thought of as a dialogical engagement in and of itself—discover new
meanings that inform the types of knowledges produced about his/her existential condition
(Moen, 2006 citing Bakhtin, 1986; Bochner & Ellis, 2000 citing Wittgenstein, 1953, Heidegger
1971, Gadamer, 1989 and Derrida, 1978). This is why I would much prefer to think of these
conversations as dialogues as opposed to interviews. Also, the word interview denotes an often
uni-directional process that presupposes a linear transference of knowledge from one person who
is a knower to another who is seeking to know. Not only does this logic negate the internal and external dialogical meaning making that occurs for instance in the moment of positing a question, but it also reinforces a hierarchical ordering of knowledge that is incongruent with indigenous ontologies. In indigenous worldviews actors within a particular learning event are viewed as equal collaborators in the process of producing knowledges.

Admittedly, I began the first few conversations with a conventional interview schedule. However, a pattern developed where after the first few questions, I was forced to do away with the formulaic interview schedule and instead embrace the unexpected but exciting narrative journey that my participant was taking me on. These storytelling moments though sometimes lengthy, facilitated a deeper immersion into their life experiences. The stories they told served as critical data once I returned to the transcripts to map out the similarities and subtle nuances in our experiences. Their stories also served as sources from which I gained conceptual clarity. Specifically, they illuminated key conceptual limitations particularly around questions of identity. I felt that I learned more, and yielded richer information than I would have had I remained bounded to an interview schedule. I was so moved by co-participants’ spirited storied recounting of key moments in their lives, that by about the fourth conversation I knew it made sense to continue this indigenous hermeneutic canon in presenting the final study report. So, in many respects, these community dialogues were the soil that germinated the seed from which the idea of creating storied representations sprung.”
I pause for a few moments, scan the room, and study the blank expressions on each committee members’ face. “What are they thinking?” Their opaque stares are unyielding. “That’s it,” I think to myself. “I must have rambled for far too long.” Sudden small affirming nods allay this fear and restore my confidence that they are satisfied with that explanation. I take slow breaths and wade through the knee-high silence. I am relieved when Swift River interjects.

“You’ve sparked my intrigue here, Adwoa, when you talk about staying true to an Afro-indigenous hermeneutic, canonical discourse. Can you perhaps elaborate on how it is that narrative inquiry illuminates and achieves the larger goals of this study?”

“Well, when I first began this project, I knew I wanted to write about indigenous educational imperatives expressed through folk songs, storytelling and other cultural mediums. I set out to underscore the role African descended mothers have and continue to play in this process of transmitting cultural knowledges. However, I didn’t know where to begin or how the project would unfold. Even after settling down to transcribe the first set of conversations I was still unsure about how to present the overwhelming amount of research text I had. At that time, I was wedded to the conventions of a standard social science thesis partly because it seemed safe but, mostly, because I was unaware at the time of any alternative models for representing empirical research information. The storytelling of my co-participants, mentioned earlier, was what breached this status quo approach. The more I grappled with representational politics in research, the heavier the question of how to do justice to their complex personal narratives
weighed on my mind. I also wanted to weave the Afro-indigenous Anancy Stories that I tell my
daughter at nights into the project to show readers the pedagogical richness of these folk stories.
I was not convinced that conventional social science prose could effectively communicate the
language, values, beliefs and cultural undertones of these stories. Neither would writing in that
way engage audiences’ imagination or facilitate their exploration of the sensory aspects of my
co-participants’ experiences. More importantly, I did not think that social science prose could
convey the complex and layered emotions felt as co-participants’ exposed their strengths and
vulnerabilities. Later, I came across a few works embodying autoethnography, narrative inquiry,
and arts-informed research methodologies. I realized then that the political dimensions of these
methodologies fit well with the indigenous storytelling culture inspired by co-participants. After
a second reading of the transcripts, I experienced a paradigmatic shift. I thought: What better way
to maintain the integrity of the indigenous storytelling culture than to represent the gathered
information as creative non-fictional narratives.

Also, a few of the women I spoke to, and who inspired me to write (most notably my
own mother), had very little formal education. In fact, my mother was not fortunate to receive
formal education beyond a primary level, but taught herself to read through ritualistic Bible
readings. Women like my mother who, though quite capable of telling me a story about her
mothering imbued with rich images, visuals, emotions and lessons, would not feel as comfortable
relaying those same events in writing. Writing in this way, was my attempt at creating space for
perspectives like hers that may otherwise remain on the margins of research scholarship. It was my conversations with the women—their indigenous storytelling, their telling of personal stories—that cemented my belief in the power of narrative/storytelling methodology as an interpretive scheme through which situated meaning could be revealed. This was especially important for my project given that indigenous peoples the world over have always used storytelling as a medium through which to speak about their lived experiences.”

Swift River pauses for a moment and pulls her chair forward closer to the table. Spreading her palms out across its smooth surface, she looks down at her hands, glides her index fingers through the spaces between them, then looks back up at me.

“I read the stories and thought they were beautifully written. You captured the readers' psychic space evocatively in a way that allows them to develop an embodied engagement with the research text. The interactions between you and your daughter were for me especially powerful in terms of providing visual and emotional evocations of intimate moments that really exposed the human side of you. I was able to conjure up vivid images in my head for instance of the place where you grew up and gain familiarity with the sites through the thick scene descriptions. It was as though I were walking through your memories, smelling the food, the air. I really got a sense of rich the cultural milieu in which you grew up. The dialogue and characters came to life and unfolded like a pictured movie. There were a few moments where I found myself shifting from laughter, to joy, to excitement and at one point even moved to tears. Not only did I access the
storied events of your participants’ lives, the narratives also enabled me to access their feelings, desires, thoughts, fears and hopes. Some of the language at some points however was a bit jarring for me. My knee jerk reaction came about in the moments when you tried to convey internalized racism and its attendant psychic trauma. I recall specifically one of your earlier stories entitled, ‘The E(race)ing: Trapped in a Pigmentory Prison’ as well the final story ‘I'm a Black girl’. In the first story mentioned, you used the metaphor of a pigmentory prison to talk about the trappings of having darker skin and about the pervasiveness of whiteness and whiteness affording free movement in and out of space. Admittedly, at a cursory glance a person who carries whiteness as a skin colour privilege may want to empathize with these experiences but may not engage in that level of self-reflexivity on the impact of institutionalized whiteness and white privilege. I feel the language used might conjure up feelings of guilt or discomfort for these readers. I am wondering then whether you have concerns about how readers might receive some of the language. Do you think that it might be received as too intense, so much so that you fail to reach audiences who are unconverted beneficiaries of white privilege and who are the very ones who need to reflect on this type of privilege?”

Swift River pauses and scratches her head, “I am wondering to what extent do you suppose these readers would spurn your attempts at getting them to think critically about whiteness? Also, for audiences even inside the African community, might these stories be received as disabling or disempowering? In other words, is it possible to get people to open up and reflect on privilege
and its bi-directional effect (the disempowerment of others that result from the unearned benefits individuals receive) without creating discomfort?”

“This may sound a bit weird, but I am relieved to have managed to move you to tears,” I say chuckling. “No, but really, the underlying reason for writing a research account in this way was to get audiences to experience the same feelings and events as the women who shared these storied events with me. But to respond to your first question on the potential alienating impact of some of the language used, I believe that this is an inevitability for researchers who write about issues such as racism or for those that dare to write against the grain and advance any perspective that fundamentally opposes the status quo. Such researchers cannot fixate on this issue of discomfort. Rather, what we need to do is to focus more on the possibilities for transformation that inhere within these spaces of discomfort. The more cogent question becomes: Whose comfort are we invested in preserving and why?

