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“LIVING IN THE LIGHT”:

EXAMINING CONTEMPORARY HOMEPLACE NARRATIVES

A Dissertation in

English

by

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This study examines five contemporary memoirs as homeplace narratives and thereby, considers the function of the texts as advocacy for the disempowered and dispossessed. In this way, the project seeks to highlight the contribution that the three authors of these memoirs make to the larger tradition of Africana women’s life writing that is centered in community uplift and in addition to exposing and challenging systems of domination. Each of the memoirists studied addresses how she has been subjugated by her position as an Africana woman, and in so doing she illumines the complex social pressures that have shaped her life. These women demonstrate, however, that their homeplace narratives become powerful instruments to facilitate the critical-consciousness development of the authors and audience. This project analyzes these texts through a womanist lens to uncover the rhetorical choices the authors make to forge communities of resistance that empower other Africana women to become more invested in self-discovery and, ultimately, transformation. Additionally, this research considers the potential of these texts to expand the parameters of academic literacies, and to foster a more meaningful engagement between university and community.
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Chapter 1

Living in the Light

Children of nature from another culture
Had to survive living in the light
Stolen from the centre of the world untimely departure
Somehow survived living in the light...

Roots become subculture
Oh the sound of street dub-vendor
Knew you had to survive living in the light
Beautiful yet scattered
Through it all your spirit never shattered
Glad to stay alive living in the light

“Livin’ in the Light”--Caron Wheeler

In the early nineties, British soul singer Caron Wheeler emerged onto the U. S. musical scene bringing a bohemian aesthetic, melding elements from varied non-western cultures that sharply defied the prevailing Eurocentric standard of beauty. The above epigraph is taken from one of her biggest hit songs, “Livin’ in the Light.” The song speaks to the ways Africana people throughout the Diaspora struggle to retain a culture that has been fragmented. In her singing and presentation, Wheeler elucidated how Africana peoples have been miraculously able to retain a sense of Africaness through music among other cultural forms. For Wheeler, to live in the light meant to find one’s true voice, which is rooted in a history one must fight to learn and remember. To do so is
a matter of survival. As I see it, to live in the light is to break free from the strictures that are created from negative notions of what it means to be of African descent and, specific to this study, what it means to be an Africana woman. It means making independent decisions about how one dresses, wears one’s hair, dances, sings, writes or otherwise chooses to express one’s self.

During a time when the surge in popularity of natural hair and Afrocentric clothing of the sixties had long since given way to processed curls and chemical straightening, Wheeler dared to flaunt waist-length locks. Her bright and bold clothing were also representative of cultures of Africa and Asia. Wheeler’s appearance alone performed pedagogy, creating a staunch assertion of her selfhood. But her music even further demonstrated a refusal to conform to a value system that was not authentic to her. Wheeler’s soulful sound infused with elements of hip hop and her socially aware, poignant songwriting called attention to and commanded respect for a culture and a people that have historically been pushed to the margins of society.

Although Wheeler would never reach superstardom, her fierce self-expression—along with that of singers such as reggae artist Rita Marley and the folk group Sweet Honey in the Rock—helped to shape the most recent incarnation of a movement toward a more African-centered aesthetic and social consciousness that is often associated with later artists such as Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill, India.Arie and Jill Scott. Wheeler, then, is just one example in a long tradition of Africana woman who have dared to challenge fiercely the way that Africana woman have been perceived. But while music and fashion
are indeed powerful forms of self-expression, narrative continues to be one of the most profound, potent and accessible vehicles for asserting such selfhood for Africana women.

A Tradition of Africana Women’s Narratives

In *African Diaspora and Autobiographics*, Africana and Women’s Studies scholar Chinosole examines texts by authors from Olaudah Equiano and Harriet Jacobs, to Peter Abraham and Richard Wright, all the way up to Assata Shakur and Audre Lorde. Her rationale for picking these texts is as follows,

All of these works by women and men protest the conditions of people of African descent over a three-hundred-year time span, but the authors are historic figures and cultural/political activists as well. (Chinosole xii)

Chinosole further reaffirms that narrative is perhaps the most powerful tool in Africana literature, maintaining, “over many years of teaching, I learned most about Black world views, aesthetics and gnosis through these autobiographical works” (33).

In her chapter that compares Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Shakur’s *Assata: An Autobiography*, Chinosole does a great job of showing the presence of a strong tradition of narrative as a tool for social change, even with texts that on the surface may seem incongruent. She demonstrates the ways both Jacobs and Shakur, though at different junctures in history, are seen as “fugitives” who are able to “challenge state power” (92). Chinosole thus argues that these women “authenticate their version of
history through documentation‖ that counters mainstream images of Africana women. Chinosole further makes the case of how imprisonment is enslavement by quoting Shakur’s autobiography. As Chinosole shows, in one particularly poignant passage in Shakur’s text, she speaks out about the harsh treatment she is receiving by reminding the prison guard that slavery is over. The guard responds that in prison slavery is not over. When Shakur refers back to the Constitution, she finds that the guard is indeed correct (quoted in Chinosole 117). A core difference that Chinosole delineates between enslavement narratives and Black-Power narratives, however, is audience. She contends that Shakur’s “language lets us know that she has turned away from an oppressor’s audience and faces an audience that is primarily black” (117).

In Traces of a Stream, Jacqueline Jones Royster, covering material complementary to that engaged by Chinosole, assays a tradition of Africana women “language users” who employ all forms of writing and speech available to become change agents (Royster 21). While she focuses on elite essayists and orators from the Reconstruction period, she accurately and effectively emphasizes that Africana women across time and space have used language to empower self and community. Royster emphasizes that Africana women have masterfully accomplished such uplift through various forms of communication. She contends,

This flexibility suggests that these writers are operating not just aesthetically but also rhetorically. In using language and literacy across a matrix of communication practices, they illustrate how highly they value the place and function of language in their lives (Royster 20).
Royster does not focus particularly on narrative, but she does acknowledge its power as a tool for speaking against oppression and suggests that Alice Walker’s essay style exemplifies how Africana women combat the traditional detachment in scholarly writing by using “narrative digressions” (39).

Similar to the stream that Royster traces, In *African American Women’s Rhetoric: The Search for Dignity, Personhood and Honor,* Deborah F. Atwater acknowledges the rich rhetorical history of African American women from Sara Baartman all the way up to present day female hip hop artists, although she pays particularly close attention to elite and educated women. Atwater aptly observes that women within the hip hop era use written and verbal communication, as did their foremothers, to “be courageous, to fight back, and to lift the spirits of themselves, but also the spirits of others” (Atwater 134). For Atwater, such a commitment to asserting selfhood and improving community is a centrality of the African American women’s rhetorical tradition. As Atwater puts it:

The major themes illuminated by the rhetoric of the women discussed in the text can be categorized as the need for women to not only stand up for themselves, but also stand up for their communities. Important themes of self-affirmation, dignity, and respect are consistently found in the writings, songs and speeches of these women. No matter how hard and often dangerous the circumstances, all of these African American women were indefatigable in their hopes and their dreams for themselves and their communities. (137)

Ultimately, Atwater maintains that the negative renderings of Africana women can and must be replaced by highlighting the rich tradition of fearless women who have dared to
challenge the stereotypical images of black womanhood. Atwater urges that changing the public perceptions of Africana women can be achieved by acknowledging the long standing tradition of resistance of African American, as well as by realizing potential feasible points of attack. Atwater contends, “We must be vigilant in how we consume products, read articles, and view films. Only then can we begin to put to rest the negative images and terrible legacy of Sara Baartman” (141).

While there has indeed been a great deal of scholarship that focuses on the early narratives of elite Africana women, Margo Perkins aptly asserts that the narratives of the Black Power Movement signaled a shift in tone and approach. Similar to Chinosole, she notices that such narratives display a more straightforward and rugged sensibility and more directly address an audience of disempowered people. They read as calls to action rather than as appeals to the white and privileged. Perkins argues that current interest in the Black Power Movement reflects a desire to “reclaim an oppositional or counter hegemonic voice that challenges the status quo,” a voice that she refers to as “oppositional rhetoric and practice” (Perkins xi-xii). She examines the ways activists’ narratives give voice to counter hegemonic discourse in a way that can empower oppressed communities by giving, to use Henry Giroux’s terminology, a “language of empowerment” (xii).

Perkins elucidates how three activists of the Black Power Movement, Elaine Brown, Assata Shakur and Angela Davis, advance the twofold project of “bearing witness and building legacies” with their narratives (xii). She adds that it is extremely important for these women to be able to provide their perspective because participants in
the Black Power Movement have been painted in the media as maniacal domestic terrorists (3). Perkins further contends that these texts do not have the standing within the academy that they should and that they force a further interrogation of what constitutes a theoretical text. As she puts it,

In addition to agitating for critical literacy that leads to practice, their works suggest new ways of envisioning literacy study. That it becomes important that we study literature not just as a repository of culture, but also as a pedagogical resource in the work of transforming culture. (25)

Key components of these texts are that they are rooted in community, and the authors subordinate their own distinctiveness to highlight the systematic pressures that impact and limit the lives of people of color (26). The impetus for writing for them is to be an example of how one can be a change agent. All the authors use their life stories to chart their critical consciousness (Perkins 32). Additionally, their texts indicate how Africana women can contribute to the liberation struggles of Africana communities. Perkins asserts, “[i]n addition to telling their own experiences, they use their narratives as sites of critical pedagogy to share stories of the struggle and to convey other important (usually historical) information that might otherwise be lost” (42). Not only do these writers expand the readers’ understanding of the role women played in the Black Power Movement, but they also contribute to the large body of work of Africana women who use narrative to elucidate the way systems of oppression undermine and undervalue Africana women, and the many and varied ways in which these women in turn fight against such limitations.
Perkins is certainly correct in her belief that the Black Power Movement represented a new non-elite “oppositional rhetoric and practice” that signaled a change (but not a stark break) from Africana writings during enslavement, reconstruction and through the civil rights era. By this time, women were no longer bound by Victorian notions of womanhood and were more radical in their political statements through dress, hair and presentation.

**bell hooks and the Concept of Homeplace Narrative**

In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell hooks, one of the most important cultural theorists to emerge during the post-Black-Power era, uses the autobiographical to emphasize the necessity of community. Hooks discusses the ways that going back to the simplicity of the country living of her youth and being able to connect with nature allow her to feel a peace she has not felt in all the other places she has lived.

Hooks recalls having had a sense of freedom in her childhood in the hills of rural Kentucky, even though she lived there during the Jim-Crow era. She asserts that this sense of freedom existed even under major constraints due to the supportive, tight-knit community with which she was surrounded (7). Because of her parents’ dreams of upward mobility, however, hooks was uprooted to a larger town in Kentucky, separating her from her extended family and a lifestyle she cherished. Hooks says that this move was traumatic for her because she was now in a setting where everything she embraced was devalued by dominant society. Additionally, the security she treasured from her
small community was now lost in the hustle and bustle of city living. Hooks shares how she struggled with feelings of displacement when she moved out of rural Kentucky and again when she left home to pursue higher education at Stanford. She asserts, “I was consistently working to make my core truths have visibility and meaning in a world where the values and beliefs I wanted to make the foundation of my life had no meaning” (15). Hooks admits that this loss of community took a toll on her mind and spirit but that part of her healing came from writing about her life. Hooks shares, “In remembering my childhood and writing about my early life I was mapping the territory, discovering myself and finding homeplace—seeing clearly that Kentucky was my fate” (7).