Historically, peoples invested in and who have achieved social transformation did not trade in their conscience—the belief that another world was not only possible but necessary—for comfort. Just imagine where we would be today if formerly enslaved Africans were focused on the discomfort that the slave rebellions would cause slave holders or if key ‘house slaves’ remained in the relative comfort of the 'Massa’s big house' eating crumbs all the while fixated on the potential that any change in the status quo would dislodge the relative comforts they enjoyed. Africans would perhaps still be in chains today. Well, that is, unless of course some paternalistic
do-gooder fulfilling their ‘white man’s burden’ of liberating Africans decided it was time to ‘grant’ Africans their dignity as autonomous human beings. I expect that rupturing the hegemonic status quo may necessitate using uncomfortable, jarring language at times.

As a child, the lessons that stuck with me the most were the ones where I was made to feel a degree of discomfort. My stepmothers and aunts used to throw these folk sayings out whenever I would misbehave. They would say: ‘All who cyaan here will feel’ or ‘Yu play wid fya yu muss get burn.’ The image of a child being burnt by a small flame but who learnt to exercise caution when having to navigate that same flame in future because of the pain felt, remains seared in my consciousness to this day. The previous sayings lead me to believe that the most important, lasting lessons are learned in and through experiences and spaces of discomfort.

Words like whiteness, white supremacy and pigmentory prison may be off-putting to some readers who may well disregard the work all together. What is, however, most important for me is to dislodge the system of whiteness (and its attendant matrix of economic, social, political, gendered, sexual, ontological and epistemological hierarchies) from its pedestal. To do so might necessitate a bit of discomfort, conflict and tension. Being forced to sit in one’s discomfort can be difficult and frightening. However, it can also be a source of internal transformation, healing and renewal. Discomfort can lead to long lasting lessons that remind us of the capacity of oppressed groups to resist oppression even in the face of momentary discomfort. The fact is that living

60 Translation: Those who cannot hear will feel.
61 Translation: If you play with fire, you will get burnt.
through the reality of internalized racism is painful. Rainey, the 'fictional' child in the story ‘The E(race)ing: Trapped in a Pigmentory Prison’, serves as a living example of the real pain of racism. Through her, we see that racism is an experience that carries with it severe psychological, physical and emotional scars that are long lasting. It is for this reason that I write from an honest space using frank language to speak about this issue. I do this so that audiences who are the recipients of various forms of social identity privileges may feel (even as they may not be able to embody entirely) the painful resultant impact of these privileges on those affected.”

Fire Wasp—the chair of the exam—tightens his tie and looks up at the clock on the wall.

“Uh, Hmm.” He clears his throat, sips some water before asking, “Swift River would you like to ask a follow up question?”

“No, no,” she responds quickly. “I think it would be a good time to open up the floor for other committee members to ask questions now.”

Fire Wasp turns and addresses the committee. He directs his first question to Deep Fox who is sitting closest to him.

“Deep Fox: Do you have any questions for the candidate?”

“I do. I do.”

“Ok, take it away,” Fire Wasp says playfully.

“Hi Adwoa.
“Hi Deep Fox.”

“Can you explain what is the role of theory in narrative research?”

“Well, researchers employing a narrative approach are engaged in a process of reading individual actions within the particular context that they occur. Because of this need to ground their understanding of individual actions or events, narrative researchers function as interpreters of stories that shape theory. However, while the stories are the central hub in the development and formulation of theory, it is important to also recognize that contextual renderings of social phenomenon necessitate that the stories shared in the initial dialogic engagement also be filtered through epistemological and ontological frameworks that the researcher embodies. This is particularly important because, as researchers, we bring our subjectivities, our embodied experiences, knowledges and politics to bear on these dialogical engagements and later on the process of storying (writing through creative or literary form) participants’ lives. The relationship between narrative and theory is commensal to the extent that the ‘theoretical perspectives enable [narrative researchers] to gain further understanding and insight’ (Moen, 2006, p. 63, citing Gudmundsdotir, 2001) so that they can explain how the individual or the group is shaped by their surrounding environment.

When I began transcribing and reflecting on my conversations with co-participants, my thoughts were consistently funneled through a set of discursive frameworks. This conscious and purposeful employment of a particular interpretive scheme continued even at the stage of moving
from the transcript to the reconstructed narrative. It was this process that enabled me to see how for instance an individual mother’s story connected to a larger collective story. This process was also useful in terms of helping me map out the in/congruencies between the experience shared and the framework I was using. So, even though in this project primacy is given to the stories (to the extent of allowing them to speak their truths to me as the researcher), the discursive framework served to provide a rationale to the academic community, for instance, for selecting a particular story out of all the stories told. The approach also served as justification for (re)presenting one participant's lived experience over another's. A clear example of this is evidenced in the first storied chapter entitled 'Pedagogies of the Spirit'. This is a chapter whose stories were created out of hours of transcribed accounts from which I carefully selected two self-identified mothers’ stories on the theme of spirituality. Here for instance, the women shared multiple experiences and articulations of spirituality. In deciding which story to render more salient and in re-constructing the narratives for that chapter, I was more inclined (being guided by my personal experiences as well as the larger goals and objectives of this project) to present a more Afro-indigenous articulation of spirituality. I felt that this purposeful rendering was congruent with the goals, objectives, theoretical, and philosophical underpinnings of the study. Therefore, my decision to render an Afro-indigenous articulation of spirituality more salient (as opposed to a more Euro-Christian spiritual articulation) in Chapter One was my way of reinforcing the ways in which home place functions as site of resistance (hooks, 2007b) and where the
African mother embodies, produces and disseminates counter-hegemonic knowledges grounded in African centred worldviews. In this way the interpretative process becomes purposeful even as it remains consistent with the philosophical, epistemological and ontological perspectives of myself and co-participants.”

Fire Wasp turns and bows playfully, signaling to Cosmic Serpent that it is her turn to ask a question.

“Adwoa,” she says, skimming gently over the pages of her notes. Distracted by her shifting hues of silver and gold refracting as they hit the table before her, I raise my head only to find myself in the middle of a question.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t quite catch the first part of your question. Can you please repeat?”

“You previously mentioned your discursive lens in your response to Deep Fox’s question. Can you tell us through what discursive lens do you want an academic audience to view this work?”

“Oh right. Thanks. Well, my study is grounded in and guided by the philosophies of African centred feminism(s), Afrocentrism, and indigeniety,” I say.

She interjects almost immediately, “How would you respond to a critique that this seems like a confetti approach to research? Can you perhaps justify your use of all three?”

“Well, I chose to employ all three in this study because each framework has particular relevance to a study that focuses on the lives of African descended women. For starters, the
indigenous framework is useful here as it serves as a platform from which indigenous peoples can begin to challenge colonial representations of their culture and knowledges. This is particularly important given the fact that historically, Western, Eurocentric theoretical paradigms and the research data yielded have reified indigenous peoples as culturally and historically inept or as atavistic anomalies predisposed to savagery, chaos, and dysfunctionality. Indigenous knowledge functions discursively as a means through which to oppose the dominating, universalizing and imposing tendencies of these Eurocentric colonial discourses (Dei, 1990, 1993, 2000, 2006; Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2004). Indigenous knowledges is crucial to this project because of the emphasis placed on indigenous people’s longstanding connection with the land; it proffers a critique of (neo)colonialism and challenges (neo)imperialistic relations of power that result in the exploitation of indigenous peoples' land, knowledge and resources; the framework also challenges the epistemological dominance of Euro-Western canon of knowledge and provides space for the legitimization and visibility of alternative ways of knowing and being in the world; indigeniety proffers a discourse and a politics aimed at rupturing this hegemonic status quo knowledge production (Dei, 1990,1993,1994, 2000, 2004; Dei et. al. 2002; Kerr, 2006; Iseke-Barnes, 2003; Smith, 1999). Research viewed through the lens of indiginiety affords not just African peoples, but indigenous peoples the world over, a framework through which to speak about reclaiming values, practices, beliefs and the ontological underpinnings that have an continue to shape their existence and sustain them as whole communities (Daniel, 2005). This is why I thought it relevant
to my project on African women’s role in indigenous knowledge production. However, while the indigenous framework presents tremendous possibilities in terms of functioning as an anti-colonial tool for dislodging Eurocentrism’s epistemological ‘superiority’ in relation to indigenous knowledge systems, African feminism allows for an engagement with the manifestations of patriarchal domination even within indigenous knowledges. This is key because as Dei (2000) tells us, indigenous knowledge systems can reproduce sites of disempowerment for women. Bearing this in mind, it is especially important to engage gender in our analysis of indigenous knowledges because of the gendering process of what Grosfoguel (2007) calls ‘global coloniality’ (or imperialism). Under this system, Africans and other worldwide indigenous peoples continue to endure inferiorization on the basis of skin colour. However, they are further inferiorized through neo-colonial discursive practices of gendering, and are as consequence (in contrast to the Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, white male held up as the paragon of humanity) denied full humanity. This is true even for the African male whose feminized positioning, relative to the ultimate white male previously described, renders him an inferior subject (Lattas, 1998; Kerr; 2006; Oyewumi, 2006). The material implications of such a feminizing process, is that worldwide indigenous women now inscribed as the ultimate ‘other’ lose social position and power within their own communities because of their gender and race (Kerr, 2006, p. 295). African centred feminism(s) then provides a base from which Afro-indigenous women can begin to speak and theorize about their role in shaping indigenous knowledge paradigms. It allows for a critical
integrative approach that better fits African people’s historical and contemporary realities (Daniel, 2006) as people precariously positioned along a continuum of markers of social differences such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation and abilities.

It is also within this context of finding relevant frameworks that conduce with our lived experiences as African peoples that Afrocentricity emerges as a culturally specific framework that places African ideals at the centre of analysis on our lived experiences (Asante, 1987; 1991; 1999; Blay, 2008). African centred feminism compliments Afrocentricity in terms of underscoring African women’s contribution to African epistemologies and ontologies.

In this regard, African centred feminism(s) emerge as a counter-hegemonic epistemology that unseats the phallocentrism of educational institutions. Therefore, in analyzing the transcripts and in recounting African-Canadian women’s stories of ‘conscientization’ (Freire, 2009) through narrative form, I affirm their critical feminist maternal pedagogies as a ‘political consciousness… which leads to a strong sense of self-awareness, self-esteem, female solidarity and, consequently, the questioning and challenging of gender [and other forms of social] inequalities in social systems and institutions’ (Amadiume, 1987, p. 10). This work, while focusing on the issues that are important to all African women in the context of mothering, also acknowledges the fact that we are not an undifferentiated mass.”

Pink Thunder pipes in right after I am through speaking. “How then does your research move away from the homogenization of African descended women’s experiences of mothering?”
“The stories written and presented here have ‘a certain universality about them without being universal’ (Knowles, 2011, personal communication). What do I mean by this? Well, at one level, each narrative is based on an African mother’s individual experience and her understanding of dealing with forms of social marginalization as she attempts to engender social, cultural and identity consciousness and impart pedagogies of survival onto African children. In thinking through this, I am reminded of African feminists intellectual, Yaa Blay (1998), who posits this pertinent question: From whose centre are we operating? In asking this question, Blay challenges those of us researching the lives of African descended women to reflect on the extent to which our analyses are grounded in the specificity of a particular locale. Bearing this in mind, even as I speak about African descended women and tell stories that insight us on African maternal pedagogies, I invoke the concept African maternal pedagogies recognizing that there are also subtle nuances in our experiences as individual mothers that need to be accounted for. The stories, while underscoring our shared experiences as African descended women who mother at the margins, also provide room for an understanding of the situational variations in our experiences (relative to other mothers) as we navigate the socio-cultural terrain that is Canada (Blay, 2008). Consistent with African feminist theoreticians such as Steady (2005), this study hones in, through narrative form, on the varying ‘African socio-cultural realities, feminist traditions and philosophies…multiple and varied social locations’ (Blay, 2008, p. 69 citing Steady, 2005), as well as the multiple processes of meaning making, desires, struggles, and issues affecting African descended women who mother
within the context of Canada. However these subtleties do not preclude us from seeing certain shared aspects in our lived experiences. It is these commonalities that allow me to see ‘HERstory’ as ‘OURstory’. A follow up to your question, Pink Thunder, I suppose might be: Why African women’s maternal pedagogies? Mothers of varying ethno-racial backgrounds impart cultural and other knowledges through songs, folk tales, dances and so on, so what is it that makes the African woman’s maternal pedagogy so significant?

“I’ll tell you something,” I pause and smile. “If I had fifty dollars for the number of times I was asked these pointed questions since telling folks about my research, I swear I would be able to pay off outstanding tuition fees owed to the University of Toronto.

The committee erupts in laughter. I continue: “No, but seriously,” I say, chuckling, trying to bring us back to focus. “On the question of whether or not any woman (not necessarily African descended) but who has performed the social role of mother may read these stories and identify with aspects of mothering articulated in the stories and therefore rightly see these as their stories as well, my response is, yes and no. This is the paradoxical universality of which I spoke of before. I mean, while the stories have a certain universality, what makes them particular to the mother of African descent is the experience of being marginalized because of the multiple and intersecting markers of social difference which she embodies and carries with her throughout her life and that the African child that she raises also embodies. What gives this narrative inquiry on African maternal pedagogies its cultural, historical specificity is the experience of mothering
through the prism of Blackness in a racialised context. It is the experience of mothering while perpetually trapped in a pigmentory prison (relative to white mothers or other mothers on the lighter end of the shade continuum), the experience of mothering African children who will also have similar experiences because they embody these multiple markers of social difference. It is essentially this ‘fact of Blackness’—this coming into awareness of being a ‘Black’ subject in a space of ‘White’ power (Fanon, 1967) that makes these stories specific to the African-Canadian mother’s lived experience. In this context, racism remains an institutionalized reality for African people in general and even more so for African women marked by our gender. What gives this study its specificity is the fact that relative to the rest of the population, children of African descent from birth to 14 years of age living in Canada are more likely to live in lone parent families (Milan & Tran, 2004), the majority of which are female headed. Such a reality reinforces the social, economic, and political significance of African women who engage in motherwork. For the African mother and the African child, it is living in a reality where our movements are restricted, our bodies are constantly surveilled by the state, where our epistemologies and ontologies are denigrated simply because of what our ‘Blackness’ signifies, that informs our understanding and knowledge of self. For the African mother, it is realizing that society's constructions of us as dysfunctional, intellectually inept, fecund welfare m(others) not capable of being 'good' parents; it is our material reality living as bodies marked by our Blackness, by our majority poor and
working class status in Canada that intuits us as to the urgent need to prepare our children to navigate this reality.