Hooks’ reflections on her childhood are powerful for several reasons. First, she is able to show the power in being courageous enough to search for fulfillment by being true to one’s self. Popular culture has bombarded youth with images of excess, instant gratification and a lack of self-control. Just as bell hooks eventually chose to live in Kentucky, even with the disapproval of colleagues and friends who did not understand the value of the area, other Africana women can be encouraged to go against the grain and be, do and look like what is authentic to them, regardless of the backlash. Hooks also shows that such courage is not a solitary act; it must come from being a part of a loving community that will show support for each member, even if consensus is not reached. Such a homeplace is bound together by love and can be a resource to overcome whatever destructive external pressures are at work to undermine and undervalue liberatory acts of people like hooks.
Additionally, hooks’ example is poignant because it shows the relationship between writing and self-discovery. She shows that she is able to overcome her feelings of abandonment and loss because she can reflect on the community that gave her strength and told her how to live with dignity. Indeed, hooks was fortunate because she had grandparents who loved her and taught her to respect herself. She also had parents who, although they perhaps were misguided about the experience of “upward mobility,” truly meant the best for her. For hooks, her family creates a beautiful example of homeplace, but it is true that everyone is not as lucky as she. For those who have never felt a part of such a life-giving community, reading the narratives of others who they relate to can create a sense of belonging. The idea that one who is marginalized is not alone in the world and can see oneself in the inspiring life writing of another is profound enough to create a “community of resistance.”

*Belonging* is also compelling in its honesty. Courageously, hooks admits that while she was away from her home community she became suicidal at one point (17-18). She demonstrates the danger of feeling isolated, recalling,

> Intensely sad suicidal longings led me to therapy, but in those early years therapy did not help. I could not find a therapist who would acknowledge the power of geographical location, of ancestral imprints, of racialized identity (17).

To stave off feeling so detached from an unfamiliar environment, hooks chose to write about her family, and her memoir *Bone Black* came into being. Hooks maintains, “I felt certain that if I could just put their memories on paper and order them it would help me bring order to my life” (18). Writing *Bone Black* helped hooks reconnect to the life-
sustaining “community of resistance” that helped restore hooks’ mind and allowed her to live more fully.

The idea that one finds a community in which to belong does not at all mean one’s community will be perfect. On the contrary, hooks shows that although her family was a wellspring of strength for her, it was also a source of great anguish. She reflects,

To return home was to come back to the pain and hurt that I had spent years of my life working to make go away. My hurt was rooted in trauma experienced in the dysfunctional family, the pain of growing up in a socially segregated world in the midst of racial apartheid. (59)

The notion that hooks is capable of finding value within a context she calls dysfunctional is instructive. She establishes in this instance that it is possible to go beyond simply being a victim to see the positive aspects of one’s life. Distancing herself from her home community allows her to see the actions of those around her with more compassion and clarity. This may prove to be a profound exercise for other Africana women. Even if a physical leave, even a temporary one, is not possible for everyone to do, distancing and reflecting through writing, as the memoirists I analyze in this study demonstrate, may provide a different perspective of one’s past.

As hooks establishes, truly belonging to a community means appreciating the affirming aspects along with the damaging. She uses her mother’s current dementia to illustrate how remembering and therefore belonging are one’s foundation for a fulfilling life (225). Hooks maintains that memory, even if it is painful, gives life meaning. She contends that because her mother does not have access to her memories to ground her,
she is in despair. While some Africana women may choose to forget past experiences because they are so traumatic, in a life-giving community they would have support to work out these issues and heal. My work builds on hooks’ concepts of homeplace and belonging in order to argue that homeplace narratives, because of their honesty, engender a sense of community and allow Africana women to create support systems from the ever-growing chorus of voices that continue to proliferate through life writing. Those who read these narratives and in turn create their own then have the ability to come to terms with their past and move on to the future they desire.

Specifically, I use hooks’ precisely articulated concept of “homeplace” as a framework to discuss how the contemporary narratives of Africana women build community and become models of developing critical consciousness, thereby connecting to the larger tradition of Africana women’s narratives. For hooks, “homeplace” is exploiting one’s subjugation to create possibilities of liberation. Her groundbreaking essay, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” discusses how Africana women have historically used their relegation to domestic spaces to gain a sense of agency and create a life-affirming camaraderie and sisterhood.

As indicated, hooks uses her own relationship with her family and memories of childhood as examples of the power of homeplace. Reflecting on her relationship with her maternal grandmother, Baba, hooks recalls, “we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were black women” (41-2). Such affirming lessons become even more profound when we understand that hooks came of age in the south during
segregation and at a time when women both black and white were still seen as second-class citizens. Hooks maintains,

"Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist" (42).

The emphasis hooks places on the tentative nature that homeplace can sometimes have is extremely important in the current cultural context.

Particularly in urban landscapes ravaged by an egregious lack of resources on all fronts, there is little ground for homeplace to take concrete hold. While hooks, despite living amid some family dysfunction, had a supportive grandmother and mother to teach her how to live a life of dignity and pride, there are many fragmented families that do not benefit from such guidance. Because of the current lack of intact, viable extended families and communities in many Africana environments, parents have been overburdened and ill-equipped to raise children most productively. Such hardships, coupled with the saturation of media influences that create a sense of inferiority or worthlessness, create a recipe for disaster that wreaks havoc on the psyches of Africana youth in general and Africana girls in particular.

As young women learn at earlier and earlier ages from the external messages they are bombarded with that their roles in life are to be sexual objects to be used and discarded, we are now reaching what seems to be a crisis level in Africana communities.
Interventions must be made to bring back a semblance of community and “homeplace” where youth can feel cared for, protected and properly guided. Narratives that delineate the hardships that young women face, especially within urban areas where communities are scarcely intact, and chart how the authors reach a pivotal critical consciousness may prove to be a powerful steppingstone for creating strong affirming “communities of resistance.” Hooks emphasizes that even with the scarcest resources, homeplace has always been a place where the disempowered can become encouraged and self-possessed. Hooks asserts,

> Historically, black women have resisted white supremacist domination by working to establish homeplace. It does not matter that sexism assigned them this role. It is more important that they took this conventional role and expanded it to include caring for one another, for children, for black men, in ways that elevated our spirits that kept us from despair. That taught some of us to be revolutionaries able to struggle for freedom (44).

Hooks goes on to say that because such a move to create a viable community of resistance had been so successful in the past, it is a method that needs to be revisited. Hooks implores, “when we renew our political commitment to homeplace, we can address the needs and concerns of young black women who are groping for structures of meaning that will further their growth, young women who are struggling for self-definition” (48).

Cultural workers can use both the reading and writing of what I would call homeplace narratives to facilitate the continued critical-consciousness development of
Africana women. What I see as homeplace narratives are not limited to highbrow literary production, but include non-elite contemporary life writing set in urban landscapes. Such popular-culture narratives are particularly important in the wake of the hip-hop industry, which has internationally mass produced violent images of Africana women that affirm and solidify dehumanizing stereotypes that hinge on a perceived immorality and inferiority of Africana women. These homeplace narratives help to bring value, dignity and compassion to a segment of the population that has been otherwise abandoned and abused, as these women demand their humanity be acknowledged. Homeplace narratives foster community and engender a sense of belonging, which creates purpose and hope in the lives of Africana women.

**Homeplace Narrative in Popular Culture**

In *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, the most extensive scholarly endeavor on the intersections between Africana women, hip hop, and narrative, Gwendolyn Pough offers a valuable examination of the ways women of the hip-hop era—namely Veronica Chambers, Joan Morgan, Queen Latifah and Sister Souljah—contribute to the tradition of Black women’s autobiography. Pough convincingly argues that these women “create a rhetoric of wreck that claims agency and encourages self-definition not only for themselves but also for contemporary Black women” (105). As Pough sees it, this self-expression is always
representative of a larger struggle and is always thereby moving towards a communal goal (106). Pough also recognizes that these women of the hip-hop era are connected to Black women autobiographers of the past because they seize the unique opportunity to challenge society through the written word and can therefore advocate for a portion of the population that is often disregarded and rendered invisible (111).

Pough examines the memoir of Sister Souljah, for example, maintaining that her explicit message of racial uplift in *No Disrespect* is similar to the message of the clubwomen of the nineteenth century (112). Certainly, Souljah (like the clubwomen) is committed to finding ways to improve the conditions of the disadvantaged. Pough accurately warns, however, that there is a downfall to assuming the burden of racial uplift. Pough states,

Like the clubwomen, Sister Souljah is in the position of having already been uplifted and thus above the women she seeks to help. Reading Sister Souljah’s autobiography from cover to cover, we get a sense of self-righteousness that lets the reader know that Sister Souljah should be not only followed but emulated (112).

Pough’s assertion is certainly correct that Souljah’s tone comes off a bit didactic and less than humble at times. It often appears that Sister Souljah fancies herself a bit more socially conscious than the people around her, including her family. Pough’s thought-provoking contention that autobiographies such as Sister Souljah’s text are similar to the “lifting as we climb” ideologies of the nineteenth century also could encourage
examination (down the line) of the ways they also diverge from clubwomen’s narratives, indicating the changing times.

Narrative is such a useful tool because it is accessible. While everyone might not have the ability to write poetry or a novel, everyone can find his or her unique and distinct narrative voice. For Africana women, finding their voice is all the more profound because it combats a systemic silencing and devaluation that is so much a part of life. In this way, being able to speak out and connect to others who have been similarly silenced becomes especially rewarding. Homeplace narratives thus become an effective tool to speak back to oppression and to forge and fortify “communities of resistance.” Such narratives are accessible to elite and non-elite women alike and those of varying levels of formal education. In fact, for those who struggle with reading and writing, creating such narratives is an exceedingly effective tool for cultivating both one’s functional and critical literacies. While it is important for homeplace narratives to be disseminated to Africana women as models, the power in these texts is not so much in being published, although it is indeed important that such texts continue to be mass produced. It is important to note, however, that homeplace is also created when all women can write their life stories, come to term with their pasts, chart new futures and share their stories with other members of their communities.

It is in this light that I approach the straightforward grittiness in contemporary narratives that are part of the current urban literary explosion. The featured memoirists in this study—Cupcake Brown, a former sex worker who has become an attorney and motivational speaker; Sandy Denton, hip-hop artist and reality celebrity; and Karrine
Steffans, who is a former video model now an accomplished author—are all a part of the hip-hop era and signal yet another shift in the tradition. I argue that these women, while they are not in an explicit political group, do very similar activism as the women featured in Perkins’ text, as well as women since as far back as U. S. enslavement. The three women I analyze are meant to be seen as a sampling of the proliferation of narratives emerging that represent non-elite women, who are often not formally educated, but nonetheless profoundly take on the role of teacher and mentor to a population of Africana women, who, like them, are in need of a “homeplace” in which to “belong” and a “community of resistance” in which to struggle.

The contemporary narratives examined in this study connect to the larger tradition of homeplace narratives as the memoirists use their texts to call attention to social issues that plague Africana women and authors articulate how women can improve their lives (using their transformations as models). There are seven key components that the memoirs in this study share that make them effective homeplace narratives. The criteria are as follows,

1. The memoirists foreground social phenomena that disproportionately undermine and undervalue Africana women, thereby bearing witness to some of the consequences of such systems of domination.

2. The authors intentionally demonstrate how their writing leads to self-discovery by highlighting not only the impact that writing their memoirs has had on their lives but also the impact of other forms of writing such as letters and journaling.
3. By detailing and focusing on the hardships they endure, these authors create homeplace (as theorized by hooks) by deemphasizing the self and highlighting some of the commonplace pathologies they exhibit due to systemic pressures. These memoirists then very clearly and intentionally create communities of resistance by establishing for readers how they overcome their hardships. The focus of their texts is not meant to be seen as a journey to success, but in fact the bulk of the emphasis is on the journey itself. In other words, the memoirists’ success warrants their story being published and allows them to gain access to the public they want to reach. In this way, they can establish common ground with those who face similar hardships and offer them encouragement by showing how they have overcome their obstacles.

4. The memoirists use a straightforward, conversational tone—steering clear of overly embellished language—to let their tragedies speak for themselves. In this way, they effectively expose systems of domination, without peddling victimhood. They also labor to accurately indicate their complicity in their own oppression.

5. These memoirs give voice to people and expose situations usually silenced, isolated or ignored in society. All of the memoirists explain how they have been, in some way, ostracized or silenced, and how they eventually combat their subjugation.

6. Each author charts her critical-consciousness development, which is usually centered in an often-circuitous journey for self-love that ultimately aids in modifying self-destructive behavior.