In terms of responding to why African women’s cultural pedagogies are significant. I think Collins’ (1986) work provides us with some insight on this when she writes that ‘[African] women’s culture serves as an ideological frame of reference—namely, the symbols and values of self-definition and self-evaluation—that [illuminate] the circumstances shaping race, class, and gender oppression (p. S22).’ This issue of self-definition, self naming, and self-evaluation becomes crucial to the African child who, in observing the lived experiences of their foremothers, may come to realize the importance of naming themselves realizing that the consequence of allowing others to name them is that they risk being interpolated into controlling and dehumanizing categories that negate their African selfhood. The African child thus learns from their foremothers to navigate the neo-colonial hegemonic framings. They may also feel emboldened to reject the scripting imposed on them and in so doing, to paraphrase Reggae Icon Bob Marley, refuse to be what their oppressors want them to be. Cultural knowledges for the African child therefore becomes a base from which to affirm their Africaness so that they can feel a sense of (be)longing. In this regard a focus on African women’s maternal pedagogies becomes all the more important because as Collins tells us ‘Black women have a clearer view of their own subordination than that of Black men or white women is their experience at the intersection of multiple structures of domination' (p. S19). Therefore, African women who mother at the margins are more attuned to
the reality that they ‘occupy more contradictory positions vis-à-vis white male power… [because] unlike white women, [we] have no illusions that [our] whiteness will negate female subordination, and unlike Black men, [we] cannot use a questionable appeal to manhood to neutralize the stigma of being Black’ (p. S19).

The fact is, African descended women have and continue to experience subtle forms of racialised violences (epistemological, physical and psychological) as we attempt to raise children in a society that orders bodies in terms of their worth on a shade continuum. Because of the impact of racism in white supremacist societies like Canada and because of this racial hierarchy, African mothers have to develop an instinct to be able to read the insidious and pervasive manifestations of racism and its intersecting oppressions. Our existential reality of being at the bottom of a racist, classist, sexist, homophobic and ableist power structure, demands that we develop the psychological dispositions to resist (even as we sometimes strategically surrender) to these structures of domination. It is this experience that intuits us to the urgency in passing on the necessary survival skills (our cultural knowledges for instance) to our children. I employ the term African maternal pedagogies because African descended women living in Canada have particular standpoints or perspectives on their lived experiences of being raced, classed, and gendered. So, even though we may share commonalities with other ethno-racial groups in terms of teaching children or being foundational pillars of whole communities, it is the lived experience of being at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression in relation to other women that gives our
knowledge production saliency. Therefore, for the African community, the African mother is even more crucial to our survival as a people to the extent that we continue through our motherwork to use ‘cultur[al] [and other embodied knowledges] as a weapon of resistance and as a basis for defining a new world order' (Dove, 1998, p. 516). It is for this reason that my study centres African descended women’s maternal pedagogies rather than those of the experiences of other women (or even African men) who may also identify with the experience of mothering and transmitting knowledges through cultural, social and political mediums.”

“Ok Adwoa,” Pink Thunder proceeds, “I must say, for me, your employment of the term maternal pedagogies seems to problematically reify gender essentialism. How do we draw out the interpolation of sex and gender, male/female in these conceptualizations, and how does this throw some gaze on dominant conceptions of male/female and mothering and parenting? In other words, is there a distinction to be made between mothering and parenting in your work?”

“I want to first respond to this question by making clear the distinction between mothering and motherhood. Within motherhood studies, the term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women. The word mothering however refers to women’s experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centred and potentially empowering to women (Rich, 1986). Adrienne Rich asserts that the distinction between the two must be made so that we are able to "separate the reality of patriarchal motherhood from the possibility or potentiality of feminist mothering".
Citing Rich (1986), O’Reilly further contends that to critique the institution of motherhood, “is not an attack on the family or on mothering, except as defined and restricted under patriarchy”. She continues, “In other words, while motherhood, as an institution is a male-defined site of oppression, women’s own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power.” (O’Reilly, 2004c, p. 2).

Within the discourse on maternal theory, mothering is framed as a practice—described as work mothering peoples engage in when they set out to fulfill the demands of motherwork (nurturing, protection, training and cultural bearing (O’Reilly, 2004; Ruddick, 1989). This conceptualization of mothering enables us to enter the discourse of maternal pedagogies with a different lens that is outside of the dominant male/female dichotomous thinking. Indeed, as O’Reilly remarks, this framing “enables future scholars to analyze the experience and work or practice of mothering as distinct from the identity of the mother [to the extent that] mothering may be performed by anyone who commits him or herself to the demands of maternal practice.” (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 3). In this work I operate from the premise that “it is the practice of mothering that makes one a mother, not a biological or social imperative. Therefore the title of ‘mother’ is not strictly limited to biological mothers or even women.” (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 3 citing LaChance Adams). In keeping with other motherhood scholars, this work holds that “mothering [and by extension feminist maternal pedagogies] may be performed by anyone who commits him or
herself to the demands of maternal practice (O’Reilly, 2004, p.3). It is this framing that disrupts the Eurocentric, gender essentialist and patriarchal paradigms (O’Reilly, 2004).

Even as this conceptualization present possibilities in terms of dislodging essentialist notions of care, the reality is that motherwork—because of the gendered division of labour—in a patriarchal society is still seen as the work of persons biologically female. It is for this reason that I focus primarily on the mothering practices of women of African descent. Nonetheless, because of the previously mentioned way in which mothering is conceived and framed by maternal theoriest, much of what I argue with respect to the connection between African mothering and critical feminist pedagogy, can be applied to people of all genders and social identifications. The only caveat of course is that these mothering individuals be actively engaged in motherwork.

I must also say that I find it interesting that this question has surfaced because, incidentally, I was recently asked this very question by one of Ma’at’s village Uncles with whom I often share aspects of my research. One day, I prepared and asked him to review an abstract for a conference presentation. After reading it, one of the questions he highlighted in bold was: What is the father doing and does he also not perform all of these elements of educating the African child? Can his teachings not be considered maternal pedagogies and are you not pandering to biological essentialism by invoking the term maternal in your work? When we finally spoke, my first impulse was to remind this relatively privileged African male of the institutionalized reality of living in a patriarchal society and confronting the attendant sexism that relegates women to the
domestic sphere. Even as I conceded that within Africological frameworks and cultural traditions, motherhood is not confined to women and can indeed be carried out by members in a larger kinship network (Dove, 1998; Oyewumi, 2003b; Sudarkasa, 2005; Wane, 2000a), we cannot negate the fact that, in our current patriarchal context, childcare is gendered work seen as the province of those who are biologically female.

So you see, Pink Thunder, my argument is not that men cannot function as educators as they care for children. The reality is that in the case of my daughter Ma’at, both her village Aunts and Uncles take part in caring for her, nurturing and teaching her social and cultural cues directly or indirectly. So while it is important to recognize that a biological or social male can assume the role of ‘mother’, I believe it is equally important to recognize the gendered division of labour and the material reality that more often than not biological females bear the lion’s share of childcare responsibilities. This is often the case even in situations where a biological male (or an individual who identifies socially as male) is present. So for me, the question of pandering to biological essentialism is inconsequential within the context of my work given that the purveyors of capitalism carefully crafted these divisions to order, manage, divide the working class and more specifically to disempower/marginalize women to serve its ideological and political agenda. Yet, it is only when the marginalized (in response to these oppressive forces) strategically reclaim these essentialist categories to define and name their situation, when the very spaces of marginalization and difference become sites of resistance, empowerment and critical consciousness raising, that
their self-identification within the categories of marginalization conveniently becomes the subject of critique by those who acquire relative privilege in this capitalist matrix of domination. So, my employment of the concept maternal pedagogies, rather than reinforce biological essences, is consistent with the ideas of maternal theorist who see the empowering potentialities that maternal identity holds. My employment of the term is in effect a political move to pay homage to the generations of women who have made what is generally conceived of as a space of marginalization—the home place—a space of resistance, critical consciousness raising and transformation (hooks, 2007b).”

Grey Owl is the last one seated at the table. “Thank you for that response Adwoa. Can you tell us how the arts-informed methodological approach as presented through the storied narrative converges with the theoretical conventions you talked about earlier?”