7. These texts fight against or at least problematize commonly held stereotypes cast on Africana women by showing that their authors’ poor choices originate from
negatively responding to systems of domination, rather than an innate inferiority. The authors’ eventual success further substantiates this claim. In this way, these writers become change agents, and their texts are forms of advocacy. It is important to note, however, that the power of homeplace narratives is optimized when such radical writing functions in tandem with grassroots organizing.

**Project Overview**

Although the narratives of Africana women change over different eras, the essential intent does not. Brown, Denton and Steffans all come from a context in which violent images of Africana women rule the day. Their homeplace narratives show the dangers of what happens when women do not have the self-awareness or self-worth to counter these images. For the women whom these memoirists target, their texts function as road maps to more affirming ways of being. It must be emphasized, however, that while Brown, Denton and Steffans struggle under similar social pressures, the way they respond to and fight against such systems of domination are distinct to each woman.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the ways Cupcake Brown uses her homeplace narrative to highlight how she was ripped away from a viable “community of resistance” by a broken foster care system that led her down a path of sex work and drug addiction. Brown shows, through her narrative of recovery, how she is able to heal from her past
abuse and become successful only after she is able to piece together a loving extended family that becomes her support system and holds her accountable for her actions.

In Chapter Three, I examine how Sandy Denton’s homeplace narrative became therapeutic for her, even as she was writing her memoir. She uses the text to show how past pain and bitterness held her back personally and professionally and that it was only when she was able to let go of her abandonment issues—which she did through the course of writing her narrative—that she has been able to truly love herself. Denton’s text is compelling because, throughout her career as a member of the hip hop group Salt-N-Pepa, she was perceived to be an empowered feminist figure. She reveals, however, that she has suffered from the same issues of low self-esteem that many Africana women have, and her newfound self-acceptance can be a model for others.

Chapter Four focuses on Karrine Steffans. I will argue that although Steffans in many circles is seen as a social pariah, and a real-life Hester Prynne, her work is nonetheless valuable because it creates a homeplace for Africana women who have been similarly ostracized and is a cautionary tale for those who are seduced by the glamour of the entertainment industry.

In Chapter Five, with an eye on Africana Studies, Women’s Studies, composition pedagogy, and writing group theory, I discuss further implications of this work. I argue that homeplace narratives, like the ones I analyze here, can be used to expand the notion of what academic literacies are, and I suggest how homeplace narratives might be used to merge university and community together in a way that will be mutually beneficial.
Chapter 2

“Redemption’s Song”: The Power of the Second Chance in *A Piece of Cake*

*The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace.*

—Haggai 2:9

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

In this chapter, I shed light on the healing power of Cupcake Brown’s attempt to make peace with a difficult past and to show others the possibilities of transformation, even under the gravest circumstances. I argue that her work is particularly powerful because she gives voice to those children who have been quite literally left to die, both spiritually and even sometimes physically, in the foster care system. If her story does nothing else, it boldly and vividly brings to light all that is wrong with the foster care system and explores the price society pays for turning a blind eye to the brutality that is
imposed on the psyches, spirits and bodies of children whom have been cast aside. I further maintain that her narrative is poignant because it stands as a model of recovery and sheds light on the disease of drug addiction. In this way, her work becomes part of the longstanding Africana women’s rhetorical tradition that sees narrative as a viable tool for not only commenting on the ills of society but also for social change. She bears witness to the miraculous possibility of shedding the stigma and sting of stereotypes and creating a new, more affirming identity for oneself in both the written word and action. The act of writing her life story, then, becomes not only life giving for her, but for others who suffer from some of the same tragedies that she has endured.

Piecing Cupcake Together

Cupcake Brown asserts that she got her original given name because after she was born, her mother was under heavy medication. In her mother’s drug-induced state, she blurted out “Cupcake” which happened to be her favorite treat (1). The nurse misunderstood that she was not naming her daughter but asking for a cupcake. When Brown’s father came to the hospital, he changed Brown’s name to La’Vette. As we will see, however, Brown had little contact with her father after she was born. Because Brown grew to have a strong hatred for her biological father (and rightfully so), and because she sees her mother’s choice of name as a term of endearment, she chose to go by the name Cupcake.
When Brown, at the tender age of 11, found her mother dead from a seizure, the life she knew up until that point was snatched from underneath her (7). Even worse, she learned soon after that the man that she had always known and loved was not her biological father (16). Even though her stepfather was ready and willing to take Brown, the state did not grant him custody because he was divorced from her mother at the time of her death (18). The only other immediate family member was Brown’s Uncle Junior, who was not allowed to adopt her because he was an unmarried man (18). Brown was thrust into the foster care system and ripped away from her family—supposedly in her best interest. At the time of her mother’s death, Brown had no relationship with her biological father, yet the court felt that he was a more suitable caregiver for her than the father that had taken care of her all along (19). Even as a young girl, Brown found it suspicious that her biological father would all of a sudden want custody of her when he had never contacted her before. Unfortunately, within the court system there was no space for her to have a say in her fate. When the court delivered Brown into the hands of a father who only wanted to receive the payout from her mother’s insurance policy, her life changed forever (he didn’t realize the mother had put the money in a trust for the children and that the funds would not mature until they were adults) (22). When Brown’s biological father was granted custody, he quickly struck a deal with a woman who took care of foster children, named Diane, and he never came back for Brown again.

When Brown moved into her foster mother’s home, Diane chose to turn a blind eye when her nephew Pete first introduced Brown to alcohol before barbarically and immorally taking her innocence (27). It was at this moment that Brown discovered the
ability of a drug to anesthetize, allowing a temporary escape from the world. She would continually return to alcohol, and increasingly more potent substances, to numb her pain for years to come. Diane was fully aware of what her nephew had done. In fact, after seeing that Brown was unable to move after Pete’s initial assault, because she was in such excruciating pain, Diane warned Pete that the next time “she better be able to work tomorrow” (30). Diane even told Brown that she deserved the sexual abuse from Pete because she was “dark, ugly, motherless and insignificant” (49). Additionally, Diane physically beat all of her children when their chores were not done to her liking. As Brown shows in her homeplace narrative, she went through many more hellish episodes with Diane in between her brief stints of escape when she lived on the streets.

The first time she ran away from Diane, the woman who helped her was a white sex worker named Candy (32). Candy taught her that, on the street, “help” always came with strings attached. When Candy found Brown in the middle of the night on a park bench, she was cold and hungry. Candy took her to a restaurant and bought her something to eat, and then informed her she would have to pay her back (39). This was Brown’s first exposure both to prostitution and to marijuana. She learned that she was able to earn a little more money because she was underage. Given her past experiences, sex work was not much of a departure in her mind. Many women older than she who found themselves in her position felt pressure to have a pimp, yet she refused (41). Candy’s pimp threatened to kill her if she continued to encroach on his territory, but this did not stop her from working the streets alone. Of course, as a young girl who had barely hit puberty, she did not have the tools to make more affirming choices to support
herself. After all, she was not even old enough to legally work (41). Her episodes on the street always eventually ended up leading her back into the foster care system.

The second foster family she lived with was the Bassinets. Brown assumed she would be spared the abuse she had received previously. Her foster mother did not physically abuse her, but she did incessantly spew verbal assaults (61). Initially, Brown thought she could trust Mr. Bassinet, because he never yelled at her (64). He even stood up for her one day when one of his wife’s attacks was particularly cruel. Brown didn’t realize, however, that he was grooming her for what would be yet another sexual assault.

Through all of the abuse Brown endured, she still took an interest in school and voiced that she was interested in being a cheerleader. She was excited that Mr. Bassinet encouraged her to participate in extracurricular activities like any other child her age that had a “normal” life (61). Unfortunately, she found out that, for the rest of her stay in their home, cheerleading practice would mean her performing oral sex on Mr. Bassinet in his van. He also forced her to take LSD and cocaine—this would become her introduction to hard-core drugs (63).

Because Brown was so miserable from Diane’s constant abuse and brutality, she constantly risked her life by hitchhiking (72). She sustained herself during these times with sex work. During one of her escapes, she met a twenty-five-year-old man named Tim who became her boyfriend (82). He took her off of the street and took care of her by selling drugs. One day, she was picked up for truancy, and she was returned to Diane, which abruptly ended her relationship with Tim. She would later find out that she was pregnant. Diane became enraged because it made her look bad for Brown to be pregnant.
at such a young age. Diane instructed her biological daughter, along with the other foster children, to physically assault Brown so that she would miscarry.

Eventually, Brown (with the help of her Uncle Junior), was finally able to be placed with a female biological family member – her great aunt Becky in Compton (99). While her aunt was well intentioned, she was elderly and was thereby unable to shield Brown from the rampant gang activity in her neighborhood (105). While in a gang, Brown experienced and participated in many violent acts, all of which culminated in a life-threatening attack that left her in the hospital with the possibility of paralysis and even worse, death, looming over her (136). She was only 15 when she was shot. She decided at that point that she no longer wanted to be a part of the gang, even though getting out was generally not an easy task. Ironically, she was able to escape this life because she was sent back to live with Diane in Lancaster (143). By this time, the physical abuse had stopped because Diane was incapacitated with diabetes and obesity. While Brown discusses at length how she felt that her fellow gang members were part of her family, she also admits that there was a limit to this camaraderie. She found that when she was returned to Lancaster, which is quite a distance from Compton, none of those with whom she had built relationships kept in touch with her with any frequency (143).

Through the dedication and constant efforts of her uncle and stepfather, Brown at 16 was finally legally emancipated and no longer was shuffled around in the foster care system (151). Unfortunately, because of all of the abuse, violence and substance addiction she had experienced up to that point, her struggle was far from over. During
the time that she was on her own, her drug addiction became increasingly worse. For the
social circles in which she found herself, drug use was common, and justifications for
such behavior were readily available. One of the excuses that would prove to be the most
debilitating was the belief that as long as she was employed, she was not an addict. For
this reason, she enrolled in a legal secretary certification program and pursued this line of
work (181). She consistently stayed employed while she fell deeper into her addiction.
In Brown’s state of denial, although she was fired quite often, the fact that she was
always able to find another job was proof positive that she was not down and out. Part of
what fueled this false belief was her relationship with a man named Tommy, who she
eventually married (200). He prided himself on staying employed while simultaneously
maintaining his crack addiction, and he instructed her to do the same (201). Her
relationship with Tommy would become toxic, not only because of his bad influence on
her concerning drugs but also due to physical abuse.

Brown had a great deal of experience with harsh drugs, but it was her addiction to
crack cocaine that proved to be her ultimate downfall. She could no longer continue to
stay employed as her addiction began to take over every aspect of her life (265). Her
uncle and stepfather, who were still very much a part of Brown’s life, tried to stage an
intervention for her and her husband, but the couple was not yet willing to enter a
rehabilitation program (314). Brown stole money from her stepfather, continued having
violent bouts with her husband and began to contemplate suicide (321). She even
became so desperate that she decided to engage in risky sexual behavior during her sex
work in an attempt to catch HIV (327). At her absolute lowest point, she lived behind a
dumpster and turned tricks for drugs (327). Brown intimates that it was while she was homeless that she began to have a connection with God. Brown claims that God told her to go to her place of employment (which she had not been to in weeks) to quit in person (335). When her employer witnessed the deplorable condition she was in, he admitted her in to an in-patient rehabilitation program (342). Brown was finally willing to accept the help.

Part of Brown’s rehabilitation was attending a Twelve-Step Program. Since she was now open to the process, she began to show signs of progress (350). She found a sponsor whom she really admired, and she was able to build a family out of positive people that she encountered who were willing to lend their support. Her sponsor, Venita, helped Brown work through many deeply rooted issues that were fueling her destructive behavior, such as her low self-esteem and history of being abandoned. She was also warned not to associate with people from her old life, such as Tommy, who could cause her to relapse. Although she would experience several setbacks (such as dating a man in her recovery program named Brett who had the potential of sucking her back into the lifestyle she was trying to overcome), she was ultimately successful with her recovery program. Venita also helped her discover what kind of future she envisioned for herself. Brown realized that she had always wanted to be an attorney but that she had not been sober enough to work toward this goal (424). Brown would then go through the long and arduous task of going to college, before completing law school, and passing the bar exam. Her greatest triumph, however, would be learning to love herself and building a
great support system around her that held her accountable for her actions and encouraged
her to make decisions that would positively impact her life (426).

**Foster Care and Other Tragedies**

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

“[Diane] angrily ranted about how, a couple of years before, L.A. wrongly took
her foster license; something about some twins that had died in her care.

Something about giving them aspirin when they had the chicken pox or measles.

She was talking so fast, and with all the cussing and fussing, the details were
hazy. But the bottom line is she did *something* to them when they were sick that
you *ain’t supposed to do.* (Brown 24)

Later on in this same passage, Brown just as evenly conveys that Diane takes the
opportunity to add that she realizes that she had gotten away with murder and that she
was confident she could do it again. Instead of Brown sharing any fears or emotions she might have had as a result of her future caregiver basically threatening her life, she instead briefly acknowledges the threat and continues to describe Diane and her new home.

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

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

Brown constructs her narrative to illustrate the inadequacy of the very system supposedly designed to protect her. She further asserts that she was virtually enslaved. As we have seen, she was not only forced into what can only be called hard labor in her
first foster home, she also became a sex slave as well (27). Brown divulges that the first
night she stayed in Diane’s home, after she had already been physically attacked by
Diane, she remembers her foster mother and her foster mother’s nephew Pete getting
drunk. Shortly after, Brown discloses that Pete came to her and offered her a drink.
Brown submits, “whatever it was I liked it—instantly” (27). Here, Brown shows how her
later dependency on alcohol and harsher substances originated and how her addiction was
fueled by her low self-esteem, grief, as well as what would become her constant
brutalization. Brown reveals,

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

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

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

Brown’s austere language further highlights the atrocity she conveys, unencumbered with embellishments to act as a buffer for the reader. She also is able to project her strong-willed personality that would sometimes lead her to success and would at other times be her downfall.

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

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

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

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

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

    “Where did you get those marks?” she asked.

    Diane’s recent whipping was fresh in my mind.

    “My foster mother,” I replied matter-of-factly.

    “Oh, my God!” she exclaimed.

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

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

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

Brown took the same fearless approach on the street. When she was only 11 or 12 and first began running away, she went into full survival mode. Brown boldly asserts, Running away, turning tricks, and hitchhiking seemed to go hand in hand. Since my experience with Candy and Money, I would never again stand on a corner to get tricks because it was too risky…Besides, it was easy enough getting my tricks hitchhiking because most folks who picked up hitchhikers wanted to turn a trick. For me, hitchhiking ended up being a double bonus: I got to make some money and I got a free ride, although I was never going anywhere in particular; I just
wanted a ride that was going from whatever home I’d been placed in. Most of the time, I also got a free high or drink. I was not longer ashamed or bothered in any way by turning tricks. I was surviving and doing what I had to do. If it did start to bother me, I would just get high. By now, I got high on something every day.

(76)
The fact that Brown was so young when she went through all of these atrocities is unconscionable. It is clear, however, that turning tricks did indeed bother her because, as she indicates, she began to get high every day. While her lifestyle would be difficult for most adults to survive, in her pre-teen mind, she was fighting to take care of herself. Obviously, her resolve led her down a path where she quite possibly could have been killed by any of the strangers who picked her up. But her inner strength would prove to serve her well later in life.

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

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

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

As Brown writes, with no officials willing to keep her out of harm’s way and no way to get back to San Diego to be with her father and uncle, she could not see an alternative other than sex work to sustain her. As I have argued, Brown gives a very detailed account of her experiences within the foster care system at length to break the silence and to bear witness to the violence that these children often endure, as well as the reasons they might rebel and be labeled “problem children.” Her memoir is therefore successful in evidencing a need to radically reform foster care, and is also successful in creating a community wherein those who have languished in the foster care system can heal from their abuse and find ways to be fulfilled, well-adjusted adults.
In addition to shedding light on the inadequacies of the foster care system, Brown also takes a great deal of time to give a complex view of gang life. I maintain that In A Piece of Cake Brown does not justify gang behavior, but she does provide an understanding of how youth who have been abandoned or do not have an adequate support system find a surrogate family through gangs. According to Brown, gang members unfortunately have a lack of regard for the lives of those they perceive to be their opposition, but they are fiercely loyal to each other—to a point.

Brown takes a great deal of time to retell the story of how she was initiated into the Crips gang. According to Brown, when she was initiated, or “jumped in,” the other members were amazed by her ability to fight back, as they all beat down on her at once. Brown writes that she came up swinging in a way that made all of them step back because she was releasing the pain, abuse, abandonment and despair she had endured in the past few years of her life. Brown writes,

As they pounded me, I began to flash back on the last couple of years of my life: finding my mother dead, that asshole Mr. Burns [her biological father], losing my daddy and Uncle Jr….I continued remembering: Diane, the rapes, the abuse, the cheerleading practices…My past continued flashing: getting pregnant, getting jumped, losing my baby. All of a sudden the anger began to rise up in me. The rage I had been holding in for years began to quickly swell at the possibility of finally being released. And released it was, in a flurry of fists as I began to fight—and cry…I continued to struggle until I wobbled up onto my feet. Once up,
I began wildly swinging at everything and anything. My rage made me forget the intense pain that just a moment before had been shooting through my body. I swung with everything I had—and for everything I’d lost. I fought and cried and fought and cried (111-112).

Brown was fighting to get into an organization that had been produced out of, and operating within, pathologies resulting from systems of oppression that relegate poor youth to a life of self-destruction and violence. Yet, she was fighting to survive the best way she knew how. When she was finally accepted into the group, it was a source of pride and accomplishment for her. She proclaimed, “Finally, I belonged to something” (112).

As Brown describes her life in a gang, she makes a conscious effort to vividly illustrate how similar it is to being in a war. In this way, Brown bears witness to the constant bloodshed and needless violence in the name of retribution that is never truly resolved. She recounts that her first “hoo-ride” or drive-by shooting on the rival “Bloods” gang was in retaliation for an act they had recently committed (122). The Bloods would surely come back for their revenge. The violence never ended. It is utterly disturbing as Brown grants her audience entry into the mindset of a gang banger. She recalls how she would usually commit crimes while drunk or high so that it would dull her conscience long enough for her to not have to dwell on her actions, admitting, “I didn’t have a problem with jackin’ folks face-to-face when I was drunk or loaded. But when I was sober, I still had sort of a conscience, which slowed me down” (123). In the same passage, however, she admits that she enjoyed striking terror in her marks. She
reveals, “But don’t get me wrong, I loved the look of fear on the victims’ faces. It gave me a sense of power and supremacy” (123). She was fifteen at the time, and it was truly tragic that she was foisting the abuse and violence that she had experienced on to innocent people.

Conversely, Brown also highlights the unrealized or misguided potential of the gang members who became her makeshift family, to give a more complex view of gang life. During her time as a gangbanger, she observed how many gangsters were the most intelligent people she had ever met (126). She recalls how many enjoyed literature, math and the arts. Brown claims she used to swap books with a gang member named Yokey; they would discuss them afterwards (126). In fact, she decided, while reading *The Color Purple*, that she had indeed found a new favorite color. In an earlier passage, Brown writes that she discovers upon joining the Crips that she had to give up her favorite color red since it was the color of the rival Bloods gang. She thus proclaims, “I could learn to hate red. *Fuck it, I told myself. I’ll find a new favorite color* (126). Upon discussing the Walker book with Yokey, however, Brown asserts, “Purple would be my new favorite color. There was a line in the book that said the color purple just wanted to be loved like everything else, like me. It would take over eighteen years before I would be able to uncorrupt my brain to allow red to return as a favorite color” (126).

Her intention in showing the interests of her fellow gang members is not to justify their barbaric behavior, although at times her tone is a bit reverent. It is instead to show their complexity in order to problematize stereotypes surrounding gangs, which is after all, a central function of homeplace narratives. Her somewhat ambivalent tone,
though, might be attributed to her nostalgia concerning a time when she truly felt loved and accepted. Her goal, as she shares in an online interview, however, is to illustrate how society has abandoned these young people, stripped them of their ability to succeed and forced them to have to fend for themselves. Brown submits,

I’m hoping by reading my book, people get a better understanding of the attractiveness of gangs. They understand the unconditional love offered by gangs. However, I do not (currently) see a way to change how society views gangs. The ignorance runs too deep, the stereotypes too convincing, and the negativity too strong. (bookreporter.com)

While many may be hesitant to be compassionate towards gangs (and understandably so), Brown provides her readers with an insider’s perspective on why gangs are appealing to certain people, and her memoir can potentially aid cultural workers and community leaders to make concrete interventions with at-risk youth. It is vital to stress, of course, that the crimes gangs commit are inexcusable. I would argue, however, that it is also inexcusable is the existence of such a scarcity of resources or viable support systems to ensure or at least encourage success among these youth.

Brown creates homeplace by creating a safe space to honestly discuss the lure of gang life, while still not making excuses. Because her tone is not accusatory or judgmental, those who are in a similar situation can be more open to reading about her experience and perhaps be more introspective about the direction of their own lives. She acknowledges that it was exciting, initially, before she really had an understanding of the pain that comes with being violently attacked and almost losing her life at 15. Brown
declares “Between [my fellow gang members’] love, the booze, the drugs and the blackouts, my conscience was shut down. Besides, there was no time for guilt, I was a ghetto star…I decided I wanted to die a ghetto star—that is, till those bullets hit my ass” (130). While in the hospital, she called on God because she was scared and didn’t know what to do. Brown writes that it is at this point that she wanted out. She was done with gang life. While it was often difficult to get out of a gang, she ended up getting an out from the least expected place—she was sent back to Diane (136).

I would argue that Brown’s portrayal of her involvement in a gang is particularly helpful to readers who may be susceptible to making such affiliations because she is honest about acknowledging that the love she once experienced with the Crips was not as unconditional as she once believed. When she has to return to Lancaster, none of her “homies” called to see how she was recovering (143). This gave her a further impetus to leave the gang life behind. Fortunately for Brown, Diane had become incapacitated by illness and could no longer brutalize her.

**In Search of True Love**

In Lauryn Hill’s release of the highly celebrated solo debut *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, her songs convey the woes of a young woman who finds herself in unhealthy relationships because she does not know the meaning of love. Throughout the CD, the songs progress from disappointment, betrayal and longing to the final realization that her desire comes from a lack of love for self and God. These songs reflect that only
when one realizes how to become a whole person can one have the tools to maintain a healthy relationship. In between the songs, there are interludes that are set in a classroom where adolescents are having a discussion with their teacher about how they define love and how they come to these definitions. As her songs on the CD bear out, because Hill has missed this class, she has to find out the hard way through unhealthy relationships what love truly is. The relationships that Brown experienced in *A Piece of Cake* took on the tone of Hill’s album. She was searching for affirmation and someone to erase the pain that was rooted in her self-hatred, abuse, abandonment issues and the overall tragedy she experienced much too soon. Until she came to terms with these issues and worked on herself, she continued to attract men that reflected her defeatism and matched her calamitous life.

Brown’s homeplace narrative is particularly successful in showing how low self-worth can lead to toxic relationships. Since the process of finding self-love is a centrality of homeplace narratives and is part and parcel of these women’s critical-consciousness development, Brown’s discussion of her romantic relationships become especially important. She recalls that at 13 she ran away to Hollywood in hopes of striking it big, which is where she instead encountered the twenty-five-year-old Tim. Her sexual experiences with men before this had only been in the form of rapists and the customers she came across when she was on the street or hitchhiking. She says that she fell in love with this much older man for the following reasons,

First he thought about me as more than a piece of ass. He asked about my hopes, dreams and fears. Though I’d never actually thought about that kind of stuff, I
thought up quick answers to give him. I told him I hoped to stay in Hollywood forever, dreamed of being an actress, and feared of running out of dope. But mostly, I think I loved Tim because he said he loved me (82).

Tim took Brown off the streets, fed her and satisfied her drug habit, because he said he did not want her to be a sex worker (82). Tim was a drug dealer, however, and he got arrested during their time together. As she was roaming the streets because she had no place to live after Tim’s arrest, she was picked up for truancy and was returned to Diane (83).