“Arts-informed methodology honors diverse ways of knowing grounded in everyday lived experiences. Similar to the indigenous, Afrocentric and African centred feminist paradigms, arts-informed research validates knowledge produced through embodied experiences, through conversations in intimate spaces, and through our everyday encounters in our communities, relationships, as well as through our imaginative or psychic spaces, dreams, and intuitions (Iseke-Barnes, 2003). Where the arts-informed perspective and the above paradigms meet, is where they function implicitly and explicitly as counter-hegemonic frameworks for challenging the status quo on what is considered acceptable knowledge. Arts-informed research is consistent with the
approaches and theoretical underpinnings that ground this research project to the extent that it eschews the view that knowledge production is the domain of researchers and theorists within the walls of academia. Rather, the methodology holds to the notion ‘that knowledge resides in our body, the senses, and in relationships with others’ so much so that space, place and bodies become sites of inquiry into how we come to know about our self in relation to the world around us (Cole & Knowles, 2008b; Luciani, 2005, Iseke-Barnes, 2003, Smith, 1999). Much like the frameworks discussed above, arts-informed research rejects the linear, positivistic methodological canons of traditional social science inquiries and instead calls for the validation and advancement of alternative forms of knowledge production and representation within academia. One of the key convergences of the arts-informed perspective and the frameworks that ground my research, is its focus on ensuring that research is not simply a voyeuristic endeavour but is relevant, useful, and accessible to the community as a whole and where the researcher and the researched are seen as equal contributors and producers of knowledge. This is particularly important when researching Afro-indigenous communities because, as Linda Smith (1999) tells us, ‘[o]n the international scene it is extremely rare and unusual when indigenous accounts are accepted and acknowledged as valid interpretations of what has taken place’ (pp. 34-35). In this regard, and consistent with the indigenous, Afrocentric and African centred feminist perspectives, arts-informed research also disrupts the imperialistic, objectifying research practices ‘that extract and claim ownership of [indigenous people’s] ways of knowing…and then simultaneously reject the people who
created and developed these ideas’ (Smith, 1999, p.1). To the extent that arts-informed research allows for the telling of diverse perspectives on reality, the methodology functions discursively as a decolonizing platform for what Smith appropriately calls ‘counter-storytelling’ (p. 2) that is ‘grounded in the spirit of integrity, relevance, accessibility and engagement’ (Cole & Knowles, 2008b, p. 59) and that is most importantly transformative. Again, this emphasis on counter-storytelling becomes crucial when we think about the centrality of stories in Afro-indigenous communities, where stories have and continue to function as key mediums for the articulation of values, attitudes, cultural practices and beliefs. Therefore from an Africological perspective, storytelling thus becomes more than entertainment. Importantly, as Smith points out, the ‘[t]elling of stories from the past, reclaiming the past, [is our way of] giving testimony to the injustices of the past’ (pp. 34-35). So when coupled with the politicized dimension of Afrocentricity, indiginiety and African centred feminism(s), arts-informed methodology also becomes politicized.

“Adwoa,” Grey Owl says thoughtfully, “Can you elaborate further on this notion of politicizing arts-informed research methodology?”

“What do I mean by this? Well, to politicize research is to view research from the perspective of the marginalized so that the space of marginalization (in this case, mothering) is no longer seen as a space of victimization and oppression and instead is seen as a space of resistance, a space where knowledge resides, a space in which we can critique systems of oppression, a space where critical consciousness is being exercised stripped of jargon free languages. Therefore, this arts-informed
research text becomes political to the extent that Afro-indigenous peoples through storytelling can continue to reveal the complex, multilayered, psychological and emotional aspects of oppressive systems, while resisting its neo-colonizing injustices, attacks and devaluation of our knowledges, bodies and spaces in the present moment. In the context of my research, the methodologies employed and the knowledge yielded from their usage becomes political in a social justice context because they speak to the ways in which the research itself becomes connected and integral to our communities' ability to unpack hegemonic relations of power and engage in the process of 'untying our tongues' (Johal, 2005). This is why I chose to write the Anancy stories I grew up hearing in my mother tongue, centering them on the page, while literally relegating the English language to the margins. The politicization of arts-informed research becomes apparent in this project to the extent that I as a researcher am engaged through narrative form in making visible bodies and knowledges that have been rendered invisible through colonial research paradigms. For those of us who are supposed to remain silent victims, I utilize these stories on African women's embodied knowledges to make visible neo/colonial violences. Just as Anancy liberated himself by creating subversive knowledges, these stories do the same in terms of illustrating how those researching African descended peoples' lives can also decolonize research paradigms. This is essentially for me how I see the politicization of arts-informed research methodology."

“Ok, let’s see. Fire Wasp pauses then continues, “Might we have another go around?” He signals with his hands to Swift River, opening up the floor to her once more.
“Aahh. Sure,” nods Swift River. “So you have chosen to present the research information through storytelling and telling stories. I am curious as to how you will satisfy an academic audience that this is research?”

“I am not quite sure I understand this question?” I say not expecting her to ask that question.

“Well,” she says, “let me clarify. I suppose I am curious as to how an academic audience will get a sense of your analysis? In other words, what clues should they look for in trying to make sense of this work and that will simultaneously facilitate an understanding of your making sense of these stories?”

“You know, as much as I attempted to allow these stories to speak their own truths, I am cognizant of certain institutional strictures. I am also very mindful that my work will be inappropriately judged based on positivist standards that call for intellectual rigour. It appears that for many within the walls of academia rigour can only be evidenced through clear sections and chapter headings that signal to readers in a linear manner: here lies the introduction, the rationale, background and or scope of the study, the methodology, discussion, findings and conclusion. These sections of course must be punctuated with abstracted interview quotes that are dissected and analyzed throughout the work. Viewed through this lens, it would seem that only then can a thesis really be scholarly. Since I decided very early in this journey that I was not going to conform to those conventions, I tried to take into consideration this inevitable demand for rigour
by incorporating as much as possible this perspective (albeit in a different way) while remaining grounded in a form that is congruent with my Africological sensibilities on the sacred value of storytelling. What you see before you is my struggle to reconcile the two seemingly diametrically opposed worlds. However, audiences that seek rigour must understand also that the process of writing stories, shaping the narrative arc, developing plot, dialogue, and characters is all a part of me analyzing in order to understand and bring to life through the form of creative nonfiction my co-participants' storied memories. Rather than simply cutting up chunks of quotes from my co-participants' conversations and telling audiences what I think each quote means, I chose instead to story their memories relayed to me so that various audiences (academic and lay) could get a more holistic picture of key moments and salient themes that came out of our conversations. This way, the reader is able to draw their own conclusions and perhaps provide other interpretations. So, for me this is the first level of 'data analysis'. A second level of 'data analysis', one more in keeping with conventional social science methods, can be evidenced in the right column where I use quotes to speak back to the main narrative. These quotes substantiate aspects of co-participants’ storied lives and reinforce the findings and ideas in the existing literature on motherhood, critical and feminist pedagogy, narrative theory, storytelling and Afro-indigenous cultural practices. Throughout, I also provide footnotes to expand on or provide clarity on complex ideas and concepts used in the discourse on anti-racist education, equity and social justice. This way, audiences gain a better
understanding of the manner in which particular concepts are employed in the context of the narrated story.”

Fire Wasp interjects offering up a time check. He reminds us that we have another fifteen minutes to close before opening up the floor once more to the committee members.

“Adwoa,” Cosmic Serpent calls out to me in popcorn style. She doesn’t wait this time for the usual linear go around model. “Can you tell us how are you conceptualizing African in the context of your work? I would also like you to respond to whether you feel it is appropriate to use this identifier when referring to diasporic women who may very well consider themselves removed geographically from the African continent and therefore might have difficulty locating themselves as African?”