While Brown does not take a great deal of time lamenting how problematic this relationship was, she makes the argument by plainly stating the facts. After she returned to Lancaster and realized she was pregnant, she located Tim in the county jail and wrote him that she was pregnant, but she received no response (85). Upon his release, however, he did in fact reach out to Brown. She writes,

Around my sixth month I finally heard from Tim. He was out of jail and ecstatic about the baby. He promised to get himself together and help me and the child. He said his mom was sending him to Texas because L.A. was nothing but trouble for him. He said that once he got a job and a place to stay, he’d send for us. Diane said he was ‘full of shit.’ But I believed him. I had to. His interest in the baby gave me renewed hope of finally leaving Lancaster forever. More important, his declared love for us invalidated Diane’s put-downs of black men as worthless men and irresponsible fathers. He promised to call again. I would sit
by the phone, staring at it, waiting for it to ring, and when it did, hoping it was
Tim. But it never was (85).

Here, Brown shows her awareness that she had been used and that what she initially
mistook for love was just a relationship of convenience.

Brown’s homeplace narrative depicts the ways her romantic relationships after
Tim were heavily clouded by her drug use and were often toxic and physically abusive.
Her discussions of her romantic relationships work to chart her path to self-love. She
would find that she ultimately had to choose whether she loved the men in her life or
herself more. That many of her major relationships were with men who also struggled
with addiction exacerbated the situation. Tommy, the man she married, for example,
introduced her to crack cocaine (203). As long as she remained with Tommy, she was
not successful in her recovery because they both had a negative influence on one another.
As Brown highlights in her book, however, it was mandatory to sever relationships that
were toxic. She would get a lot worse before she got better, but divorcing her husband
ultimately ended up being a wise decision (318).

As Brown testifies, when she left Tommy she was so mired in drug addiction and
depression that she attempted suicide (321). She felt so overwhelmed with her addiction
that she saw no way out. This was the point that Brown decided she would end her life
by intentionally trying to contract AIDS (327). Brown confesses,

I was more convinced than ever that the only way out of my miserable life was
suicide, but still wasn’t sure how to do it. Then, as usual, I got a bright idea.

Sure, I convinced myself, people will feel sorry for you because there’s no cure
and it won't be your fault. That way, you can die with dignity. I had made up my mind about how I would die. I would get AIDS. (327)

The candidness of her homeplace narrative is helpful because she gives insight into the reason that some people may engage in such risky behavior. After all, a successful homeplace narrative should work as a tool that can help to forge and mobilize concrete communities of resistance. The text, here, opens up dialogue about taboo issues such as this and creates a platform to mobilize around combating such destructive behavior. Thankfully, her plan to kill herself did not work. This period in her life, though, did signal a new low point for her.

The Truth about Addiction According to Cupcake Brown

In Dispelling the Myths about Addiction, the Institute of Medicine calls attention to the ways the stigma surrounding addiction has caused a lack of adequate research. Such a void impedes further understanding and advancement of the causes of drug addiction and finding the most effective treatments. The institute argues that “addiction is a major public problem” that fails to be “well understood by the public or policymakers, and addiction research is often an undervalued and stigmatized area of inquiry” (Institute of Medicine 1). The institute further posits that although there has been some important research done in the area, “the public’s perception and their understanding lag far behind” (9). For this reason, the institute delineates several directives that they hope will aid in a greater understanding of addiction that are without
judgment and preconceived notions. To carry out this goal, the institute calls for establishing “public education campaigns” (9) that emphasize the neurobiological research that proves that “the disease of addiction is produced by the interaction of the drugs themselves with genetic, environmental, psychosocial, behavioral, and other factors, which causes long-lived alterations in the biochemical and functional properties of selected groups of neurons in the brain” (37).

One concern that the institute has about challenging the widespread ignorance surrounding addiction is that many people do not have access to the highly specialized, scientific language of the studies that are being conducted. Surely, Cupcake Brown’s text functions to expose her readers to some of the root causes of drug addiction and the difficulties of a recovery program. Brown achieves consciousness-raising in an accessible manner and engenders the compassion and understanding (but not pity) for which the institute calls. She does not paint herself as a victim but as a person who has suffered from substance abuse disease and more hardships as an adolescent than many people will their whole lives. Her recollection of her troubled childhood, in this way, helps to build a community of resistance that can help to protect children from drug addiction. This is so important to stress, especially in light of the fact that homeplace narratives work to be life changing in and of themselves. But that they must also function to impact society through other concrete avenues of social change.

Brown’s text is not only instructive because it helps to humanize addiction for an audience that might stigmatize such a condition out of ignorance, but she also exemplifies the ways in which writing and recovery are inexorably tied. This is particularly
important given that the healing and life-changing power of writing is yet another component of homeplace narratives. In *Narrative Means to Sober Ends*, addiction psychologist Jonathan Diamond stresses that there is a long history between recovery and narrative and that narrative must continue to be a tool used in the rehabilitation process. Diamond asserts, for example, that letter writing is particularly important in allowing those individuals that are in recovery to separate the poor decisions they have made in their addiction from who they are as people. Building on the work that White and Epston have done on “therapeutic letters,” Diamond argues that “encouraging people to define their values and sense of self, separate from problems, often leads to a shift in perspective from ‘I am the problem’ to ‘I am up against a problem’” (Diamond xix). Diamond also maintains that through the process of writing, those in recovery find their “own creative voice as an antidote to alcohol, narcotics and other self-destructive habits (emphasis mine).” (xx)

Brown’s work certainly exemplifies the relationship between writing and recovery. She writes about devastating and often embarrassing experiences in her life without inhibition. Brown is also able to talk about what she has gone through with a distance that helps her to reflect on her past, while at the same time holding herself accountable for how she has hurt other people and herself. In *A Piece of Cake*, Brown asserts her creative voice and constructs a new narrative where she can move past being a brutally abused, motherless child in the foster care system and a crack-addicted sex worker, to a successful attorney and motivational speaker who goes all over the country telling her story to inspire others and to change lives.
Diamond reminds us that writing becomes important for the person who is in recovery as well as those who read the narratives. For this reason, his text is a compilation of writings from his patients that are meant to be models for future patients and all those who can gain a greater understanding of addiction. Brown’s story—like those in Diamond’s collection, but on a grander scale—shows the power of telling one’s truth to save not only one’s own life but also the lives of others.

Recovering Cupcake

Brown does not romanticize her recovery. Her narrative creates homeplace for those with similar struggles by giving a true depiction of the difficulty of her rehabilitation, illustrating that she did not get through it without setbacks. What is striking about the way she shares her experience is that people who do not suffer from substance abuse can still benefit from the community-building practices of the recovery program. Anyone who is a product of a fragmented community for any reason can be encouraged by her recovery narrative.

As Brown shows, while she was in the rehabilitation center she took part in a writing exercise much like the one Diamond describes. She had to write a good-bye letter to her favorite drug. Although she did not share the letters themselves, she strongly makes the case for why writing them is vital in recovery. As she did the exercise, it was clear that she was still in denial and had much work to do. Instead of writing one letter as she was instructed, she wrote two. One was for every drug she had ever done, and the
other was for crack. It was clear that crack was her favorite drug, but, because of the stigma attached to using it, she could not come to terms with admitting her preference. Even still, she was successful at completing the exercise and shares how helpful it was to her rehabilitation (348). It was at that point, through writing about her life, that she became truly introspective. She imparts,

> Writing those letters was an eye-opener. I spent hours on them. I finally got brutally honest with myself about my using. I talked about the effect they’d had on my life, my mind, my body, and my family. The letters helped me see the progression of my using as well as its treacherous end. As I got deeper into the letters, it all started becoming clear: there was no longer any denying it because it was laid out in front of me in black and white and in my own handwriting. Job or no job, school or no school, married or unmarried, I was definitely an addict. By the end of the second letter, I was crying so hard, my tears were smearing the ink on the paper. The revelations in those letters helped me fight cravings to use. While I was in the hospital I didn’t get many cravings, but the few I did have were immediately put to rest when I re-read the good-bye letters” (348).

While Brown did not share specific quotes from her good-bye letters, it was her reaction to writing and reading the letters that demonstrated the true life-changing power of narrative.

In addition to writing, Brown relates that as a part of her recovery, she attended a Twelve-step program. She was now open to the program, unlike the time her father and uncle tried to get her to attend. She fully submitted herself to the process. Brown is
honest in sharing yet another pathology that she had to overcome, however. She admitted that throughout her life, Black people surrounded her and she had an awful life. When she found herself in a predominately white Twelve-Step meeting, she surmised that white people must be the answer to turning one’s life around. She began to momentarily distance herself from all Black people, although she admits how illogical this line of thinking is in hindsight (350). It became particularly clear that her thinking, at that point in her life, was irrational given that many of the people whom she felt betrayed her within the family court system, not to mention the woman that introduced her to prostitution when she was eleven, were also white.

Brown’s thorough description of her recovery process is an especially poignant part of the text and elucidates that she wants her audience to benefit from her lessons. She gives a detailed account of how she became increasingly more acclimated to the process. As she continued to go to the meetings, she conveyed the strong sense of camaraderie and belonging. At one point she admitted that her white friend Karen encouraged her to go to a meeting with predominately Black people. Brown concedes that she was initially hesitant, and even contemplated leaving in the middle of the meeting; she became taken, however, with a woman named Venita, who shared her story during the meeting. Brown talked about the way she felt connected with Venita’s story as she shared that her drug addiction stemmed from feeling ugly and unloved—to which Brown related. Brown recalls being shocked when Venita first uttered that she had a lack of self-worth. Brown reports,
I stopped in my tracks. I turned around to look at her... she was beautiful. She was everything I’d ever wanted to be. She had a nice slender build. But most important, she was light-skinned with long hair, the ideal woman in my eyes... I sat in bewilderment. And I listened. I hung on to every word she said because I understood every word she said. I felt every word she said. She described a lifetime of feeling ugly and that, all of her life, she wanted to be dark-skinned. 

She wanted to be dark! I’ll be a motherfucker! All of my life I wanted to be her, and she wanted to be me? She talked about wanting to be a part of something, wanting to be desired, to be ‘special,’ craving to be loved... I felt like she was reading my mind. (353).

Brown is particularly vulnerable as she shares her misgivings as she sat in the meeting. She knew that she needed to get a sponsor, and she wanted Venita to fill the role. She recalls,

As soon as the meeting was over, several women swarmed around her. I didn’t blame them. I wanted to get close to her too. I just didn’t know how. It was then I realized that I was afraid. Without the false courage of alcohol or drugs to break the ice, I didn’t know how to befriend people, didn’t know what to say (354).

She was not able to ask Venita to be her sponsor at that particular meeting because she was quickly approaching her curfew at the in-patient rehabilitation center, and she knew that she did not want to endure the consequences of an infraction. She continued to make the two-hour trip on public transportation to see Venita, although she did not ask her to be her sponsor right away (359). She was intimidated by Venita, but when she finally
allowed herself to be vulnerable enough to approach her, this became one of the most affirming relationships she would experience. Brown’s homplace narrative, in this way, can encourage those who are trying to go through a recovery program and who have similar fears, that those fears can be overcome. She also exhibits here the importance of sisterhood among women.

After Brown was released from the center, her boss Ken, who admitted her to the center, welcomed her back at her previous job as a legal secretary. She had a wonderful opportunity to start her life afresh. And she shares an important lesson about severing toxic relationships. Her friend Mona took her in, but Mona drank alcohol and smoked marijuana. Brown realized this was too much temptation for her, so she moved out. At this point in the text, Brown demonstrates how her critical consciousness continued to develop, and she became more introspective and began to make better decisions.

A great deal of Brown’s discussion concerning recovery is centered in her cultivating her spirituality, and Venita encouraged her to consult a higher power about all of her decisions. Her spirituality began to help her further develop her critical consciousness because she developed a stronger moral compass and values system, and she saw herself more in relation to the people around her as well as to God. Her humility and reliance on God allowed her to make more mature and responsible decisions. Brown shares with readers how she learned to pray about even the smallest things she needed and how she also humbled herself by accepting help from others and taking advice from Venita. This proved to be difficult for Brown because she had been on her own for such a long time, but she gradually adjusted and the results were favorable. For example,
although Brown had horrendous credit, she divulges how Venita advised her to pray in earnest for an apartment after she made the decision to leave Mona’s home. She says she prayed to be taken out of her situation. Brown recalls, “That night, as I lay in bed, I thanked Him for another day clean and asked Him to help me find an apartment. I thought about it and added quickly, “One I can afford” (368). She is careful to say, however, that the response was not instantaneous. She admits that after a week, she became dejected, feeling like God didn’t answer her. When she communicated her misgivings to Venita, however, her sponsor assured her, “You’ve got to learn to trust Him, Cup. You’re not always going to be able to see the big picture. But you’ve got to know that, no matter what, you’ll be okay. Keep praying. Stay clean. And stay sober” (368).

Brown reveals that this faith in a higher power became an ongoing lesson to surrender herself to something greater than herself. That she talks about this process at length demonstrates her desire to impart the importance of having a faith base for the community she is forging through her homeplace narrative. She asserts that she continued to pray until she received a modest apartment. It is interesting that she admits when she first saw the apartment, it fell short of her expectations. She then expresses, however, that as soon as she was about to break down because of how much she hated the tiny apartment, she put the situation in proper perspective. Brown declares,

Just before a tear began to fall, my mind was suddenly (and surprisingly) hurled back to just a month or so before when I’d been crouched behind a dumpster with nothing but a fifth of gin and a crack pipe. My mind flashed to the sickeningly
thin woman with the dirty green dress and no shoes. And I remembered her prayer for help. (369)

Reflecting on how she had progressed from that low point was enough to make Brown realize that her prayers had, indeed, been answered. In this way, her text becomes a testament to the importance of cultivating fortitude and patience in order to sustain faith.

She will share much more about how she learned to depend on others and rely on God as she built her new life. She does not deny that it was a long process, and she had to shed her pride little by little to accept the help she needed. For instance, she recalls how she continued to have to pray for furnishings and other household items she could not afford, including dishes. As an answer to her prayer, a woman at work named Maria, who would later become somewhat of a mother figure to her, offered her a set. Brown instructs, however, that her pride and stubbornness almost blocked her from getting what she prayed for when she realized that Maria would be bringing the dishes to her home.

Although she was deeply anxious over the fact that she is embarrassed for anyone to see her living conditions, she allowed Maria to come anyway. She shares with her readers that this fear, just like many others she admits she has throughout the memoir, was unfounded. In fact, Brown is shocked when, upon coming to her home, Maria very sincerely exclaimed, “what a cute place” (374). More important, she allowed Maria to offer her the help she needed. Most important, when she received the dishes, she discovered that they were fine china, which made the offer even more touching (375).

After this, she received other furnishings and items for her home that even exceeded her prayers. Her relationship with God became encouraging because it was clear to her that
there was a change in her and that the path she took to improve her life was met with positive affirmations.

**Back to School**

As Brown goes through the process of piecing her life together, she saw the importance of surrounding herself with loving people who would become her family. She marveled that “only God could have put this divergent group together and make it work. We were varying ages and races…but somehow our oddly shaped individual pieces fit into an unusual picture—perfectly” (421). Brown’s homeplace narrative functions to prove that as she let go of the toxic people in her life, the loving family that had eluded her for so long can flourish, and she has the presence of mind to accept its support.

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

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

Many fears that a non-traditional student would have coming back to school when she is almost thirty are addressed. Firstly, Brown discusses the initial hurdle—she did not have a high school degree. She recalls that she allowed herself to stall for weeks as she worried about how she would overcome that obstacle. However, when she went to speak to an adviser at her local community college, he told her, “Oh, you’re too old to be going back to high school, so I wouldn’t waste my time. If I were you, I’d start right here at the community college. You can get your associate’s degree and transfer to a four-year university” (428). Her next hurdle was overcoming her fear of the placement tests she had to take. She became highly anxious over doing poorly because she saw her results as a reflection of her self-worth. She would find, however, that the tests were just a starting point and that even though she scored low on most of them, she was still able to be successful and later graduate.

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

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

What seemed to be the true source of pride for Brown was her graduation party. She recalled hoping that thirty people would show up but doubting if this would be the case. Instead, the party was packed, a testament to the strong community of loving people in her life.

Brown shows here that even though she did not have much biological family, she was able to nurture relationships with people who would become invested in her life and
would be concerned with her well being. Her authorial choice to subordinate this aspect of her life to the perils she experienced up to this point prove that this text is meant to be a story of surviving the street, not a tale of self-aggrandizement. While her education is indeed a triumph, what is truly miraculous is her courage and perseverance to fight for her life even though she has experienced so much tragedy. In fact, she no longer practices law; she prefers to go around the country to talk to women about how she has changed her life. She takes great pains to talk about what happened to her as a young woman and how it impacts her adult life.

**Conclusion**

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

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

Brown gives a true model of recovery that is possible to achieve. Her life is anything but a piece of cake, but by sharing herself—as tragic as her life has been—she perhaps can equip others to take a path that is a bit sweeter. She establishes her text as a homeplace narrative by bearing witness to the many injustices she faced as a child and how they impacted her adult life, breaking silence about forgotten or misunderstood members of society (such as foster children, gang members and those dependent on drugs), demonstrating the ways her writing has been cathartic in aiding her recovery from addiction and creating a fulfilling life, and by encouraging women in similar situations that they can make similar strides.
Chapter 3

It’s Bigger Than Hip Hop: Sandy Denton’s Search for Selfhood in *Let’s Talk About Pep*

_Did you know somebody almost got away with me/me in a plastic bag under their arm/me danglin on a string of personal carelessness._

_For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf
--Ntozake Shange

Sandy “Pepa” Denton, who gained fame as a member of the platinum hip-hop group Salt-N-Pepa, represents for many a symbol of female empowerment and self-possession, yet her memoir, *Let’s Talk about Pep*, reveals another side of the artist. Denton’s narrative transcends being solely a testimonial because she uses her experience for the express purpose of providing readers with a blueprint for healing as she outlines her recovery from the pain of abuse and self-loathing. Denton’s language as she discusses difficult memories is straightforward and conversational, which is characteristic of homeplace narratives of the urban variety. In this way, she makes her text accessible and unintimidating to the audience she is trying to reach. She also, very early on, establishes that her ideal audience is women who can relate to her past. In fact, aside from her parents, she dedicates her tale to “The many women who think they’re all alone in their pain. You can get through it. Trust me. And know you are worthy” (v). The memoir reads much like her part of a very candid conversation with a friend she is trying
to uplift and encourage. Denton does so by disclosing many of her own mistakes, highlighting the root cause of her behavior and providing a detailed discussion of how she embarked on a new path.

In this chapter, I will show the ways that Denton made the conscious decision to create a homeplace narrative, rather than the typical celebrity memoir that tells of her journey to the top. Instead, I establish that her narrative demonstrates healing from abuse and low self-esteem, thereby creating a community of resistance for her readers. Much like Cupcake Brown, Denton illustrates her desire to de-emphasize her own accomplishments in order to establish common ground with an audience that has had similar difficulties in terms of succumbing to social pressures. The true success story for Denton is coming to a place of self-acceptance and being able to negotiate her identity. I argue that her memoir ably embodies the cathartic and transformational nature of an effective homeplace narrative. In fact, I will discuss how Denton initially was aiming to create a fluffier piece based on her group’s break up. The act of actually writing her story down, however, caused her to become more introspective.

**All about Pep**

Denton admits that initially her memoir was at least in part going to focus on her bitterness toward her partner Cheryl “Salt” Wray, whom she believes decimated her career by unexpectedly leaving the group. While Denton was in the process of writing her memoir, however, the two women reconciled. The author concedes that because she
had been a part of the pioneering hip-hop group since she was a teenager, she never really took the time to be introspective about what her identity was outside of being a performer. The act of writing her memoir, however, helped her to delve into who she was as a whole human being.

Denton reveals that she was molested once at seven and again at eleven (17). The second time, however, since she was a little older, she was able to summon the courage to speak out. But she was not believed, which was a devastating blow to her self-esteem (20). She also voices how her first consensual sexual experience promised to be traumatic because she allowed her judgment to be clouded by her low self-esteem. As a result, she lost her virginity to a young man in her class, only to find out that he had made a cruel bet with their fellow classmates (21). She divulges that this humiliating experience—along with the molestation she experienced—set the stage for the series of poor choices that followed. Denton even admits that her first relationship in high school was a brutally abusive one and that she allowed the violence because she was needy for attention. In fact, Denton states that she has a permanent scar on her face where her boyfriend viciously bit her (24). Not surprisingly, her early traumatic experiences caused a significant drop in her school performance (29).

Denton’s exploration into her family dynamic further explains her lack of self-regard. While she admits that her parents cared about her a great deal, she says she suffered because they were such strict disciplinarians. Although she saw herself as her father’s favorite child, she never felt like she fully had his approval. She also conveys how difficult it was to be in a family in which her parents would espouse that they beat
their children because they loved them. Denton suggests that connecting physical hitting and love in this way would put her in a position where she accepted physical abuse from men. Denton also admits that her father’s abrupt death caused her to have abandonment issues and that she would continually seek relationships with men to fill a void. Denton intimates that, because she no longer had a father, from her mid-teens on she would find herself in relationships with controlling men whom she felt would provide for her (63). Indeed, the majority of Denton’s memoir is dedicated to her toxic relationships with men. She argues that her search for the affirmation and attention that she did not receive at home led to one bad scenario after another. In a Vibe interview featured in the compilation Hip Hop Divas, Denton confided, “I had a deep, rough childhood…maybe that’s why I’m so flirtatious. Maybe that’s why I am…clingy. I’m very clingy” (Allen 37).

The first significant romantic relationship of her adult life involved a drug dealer named Tommy. She says that she was drawn to him because he seemed powerful and successful. Although Tommy was a drug dealer, he also owned several businesses and carried himself as a man of importance. Denton remembers falling in love with him because he initially showed her the attention she had never experienced before. This relationship was predictably cut short because Tommy went to prison (57). Her next relationship was with Prince Markie Dee of the Fat Boys, who was a star at the time she met him (61). She recalls that he was mentally abusive, but she stayed in the relationship too long because he, like Tommy, showed her attention.
Denton’s relationship with Tyran, the father of her first child, represented the first traumatic heartbreak of her adult life, a turn of events that deflated her dreams of being in a “happy family.” She shares this part of her life at length to illustrate for her audience how her unresolved inner conflict made her susceptible to accepting treatment that was beneath her. She also portrays how she was able eventually to release herself from that very unhealthy relationship. In this way, she is able to create homeplace with women who similarly have allowed themselves to be misused.

While Denton has often been publically perceived as a strong, self-possessed woman, she eschews this persona as a writer and becomes vulnerable to her audience throughout the text by detailing how her self-hate manifested, not only through her toxic relationships with men, but also through her self-mutilation. In her memoir, Denton admits that she was a cutter and describes how she had to go through a long process of self-acceptance to overcome such self-destructive behavior (158).