“Dove (1998) uses the term African to describe all Black peoples of African descent who are continental African or members of the diaspora living in Europeanized or Euro-American/Western societies outside of Africa. This conceptualization she argues, captures the cultural and experiential specificity of a diverse people. I employ the term African in a similar manner throughout this text to link people who bear the physical markers of Blackness. I also use it to underscore the materiality of bearing identifiable markers of Blackness in a racialized context, even as I acknowledge of course that as African peoples we span a diverse colour palate and occupy varied phenotypical markers and shades of brown skin. Beyond the physical aspect, and perhaps most importantly, I employ the term African as an ethnic marker—as opposed to a
national identity marker, thereby precluding Anglo-Saxons born on the continent and who I believe can never experience what Fanon calls ‘the fact of Blackness’—because the label ‘offers the potential [for diasporic Africans in particular] to connect [these physical] characteristics, [this fact of Blackness of which Fanon speaks] to a [larger] cultural value system that venerates African humanity’ (Dove, 1998 p. 536). Incidentally, now as I reflect on my conversations, two co-participants were hesitant to identify as African either because of the experience of colonization of the mind and/or wanting to extricate themselves from what has been historically regarded as the space of darkness. Even as they were given the space to tease out these tensions and to express or eschew their Africanness as they saw fit, the irony was that the women who disassociated themselves from that label were the very ones to draw connections (albeit un/consciously) between their cultural practices in a way that clearly illustrated a link to an African ancestral past. I recall for instance one co-participant telling me with confidence that she is Jamaican not African. She told me that she identified as Jamaican because when she meets continental Africans her Africaness is immediately called into questioned either because she does not speak an 'African language' or have physical rootedness in a particular place on the continent. At the same time she also talked to me about death rituals—rituals that today can be traced back to the enslaved Maroons brought to Jamaica from parts of Africa— in the same way I did in my childhood story entitled 'Nine-Night'. Another one of the women (born on the continent) relayed a story of passing for white in the winter but being of darker hue in the summer. It was also difficult for
her to locate herself as African even as she shared experiences of anti-African racism similar to that which I and other visibly darker co-participants experienced. For me however, in this work, the most important factor in locating oneself as African (even as I may not have a piece of land to connect to on the continent) is realizing that as Dei (1999b, p. 4) aptly tells us, for all peoples of African descent 'there exist an emotional, cultural, intellectual, and psychological connection between all Africans, wherever they may be [located or born physically]'".

The two other committee members abstain. Fire Wasp circles back to the Swift River who asks the final question.

“How does this work contribute to the advancement of knowledge?”

Exhausted, I breathe a loud sigh of relief and think: This is the question anticipated by all doctoral candidates. I respond confidently having prepared for the certainty of its asking. “The study explores a neglected area within the field of education. It is unique in its examination of the link between motherwork, critical/feminist pedagogy and 'epistemological equity' (Cole & Knowles, 2008b, p. 62). This is important because, despite growing interest in the topic of mothering and the birth of motherhood studies, few studies have focused in on the learning associated with and influenced by the everyday practice of mothering. This arts-informed narrative text hones in on the various ways in which mothers enact forms of resistance and embolden children to develop an awareness of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heteronormativity as well as the hegemonic nature of the neo-colonial knowledge economy. It underscores the role the African-Canadian mother
plays in 'exposing the hegemonic order of colonialism and patriarchy (Wane, 2008, p. 186)' within the context of education. It is my hope that through the study's association between mothering and critical pedagogy, that we can begin to open up space that values maternal pedagogies, realizing that as educators, mothers are foundational elements of our society (Oyewumi, 2003b). Further, it is hoped that through my research, educationalists can begin to see the potentialities of maternal pedagogies—produced through the African mothers lived experiences, their stories and storytelling, songs, dance, and cultural productions—for rupturing neo-colonial alienation and for developing alternative educational practices.

Building on the notion of epistemological equity, embodied knowledges and education (broadly conceived), the findings of this project also makes an invaluable contribution in terms of answering the indigenous and anti-racist call for valuing of multiple sites of knowledge—in particular embodied pedagogies. In this regard, my research validates Luciani's (2005) claims to the extent that the African-Canadian mother becomes ‘a metaphorical site of inquiry’ where the African child constitutes his/her subjectivity. My study however builds upon this notion through its location of the African mother as a literal embodied text from which the African child reads the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) in order to discover socio-cultural meaning. Therefore it uniquely locates the African-Canadian mother within a corporal schema where her body serves as a site of knowledge about the historical and contemporary social constructions and implications of social difference. In other words, the African-Canadian mother through her embodied ‘otherness’
shapes the African child’s discursive identity (Gee, 2000) and as a consequence is a site where race, identity and culture is scripted. Through this study’s positioning of the African mother as literal and metaphorical anti-colonial text, I stand on the shoulders of indigenous scholars before me in acknowledging that ‘knowledge surpasses the intellectual realm [and rather] lodge[s] into the realm of the emotional [spiritual and physical body]’ (Iseke-Barnes, 2003, p. 215 citing Holmes, 2000). This arts-informed narrative account reinforces the notion that ‘[k]nowledge is a gift… revealed and contextualized through relationships’ (Iseke-Barnes, 2003, p. 214 citing Holmes, 2004), but may also be inscribed on the body of the racialised m(other). In this regard, this text becomes important in terms of providing educationalists with real life examples that reveal the pitfalls and possibilities of enacting pedagogies that are grounded in bodies and communities and that will transform our thinking beyond the scope of Euro-patriarchal paradigms of knowledge, learning and education.

Additionally, the study offers a contemporary look into the African descended women’s role in the anti-colonial struggle. In this regard, it adds an important dimension to the literature on anti-colonialism and indigenous knowledge production through its intersection of African centred feminist theories on mothering and indigenous pedagogical approaches. The work offers a counter hegemonic reading of African descended women’s experience of mothering (more specifically African descended women located in Canada) through their own voices. Through their stories, we are reminded that ‘African women are the guardians of traditional knowledge
and leaders in resistance struggles [and that] women’s role as traditional teachers has never ceased’ (Wane, 2008, p. 186). This arts-informed research account uniquely allows the African-Canadian mother to ‘speak their own truths’ (Wane, 2008, p. 186) in bringing into focus the historical legacies of colonialism and its attendant physical, epistemological and psychological violence. It is in this way that the study cements the African mother as a site for the enactment of anti (neo) colonial resistance. At the same time, it makes an important connection between anti-colonialism and knowledge production further revealing how Afro-indigenous women continue to—through their lived experiences, rituals, storytelling, play, song, dance, and art—model indigenous educational imperatives.

This research reinstates the agency of women who through an assertion of African ‘indigenousness’ (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001) are able to ‘challenge the political economy of knowledge production that accords legitimacy to certain knowledge systems while invalidating others’ (Shahjahan, 2005, p. 685 citing Dei, 2000a, p. 129). Through their knowledge production, the African-mother is able to resist the erasure of self as well as reconfigure the lens, images, and discourses through which they are produced as m(others).