Perhaps logically, one of the ways that Denton went about seeking self-love is through celibacy. She focused more on the issues she had been burying, no longer allowing drama-filled relationships to distract her from her inner hatred (196). She highlights that writing and journaling further aided her in sorting out her problems and creating a more fulfilling life for herself (199). Ultimately, writing her memoir was cathartic for her in that she was able to vent in an expansive format all of the pain she had suppressed throughout the years. She informs her readers that she now truly loves herself and that her strength is no longer a façade.
Breaking Silence and Shame

While child molestation is a subject that is often shrouded in silence, Denton openly discusses how she was molested and how the concomitant shame and isolation contributed to her destructive behavior far into her adulthood. In this way, Denton creates a community of resistance for others who have suffered from such abuse and silence. In her introduction, Denton immediately delves into how this molestation has impacted every aspect of her life. She recalls that while doing her reality program, *The Salt-N-Pepa Show*, she and former group member Cheryl “Salt” Wray went on a retreat in hopes of resolving the issues that culminated in the abrupt dissolution of the group. Denton reveals that at the retreat—with life coach Iyanla Vanzant—her molestation came to light. Denton recalls that when she showed up to the retreat late, a perceptive Vanzant asked her, “So how old were you when it happened?” (3). When Denton admitted she was seven, Vanzant replied that in her own case she was ten (4). Vanzant went on to expound that persistent tardiness “is a classic trait of someone who was molested at a young age. It’s like their way of having some sort of control. It’s one way of having power” (4). Upon absorbing this revelation, Denton says she began to be more introspective about some of the other concrete ways that these early events manifested in her adult life. Denton writes,

I could see a pattern, and I could also see where I tried to find my power or find my control in other areas. I also saw that I seemed to keep being attracted to men who would take from me, abuse me, and try to make me powerless. It was almost a sickness. How did I keep ending up with the same kind of man? (4)
Denton also asserts, however, “I finally decided to break the cycle” (4). As she had finally done the work to come to terms with her pain and to heal she proclaims “I deserve the best in my life. I didn’t always feel that way. But I do now” (5).

The fact that Denton decides to frame her memoir in this way is telling. She wants to prepare her readers for the tragedies and disappointment ahead. Denton seeks to assure her audience, however, that her suffering has not been in vain and that she has finally learned her true self-worth. Her description of painful events proves to be inspirational, and her story stands as a symbol of survival and growth.

Denton’s first instance of abuse occurred while she was at a neighbor’s house playing. Her friend Anthony’s grandfather sent him to the store. Denton wanted to tag along but was told to remain behind. She discloses, “I remember Anthony looking back at me kind of puzzled, and I looked at him funny, too. I knew something wasn’t right” (17). Although this strange request might have set off red flags for Denton, she reminds her readers that she had been raised “old school,” which meant you did not question your elders. This teaching was so ingrained into her seven-year-old mind that she felt too disempowered to protest the odd request or to even later admit to anyone what the grandfather had done. Denton divulges,

I didn’t tell. I was always taught to respect and mind my elders. And while I knew what Anthony’s grandfather had done to me was wrong, I couldn’t tell anyone. I was also embarrassed and may have felt that it was my fault. (18) Although she never told anyone about the experience, the feeling of shame never left her. Denton writes,
This thing that happened so many years ago definitely messed with my mind. It made me question so many things about myself. It made me feel so bad about myself. I know that it wasn’t my fault. But you can’t help but think that maybe you did something. What it did more than anything was make me know what some men are capable of. If you had seen Anthony’s grandfather, he didn’t look like a dirty old man. He looked like a harmless old grandfather. Yet I know he would have tried a whole lot worse if Anthony hadn’t come when he did. (18)

Denton goes on to discuss how she was molested yet again a few years later—this time in her own home by one of her sister’s boyfriends, who cornered her in a remote area of her large house and fondled her. This time, perhaps because she was a little older, she did tell, and what happened next was devastating. Her sister accused her of lying. Denton imparts how damaging the accusation was to her self-worth. Moreover, her relationship with her sister was never the same. She warns, “when you don’t believe children you rob them…it made me not want to tell anyone because I didn’t want to fight about it” (20).

Not only did she carry around the shame from being molested by her friend’s grandfather, she was now burdened with the betrayal within her own family.

Denton’s descriptions create a community of resistance that facilitates dialogue about preventing such abuse. Her tragedy confirms the need for parents who desire to be traditional in their child-rearing to think about how to instill respect towards elders while at the same time communicating that it is permissible for children to admit to someone they trust that they have been abused. Denton’s articulation of this violation typifies a homeplace narrative in that she is recounting her tragedy to empower her audience, in
this case to break silence about an atrocity that is all too common. She is careful to point out, for example, that it was her upbringing more than fear of her aggressor that silenced her. As a young child, she felt totally disempowered to speak out against her first instance of abuse or to refuse to stay alone with the older man even though she had a feeling it was wrong. Denton’s desire not only to detail the hardships she endured but to also emphasize how she has progressed is also emblematic of a homeplace narrative. As a mother, Denton finds it exceedingly important to communicate the steps she has taken to protect the young people around her from being exposed to this kind of abuse. She asserts,

That’s why I talk to my daughter and my nieces. I tell them that they can tell me anything. And that if anyone—and I mean anyone—ever touches them or makes them feel funny, they better come and tell me. I tell them that they will be in more trouble if they don’t tell (18-19).

This is Denton’s way of underscoring the earnest effort she has made to guard against a cycle of abuse continuing to the next generation. In addition, she shares how she takes a zero-tolerance policy regarding her daughter being alone in the company of men—even if they are in her family. Denton admits that at a family function she was looking for her daughter and one of her sisters informed her that she was taking a walk outside with her husband. Not concerned with being offensive or accusatory, Denton expressed her discomfort with the idea. Her sister became insulted, “[my daughter] was with her husband. So what was I trying to say? And, yes, that’s exactly what I was saying. Not because [her husband] was a bad guy or I thought he would actually do anything to [my
daughter]. I was acting out of my own experiences” (19). For Denton, it is important to declare that protecting her daughter is more important than insulting others or appearing irrational.

Denton’s disclosure of two traumatic episodes from her childhood function to establish that when her innocence was stolen from her at an early age, it caused her to make damaging decisions from that point on. In this way, Denton bears witness to how devastating it is for a child to be violated in this way because it ultimately alters the course of that child’s life. Although much of her subsequent behavior can be attributed to her abuse, she suggests, as indicated previously, how her relationships with her parents—with her father in particular—were also contributing factors.

**Daddy’s Little Girl**

Denton uses her homeplace narrative to interrogate how she was raised. This discussion is not meant to be an indictment on her parents; in fact, she acknowledges that they showed their care for all of their nine children (Denton is the youngest) by sacrificing to bring each of them to the United States from Jamaica to give them better lives. Denton tells of this transition,

My parents moved to the United States when I was three. One by one, each of my sisters left, too…I just remember talk of “opportunity” and “education” in America. In Jamaica, you had to pay for education after primary school. And getting an education was big in my family. So maybe that’s why they left. I
never asked. You didn’t ask questions when I was growing up. My family was traditional, and kids didn’t ask adults questions, you just accepted things—whatever those things were. I ended up being in Jamaica with my grandmother and one of my older sisters. My parents would come back from time to time, but I was there for a couple of years before they finally moved me to the states, too.

(7)

In her retelling of the family’s migration to the United States, we learn a great deal about the “Denton” dynamic. The author captures the commonly held notion in many Africana families that provision equals love. In this same passage, however, she communicates how children were silenced and disempowered. As we have already seen, however, the silenced position of children in her family is what caused her to internalize the shame from her molestation and contributed to her lack of self-worth. Just as bell hooks is able to discuss some of the ways her family was simultaneously affirming and dysfunctional, Denton brings forth the same message. She is able to talk about her suffering as a child without demonizing the people who loved her the best way they knew how. Denton does assert, however, that her parents’ harsh approach to disciplining their children fed her self-doubt because she never felt she could please them. She foregrounds the importance of providing her audience with the lessons that can be learned from the mistakes of others. She creates homeplace for those who subscribe to this kind of parenting to interrogate some of the long-standing beliefs concerning child-raising that prevail in many Africana families.
For example, Denton recalls that her parents would not say, “I love you.” The way that they chose to teach their children they loved them was through strict instruction that often led to beatings. In her parents’ estimation, life was hard for people of color, and if they did not toughen their children up, their children would not survive. However, Denton’s text functions to examine the potential consequences of parents exhibiting their love through such harsh discipline and to show that such an approach may prove to be counterproductive. Denton also recalls how her father, whom she adored, would always call her disparaging names when she did not perform well in school. Denton writes, “I know he wanted the best for me. And calling me stupid and a dunce was his way of trying to motivate me. He knew I could do it” (30). Concerning her father’s sudden death while she was still in high school, she laments:

My father left this earth thinking I was a disappointment. I didn’t get a chance to show him what I could do…I believe part of the reason why I worked so hard to be something was to show my father I could do it. (39-40)

While it is true that Denton learned to work hard because of the way her father treated her, it is also clear that whatever self-esteem she had been holding on to had been decimated in the process.

To make matters worse, Denton learned of her father’s death after staying out all night without permission. She remembers,

As soon as I walked into the house, my mom started breaking on me: “you’re out running the streets…” I noticed immediately that she was crying. My mother is not a crier. As I looked around the house, it was full. It was always full, but
everyone was together, on the main floor, and they all had this look on their faces, and they, too, were crying. “Pop-Pa is dead! My mother screamed” (37).

Because Denton felt she had been a disappointment to him, it made her feelings of abandonment that much more palpable, particularly in light of the fact that, as her family informed her, “He was asking for me before he died. He was asking for me and I wasn’t there!” (38). He died before she was able to say goodbye or to receive any final validation or closure.

Denton maintains that her early experiences of molestation, the devastation of losing her father, as well as the sense of loss she experienced from being callously abandoned by her first child’s father, continuously made her unable to leave abusive relationships until they nearly destroyed her (127). When she first learned she was pregnant, she assumed that she and Tyran would be married right away (88). After all, her parents were married for a long time before her father passed away, and this traditional nuclear-family structure was what she was accustomed to. She would soon learn, however, that the fairytale was not meant to be. Denton recalls that she did not read Tyran’s lukewarm reaction as a sign that he was not committed to her. Instead, she kept pushing him. She recalls,

I wanted a ring. I wanted us to get married. I laid it all down. He didn’t say a word. So I figured I got through to him. He was so funny. He came in with this box and said, “Here,” and ran out of the room like a little kid who was nervous. I opened up the box and saw this beautiful ring that I thought meant what a diamond ring means, that we were engaged. Later he would tell me it was just a
friendship ring, that I had pressured him so much that he had to get me something. He didn’t want to disappoint me and didn’t want to tell me what he was really feeling—which was that he wanted out. He didn’t want to be a father. While I was cherishing this ring and thinking that [Tyran] and I were going to get married, he grew more and more distant. And eventually he stopped coming around. (88)

Denton’s retelling of this story becomes exceedingly helpful in creating a community of resistance for women who have low self-esteem and allow substandard treatment. Denton lays out for her readers how she was delusional from the first time she announced she was pregnant. She also shows that because she continued to ignore the hints that Tyran was not a suitable mate, she later set herself up to be even more devastated in the process. Denton’s homeplace narratives works because it is not overly didactic. Instead, she lays bear all of the mistakes that she has made and allows her audience to see themselves in her shoes, not only as she is making the mistakes, but also as she is learning from them.

Even before the child’s birth, Tyran left Denton for another woman, Tasha. Denton pressed on this point,

Finally I sat Tyran down. “Be real with me. Let me know the deal.” When I said that, he told me the deal. He told me, yes, he was seeing this girl Tasha, and his plan was to be with her. He wanted to break it off with me...Here I am like four months pregnant with his baby, and it was like he kicked me in my stomach. And he was so nice about it. He wasn’t mean or cruel. (89)
While Denton shows that she was disappointed that she was pregnant with someone who was not interested in her, it is clear that she is not vilifying him. Of course, it is also clear that he could have handled the situation differently, but Denton is careful to illustrate her culpability as well. She shows that while he had not been totally honest with her, he had not led her to believe they were moving toward a wedding. Contrarily, Denton shows that she was solely responsible for creating that fantasy. Denton is also candid about the fact, however, that she did not stop there.

Denton provides a highly elaborate account of the difficulties she had with Tyran even to the point of nearly stalking and harassing him. She proclaims, “I wasn’t trying to hear that. He wasn’t going anywhere, as far as I was concerned. I was having a baby, and he was going to be with me” (89). Nonetheless, her attempts were futile,

But nothing I did was working. And worse, he started showing up places publicly with Tasha on his arm, almost flaunting their relationship…My friends tried to talk me off the ledge, but I was hard-headed…I could only see the possibilities—having his baby and living with him as a family, not the truth. I was ignoring the truth, which kept slapping me in the face (90).