Finally, it situates arts-informed research as an anti-colonial, ‘indigenist’ (Wilson, 2007) and decolonizing methodology. Arts informed research acknowledges ‘the myriad ways of engaging with the world—the oral, literal, visual, and embodied’ (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 60). Since as we know that ‘indigenous peoples…have always resisted oppression through storytelling,
spirituality [and] by keeping traditional ways of life alive' (Wane, 2008, p. 186), this project illustrates how arts-informed narrative research as a methodology builds on and is consistent with this politicized cultural tradition of storytelling that is already rooted in worldwide indigenous cultures. Whereas anti-colonial methodologies usher in a politics of resistance, this thesis shows how indigenous and arts-informed methodologies intersect in terms of opening up space for the reclamation of indigenous voices through storytelling, music orality, as well as visual, and embodied representations such as dance. Arts-informed scholarship is anti-colonial to the extent that the methodology accords ‘discursive integrity’ (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 299) to our accounts of our histories, cultures and languages. Therefore, in the context of my study it is this positioning of stories, for instance, as a medium for the articulation of indigenous narratives on their lived experiences of pain, vulnerability, resistance and possibility that allows for the viewing of arts-informed research as an anti-colonial methodology that facilitates a knowing of the world which comes from the perspective of those positioned as M(other) (Shahjahan, 2005, p. 226). Arts-informed research methodology answers the indigenous and anti-colonial ‘call of stories’ (Cole, 1989) in a way that moves us away from this conventional disembodied, exploitative and disconnected Euro-patriarchal social science research. The narratives here evince how arts-informed research methodology can use insights from indigeniety, as an entry point for thinking through possibilities for decolonizing educational research within academia.
“Okay Ms. Onuora, the question part of this examination is now over. We are going to ask you to leave the room while we discuss your thesis and presentation. Feel free to go stretch your legs, and get a sip of water.”

I nod, pick up my cue cards and head towards the door. Before exiting, I hear Fire Wasp call out, “Don’t go too far now. We need to be able to find you when we have made a decision.”

I exit into the corridors of the 4th floor of OISE and dash for the closest washroom.

Fifteen minutes later, I return to the proximity of the examination room to find Fire Wasp searching for me in the hallway.

“Where did you go Ms. Onuora?”

“Oh just to the washroom.”

“Come on in, we’re ready.”

I follow slowly still bathing in sweat. My heart flutters vigorously. My legs wobble under the weight of my torso as I move into the room.

Fire Wasp turns and whispers playfully as he enters the doorway, “I thought for a second there that you ran off. Was thinking we might have to call the search and rescue team to find you.”

I let out a nervous giggle.

Fire Wasp quips with a laugh before saying, “Don’t be frightened.”

*
I awake on those words with Ma’at’s fingertips prying my eyelids apart. She plants wet ones in my ear and nostrils before screaming, “Mu-ummm, the sun is waking up. Wake up, it’s your big day!”

Beaming up at her, I pinch her cheek and whisper lazily, “I know baby, I know.”
Appendices
Appendix A

Journaling the Process

December 15th, 2010: Breaking Down, Falling Apart

Dear Diary,

Today, I sat staring at the blank computer screen and the writer’s block continues. I wonder: Will I ever get to the stage of completion? Even if I do, will I escape whole or in pieces? Today was one of those days where I felt like giving up and letting go of this all. But then I remembered Ma’at and realize that if not for anybody else, if not for myself, I have to finish what I started. Even as my body is literally falling apart, I have to believe that it will all be worth it in the end. As much as this journey has been spiritually, emotionally and physically draining, Ma’at remains the light guiding me through this dark tunnel.

March 19th, 2011: Finding Form

Dear Diary,

Today I feel hopeful. Gary and I sat down for two hours going through my initial interview schedule. We went over the research goals and objectives and mapped out themes that I could perhaps draw on to write these stories. At the end of our meeting, we had a template for my dissertation. So, each chapter will read like this: a story about me telling my daughter an Anancy folktale, followed by my own story of being mothered, and finally a co-participant’s story about their experience of mothering or being mothered and that compliments the theme of that chapter. Now that I have the form I am comfortable with, I think I can begin to story these lives. Things are beginning to look more positive now.
May 20th, 2011: A Satisfying Ending, Trusting the Process

Dear Diary,

Today was the last thesis group meeting for the summer. At these monthly sessions, a group of researchers using arts-informed methodologies share aspects of our work, and get peer support for things that we're struggling with in our work. I enjoy going to thesis group sessions. For me, it is a space where I can seek guidance varying from how to surpass writer's block as well as get moral uplift through what can be an enjoyable but demoralizing journey. The group also serves as a source of creative inspiration.

Well, this past week my creative juices seemed stagnant. Not quite sure where to turn with the larger narrative, I cried out in a panic: "Help! I don't know how to end these stories." Sure, I can admit that I was perhaps being a tad bit hysterical. In any case, my peers assured me that we all go through this at different stages of the creative process. This made me feel better. Then, I don't know why but as part of my check in, I decided to share a story about my week with my daughter and a memorable moment as I prepared her for daycare. As I ended the story, a member of the group said to me: "There's your satisfying ending." That was an epiphanal moment. I didn't want the freshness of that memory or the idea to leave me so I rushed home to immediately write again.

As I sat at my computer, I thought back to the moments when Gary tells me to trust the process. I do this now, even when in the moment it appears that all the pieces of the puzzle are not quite fitting together.
Appendix B

Glossary of Words

_Akete drum:_ a high-pitched drum

_Nyame:_ is the sky god of the Ashanti and Akan people of Ghana

_Duppy:_ a ghostlike creature in Caribbean folklore, believed to have the capability of harming or overpowering humans; a ghost or spirit

_Obeah:_ an African religious tradition practiced in Jamaica that is usually classified as sorcery or Black magic

_Wine:_ this word appears in many languages in the Caribbean region and is a literal reinvention of the word “wind”. When used in the context of the dancehall in Jamaica, it describes a circular (sometimes) seductive movement of the waist and hips

_Ackee:_ the national fruit of Jamaica, consisting of a spongy, red skin with fleshy yellow pods and black seeds inside

_Cowitch:_ a wild bush that causes itching and swelling of the skin

_Calabash:_ a smooth, large hard-shelled gourd use as a drinking and eating utensil

_Rastafari:_ a religious, spiritual and political order that is based on African philosophy and traditions. A Rastafarian therefore is a person who holds to beliefs centred on this philosophy
Adinkra Symbols: Their Meaning and Significance

Adinkra is a language system that has been used for centuries by the Akan of West Africa in Ghana. In Akan cosmology, the world is made up of two realms: the world of the physical or the world of the living and the nonphysical or spiritual world. Both worlds compliment each other and every living creature is thought to transition between these two realms through the cycle of birth, puberty, marriage, physical death and rebirth (Blay, 2008). Each symbol contains its own narrative about the Akan people and their relationship to land, the environment and the ancestors.

The reader will notice that I have woven some of these symbols into each storied chapter. The symbols, though aesthetically appealing, lend more than just aesthetic consistency to the work. Importantly, they lend well to the educative possibilities of the work. Each Adinkra has pedagogical significance and connects to the theme of the chapters as well as to the larger story on African maternal pedagogies. As a unique structured language system, Adinkra (similar to the Anancy stories) serve as a medium for the articulation of Afro-indigenous cultural knowledges and worldviews. As a system of communication, the symbols serve an important storytelling function in terms of conveying messages about Akan cosmological principles, cultural values and beliefs. Some of their messages have been adopted by Africans the world over and continue to
be used as an expression a collective historical memory. Below is a list with meanings of select Adinkra symbols used throughout this work:

**Cover**
Ananse Ntontan: “Spiders web”. Anancy represents the symbol of wisdom, creativity and the complexities of life.

**Chapter 1**
Owua Atwede: “The ladder of death or symbol of mortality”. It serves as a reminder of the transitory nature of existence in this world and of the imperative to live a good life to be a worthy soul in the afterlife.

**Chapter 2**
Boa Me Na Me Mmoa Wo: "Help me and let me help you". This symbolizes cooperation and interdependence.

**Chapter 3**
Duafe: “The wooden comb”. This is the symbol of beauty (specifically feminine beauty).

**Chapter 4**
Aya: “Defiance, endurance, resourcefulness”. The fern is a hardy plant that can grow in difficult places. An individual who wears this symbol is known to have endured many adversities and outlasted much difficulty.

**Chapter 5**
Sankofa: “Return and get it”. This symbol speaks to the importance of learning and recovering from the past.
Appendix D

Storytelling Epistemologies within the Classroom

As the research account did not examine in a significant and direct way, how to use stories within the context of the classroom, I will devote this section to briefly talk about the pedagogical and instructional relevance of stories for the classroom practitioner.

Within the context of the classroom, storytelling could be used as a pedagogical tool to enrich teaching and learning for both students and learners. There are numerous benefits that can be garnered from infusing storytelling into curriculum and pedagogy.

Firstly, stories can be used as tool for speaking about the lived experiences of various marginalized groups. They can engender critical thinking on how stories relate to these lived experiences and help students think about how we can imagine transformation at various levels. Educators may use storytelling “as a way to link course material to larger socio-cultural beliefs, practices, or to critique/critically reflect on and challenge socio-cultural practices and to examine possibilities for change” (Abrahamson, 1998, n.p). Anancy folktales for instance, can become a useful tool for critiquing structures of domination. Anancy stories can help learners understand the socio-political context within which Anancy arose in Africa and its diasporas. They can also be used by educators to speak about the various mediums through which African peoples engineered resistance to slavery and colonialism. Anancy stories also gain significance
as an anti-hegemonic narrative in its offering of what Delgado (1989) calls a “counter-story”. Anancy stories could be taken up in such a way to help learners focus in and critically reflect on the historical consequences of colonialism. As facilitators of learning, educators could draw out examples in Anancy stories to help learners examine and reflect on the consequences of internalized racism. More specifically, they could also use these stories to open up discussions on the material consequences of skin colour privilege in the historical and contemporary context. In this way, educators can create teachable moments that challenge the dominant ideology that lighter skin is better and in so doing, address any potential for healing racialized groups of the psychic trauma wrought by the racism of colonialism (Delgado, 1989).

A community of learners could also collectively tease out the complexity of the trickster folk figure Anancy. In critically thinking about the socio-political context within which Anancy had to survive, learners will begin to (rather than see Anancy as automatically a negative figure) understand how the conditions of oppression sometimes forces those marginalized to resort to “trickster” tactics in order to survive the systemic inequites it creates. The reading of the folk icon Anancy as tricker and as a site of empowerment, resistance and agency can unearth alternative interpretations to the negative readings often offered up about Anancy.

Storytelling allows for the inclusion of diverse ways of knowing from various ethnocultural groups thereby yielding a greater appreciation for the knowledges and perspectives of various learners within the classroom. “Through the linking of various learners life experiences, hierarchical power relations that inhere in the teacher/student dynamic are potentially reduced and the emotional and personal distancing in educational sites of knowledge production is ruptured
when teacher (like students) becomes learners of each other’s stories that show commonality in their personal experiences and perspectives.” (Abrahamson, 1998, n.p)

Stories (both personal and cultural) are useful in bridging the divide between classroom educators and the educators that young learners have in other cultural institutions such as the family. A concrete way in which this could occur is by inviting and involving mothering peoples to take part in consultation around curriculum development. The benefits of this are two-fold. First, it would facilitate a more collaborative approach that shifts the dominant perception that a learner's home based educational support is merely an appendage to the support and education offered by the “expert” classroom teacher (Macdonald, 2011). Second, in drawing on the diverse bodies of cultural knowledges and mediums, educators could stem the alienation experienced by marginalized groups in formal educational institutions and instead facilitate the building of a more holistic community of learners.

Educators can incorporate stories within their teaching by inviting community folklorists to conduct storytelling sessions in the classroom. Another option would be to take students on field trips into areas in the communities where folklorists reside to engage them in storytelling learning events outside the classroom. The benefits of this are many. Classroom practitioners can support community members in preserving and validating important belief systems, values and indigenous educational imperatives. In the context of maternal pedagogies, Macdonald (2011) suggests, giving mothers, grandmothers and other elders in the community the opportunity to participate in play based learning activities of pre-school children. Students get to observe a model of collaborative education wherein members of the community serve as an important
part of their learning experience. Additionally, the type of thinking that presupposes that teachers are solely responsible for educating our children is disrupted when the whole community is welcomed into the classroom space. In this way, all learners come to value different types of knowledges that reside in different bodies. Folklorists in collaboration with teachers can then ask a series of questions that focus in on a specific theme or topic (Mello, 2001; Macdonald, 2011).

Educators can use cultural stories as a means through which to tap into ancestral memories of particular groups. Storytelling can provide a more accessible format and language for students to learn about their ancestral history as well as the legacies of colonization. In the classroom, educators could present historical content through the use of cultural stories. A concrete example abounds: teachers could talk about pre-colonial and colonial contact through Anancy folk tales. For example, the story “How Anancy came to Americas” could be used at a pre-kindergarten level to provide a basic introduction on the topic of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade connecting Africans in the diaspora to Africa. This is particularly important in spaces like Jamaica where many people still distance themselves from Africa because of the psychological violence of colonialism. Storytelling therefore can serve as a tool for the reclamation and recovery of our ancestral legacies and histories. At a more advanced level, educators could develop courses whose learning objective would be to engage students in oral literary criticism of folklore such as Anancy stories and facilitate critical thinking on the various meanings and significance of folklore. This practice could be both a learning experience for teachers as learners as well as students.

Stories can also become a useful tool for countering dominance both inside and outside the classroom. Currently, in mainstream schools, students are being provided pedagogical tools
that come from a particular lens and from a particular perspective (what Audre Lorde calls the master’s tools) so much so that they tend to reproduce the very racist, sexist, classist, patriarchal, homophobic and ableist dominant narrative that reinforces hierarchical power relations. Folktales could be amended to fit the current context in a way that allows the classroom practitioner to focus in on issues of marginalization so as to encourage students to write/retell these stories in a new way that speak to their current context. If stories like Anancy can illuminate us on the plantation experience, these same stories can also insight us on the culture of dancehall, on topics such as sexuality identity and culture, or cultural and economic (neo)imperialism. Case in point: Educators could encourage students to create contemporary versions of Anancy folktales. A story about Anancy in Foreign (read: Canada and the United States) could facilitate a critique of North-American cultural and economic hegemony, and also open up a dialogue on the varying experiences of immigrants in “the land of dollars”. Here, learners could unpack the various myths that cast Euro-America as a “bed of roses” or the “home of the brave, land of the free.” Instead, teachers could infuse course materials with the narratives that explore and foreground the immigrant experiences of navigating whiteness and its attendant alienation. These discussions could also provide an opportunity for an awakening of the trickster motif in the contemporary context, exploring how the trickster spirit of Anancy remains in terms of helping immigrants develop survival strategies. They could also be useful in helping learners draw parallels to the historical instances where oppressed groups have employed Anancy tactics as a tool for survival.

Above all, storytelling pedagogies offer a shift from the “depersonalization endemic in the types of knowledge production that takes place in formal educational settings and schooling” to
the extent that it offers a vision of schooling where a community of learners feel comfortable sharing stories “imbued with emotions [and that] provide as an alternative to mechanistic knowledge production that is privileged in formal educational settings.” (Abrahamson, 1998, n.p.)

Where to from here?

In moving forward, I would like to devote future research to examining the usefulness, limitations and learning outcomes of some of the storytelling pedagogical techniques discussed above in the context of Jamaica. I am particularly interested in looking at the following questions: To what uses can Anancy and other Jamaican folkstories be put in classrooms? How does storytelling impact teaching and learning? How do stories enrich pedagogy and the learning environment? I would also like to inquire into the use of Anancy stories in broadening pre-kindergarten students’ and primary students’ understanding of the historical and contemporary experiences of colonialism. Finally, I would like to also examine the possibilities and limitations of bringing folkstory tellers (such as mothers, grandmothers and other mothering elders) into the classroom.


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