She further admits that she would call and beg him to spend time with her, even though he would continually refuse. Tasha answered the phone one time and said, “Look, stop calling him. You look really dumb. I’m sitting right here while you’re begging him to play pool with you. He doesn’t want you!” (91). Denton immaturely replies, “Yes, he does…It’s just a matter of time” (91).
Denton further details her persistence and delusions, recounting that at one point she learned that Tyran had been shot. She rushed to the hospital even though she realized it was not her place to be there. Because she was a star by this point, the nurses allowed her to see him first, even before his girlfriend. Denton explains,

He had all these tubes sticking out of him, but he was still alive and awake. “Are you okay?” I asked, and he nodded. I was thinking that he was happy to see me. Then Tasha came in and pushed past me to his bedside. He grabbed her hand and I was standing right there. It was killing me. He was looking at me like “Pep, let’s stop doing this.” I was just standing there looking stupid. He finally said to me, “I got to talk to her. You know…” and he nodded for me to leave (91-92).

Denton could stopped the episode there, with admitting the lengths she went through to get the attention of someone that she had no chance with, but it is clear that she really wants this message to sink in with her readers. She discloses that even after the scene at the hospital, she continued to call Tyran until she thought she made a little headway.

After months of not returning her calls, Tyran invited her on a trip to Las Vegas. Denton submits,

We were going to get back together was all I was thinking. I paid for the room, and as we were checking out, I saw the phone bill. He spent practically the whole time on the phone talking to Tasha. I found out that she agreed to let him take me to Vegas as long as he didn’t touch me. He kept his promise to her. I also found out that she was pregnant, too—just three months behind me. (92)
While most of what occurs with Denton’s first child’s father must be embarrassing to admit, her full disclosure solidifies the fact that she is making an effort to show her readers that she is human and as flawed as anyone else. How she gets over her traumatic experience with Tyran, however, is also exceedingly helpful.

Denton recalls that the last straw in their relationship is when he called her to borrow $25,000 to open up a store. At this point, Denton was financially able to comfortably lend Tyran the money. The problem, however, is that he was still seeing his girlfriend, Tasha, and up to that point made no effort to spend time with Denton or their new baby. She admits that she was so desperate to see him that she agreed to give him the money if he came to visit her the next day, since she had not seen him in so long. She says when he did not come or call the whole day to pick up the money, she finally tried to get him out of her system.

Denton concedes that throughout their tumultuous relationship she had been praying for God to change the situation and to make Tyran love her. She finally decided to change the focus of her prayer. Denton recalls pleading, “Please, God, if he doesn’t come here tonight, by tomorrow morning when I open my eyes, please take the feeling that I have for him away from me”(98)! She then reflects, “All of this time I had been praying for [Tyran] to love me, for him to be with me. I had never prayed to not love him” (98). This move to take back some of her agency by changing herself rather than relying on someone else to change transformed the nature of their relationship. She says she no longer was interested in him after that point because she had taken back her power. Although there would be several other dysfunctional relationships she would fall
into after that one, this moment still remains pivotal. In this way, she allows readers to learn from her mistakes and encourages them to put their own well being ahead of the desire to be in a relationship.

Denton’s authorial choice to foreground her problems with relationships and to highlight how her decisions regarding men were manifestations of her self-loathing aptly embodies the aim of a homeplace narrative. I have examined this particular episode in her life at length because it illustrates her willingness to show herself in an unflattering light for the purpose of helping others. It is clear, through Denton’s construction of her memoir, that it is not her desire to foreground all of her many professional accomplishments or to emphasize the legendary status she has in the hip-hop realm. Alternatively, she seeks to counsel, uplift and inspire, even if it takes divulging the most humiliating details of her life.

Denton’s work is also admirable because she admits suffering from postpartum depression, which is an extremely taboo subject. She exposes,

I had the worse case of postpartum depression…I think I just had regular depression before the baby came, and it got a whole lot worse after I delivered my baby. I was stressed and sad and angry all at once. I had never been that depressed in all my life. (97)

Postpartum depression is something that many suffer from in isolation because they are scared that they will be seen as incompetent mothers. The fact that she even mentions that she dealt with this sickness will undoubtedly create homeplace for countless women.
Denton admits that her most public relationship—her marriage to rapper Treach (Brad) of the rap group Naughty By Nature—was the most toxic of them all. She almost did not make it out of that relationship alive after a particularly brutal fight. Although it wasn’t clear to her when she was going through these relationships, through the course of writing her memoir she grew now reflective enough to see why she got into such unhealthy relationships. Denton reflects,

Looking back, I know I attracted these controlling men because I missed my daddy. I missed having him in my life, and I needed to have a man to take care of me and whom I had to answer to. I also realized that by my being so obedient is what attracted the kind of guy that would be abusive…But I had a hard time being alone. I wanted to have a man. I didn’t want to be out there dating. I liked being in a relationship—even a bad one” (63).

It is apparent that when Denton reveals to her readers the many mistakes that she made, or how misguided her thinking was, it is not to paint herself as a victim. Denton admits that Brad showed signed of being abusive just a few weeks into their courtship: “We were at a party and I was being my bubbly self…I didn’t think anything about mingling with the guests and being my crazy self…When I was ready to go someone told me he left” (117). When Denton returned to his house, and confronted him about leaving her, he hit her and threw her clothing into the street. Denton continues,

The next day he came around talking about how he was sorry. Actually, he didn’t say the words I’m Sorry but he started talking about his childhood and how nobody ever loved him and how he was feeling I was [being disrespectful] by
talking to other [men] at the party, and he just lost it. I don’t know why, but seeing him like that, all vulnerable and sad, I felt sorry for him. I could see this little boy who was abandoned, whom nobody loved, with all of this pain and anger, and I understood where he was coming from. He had me from that moment. I guess I could even excuse him hitting me. I had been hit before. And I was of the mind-set where I believed that if a man hit me, it meant he cared. For him to get that mad to have such emotion, he must really care. (118)

This passage exhibits a textbook case of battered women’s syndrome.

Denton’s discussion of this relationship creates a homeplace narrative because she allows the reader to see how faulty such thinking is. Her courage in voicing the belief that she mistook his physical abuse for love creates a forum to talk about the dysfunctional but common belief. Her construction of her memoir, however, disallows readers from being able to continue buying into such misguided thinking when she shares how Brad continued to abuse her. For example, she broaches the controversial subject of marital rape, which many people don’t believe exists. She recollects that she and Brad had been having issues in their marriage because her career was growing while his seemed to have slowed. Denton discloses that after she rejected his sexual advance on one occasion, he became violent. She analyzes,

I never believed you could be raped by your man. But here I was getting raped by my man. He was worse than some stranger off the street. He was worse than my friend’s grandfather. He was worse than my sister’s boyfriend. He was worse than those guys who tried to gang-rape me when I was sixteen. He was worse
because he knew me and he supposedly loved me and we had a life together and he never had to force it on me...I spent seven days in the hospital. My entire body was infected, and the doctor’s said that I could have died. My IUD had ruptured my insides and bent my cervix. It caused a toxic reaction. (132)

Here, Denton creates homeplace for women who have been raped or abused by their husbands or otherwise. As she purges, it allows others to open up and heal.

Unfortunately, that was not the last time that Brad nearly took her life. After the rape, made a concrete effort to distance herself from her husband. She decided to go to California to spend time with friends in order to recuperate from the traumatic experience. Brad, however, came out to visit under the guise of reconciling. When Denton dropped her guard, however, Brad proclaimed that he wanted a divorce and began mercilessly beating her. She said that the altercation progressed to the top of the stairs of the huge house they were guests in, where he was choking her and dangling her over the steps. Luckily, their mutual friend, actor Omar Epps, stepped in and tried to calm Brad down, telling him, “She’s not worth giving up your whole life. Let her go” (139). That was the only thing that was able to calm Brad’s rage, and it gave Denton an opportunity to escape. It was finally the last straw for Denton. She no longer wanted to be with Brad. She admits, however, that she did not want to see him go to jail: “While I knew I was never going back, I also wasn’t strong enough to tell the truth. I couldn’t press charges. I couldn’t make him pay. So I lied” (139).

Because Denton is able to take her readers through her initial meeting with Brad when he was charming and attentive, to a few weeks in when he hit her for the first time,
all the way to when he nearly killed her twice, they can see the process of how making an ill-advised decision early on can have grave consequences. Denton shows how she learns the hard way that, not only does hitting not equate to love, it can kill. She makes clear that she intends her memoir to function in such a way that it will allow other women to realize how faulty her thinking was. She intends the portrayal of her brutalization will empower others to make more informed choices. This once again exemplifies the communal bent of her text. Because she accepts full responsibility on the course her took, she encourages others to do the same.

The relationships that Denton chooses not to get into prove to be as instructive as the ones that she does. For example, she expresses extreme regret for never pursuing a relationship with megastar Will Smith, who at the time was a fellow rapper just getting his start. She recalls in the early days going on tour with Smith and MC Hammer. Denton says that he took an interest in her, but she wasn’t attracted to him because he was so nice to her. Of course, the fact that he is a darling of Hollywood and is a multi-millionaire might cause her to kick herself, but it is more so the realization in hindsight that he was well intentioned and was a good person. She uses this example to illustrate for her readers how her low self-esteem caused her to feel that she was not worthy of someone who showed kindness and emotionally maturity.

Denton later talks about a good friend named Gavin Wray, who would save her child’s life when they are carjacked at gunpoint (95-6). She was so moved by Wray’s bravery because she knew that he is not at all a tough guy or violent by any means. Denton decided that Wray would be perfect for her partner Cheryl James, and the two of
them ended up getting married. While it is wonderful that she had a hand in James meeting her husband, it is curious that Denton did not see Wray as a suitable mate for herself. Of course, it could be that the two were just not compatible and that it was fate for him to meet James. Given her behavior towards men, however, it is possible that she might have felt that just as Will Smith was too good for her, Wray was as well.

Denton also recalls encountering baseball player Gary Sheffield after a particularly brutal episode with Brad (leading to a temporary separation) during which he burned her with an iron. Sheffield expressed interest in her, but she didn’t like him because he was a homebody and wanted a woman who would settle down with him. At the time, she wasn’t interested in trading in her party-girl lifestyle, a decision she regrets to this day. Denton laments, “I needed that kind of stability in my life, but I wasn’t ready for it” (126). Unfortunately, this stable relationship eludes her even now and she has yet to find the loving husband she desires. In any case, the way she constructs the memoir encourages readers to interrogate their reasoning for choosing certain men, while rejecting others, and to deduce what these choices reveal about one’s sense of self-worth.

One of the intriguing aspects of reading memoir is that sometimes there are things that become apparent to the reader that may not be readily obvious to the memoirist. Denton’s discussion of her relationship with basketball player Derrick Coleman is a case in point. This relationship was not at all violent or abusive, but at the same time it was not as ideal as she represents in her memoir. Denton blames herself for her break up with Coleman and says that he could have potentially been a life partner. The reason she says that they split, however, is fertile ground for a fruitful discussion about safe sex. Denton
says that she was dating Coleman during the time when Magic Johnson revealed his HIV status. Denton intimates that she panicked and began demanding Coleman wear a condom, a request he refused (112). Upon his refusal, she left him, although she potentially saw him as a “happily ever after kind of dude.” In Denton’s estimation, she ruined their relationship with her request. I find the way that Denton tells this story particularly interesting in light of the fact that she is an AIDS activist. Although the way she came to her decision may have been out of panic, her request was not misplaced.

For many people, the courage that Magic Johnson demonstrated in revealing that he was HIV positive brought the reality of the disease to the forefront for the heterosexual community, when it had been previously commonly held as an exclusively homosexual disease. Denton was right to insist that she be protected, and it was a courageous move for her to leave someone she deeply cared for to stand up for this principle. Unfortunately, her bold move was undercut by the apologetic way in which she tells the story. J. L. King, author of the controversial book On The Down Low, which is an account of the façade he lived as a straight married man when he was also living a secretly homosexual life, makes the argument that women put themselves in a vulnerable position by allowing the men in their lives to bully them into having unprotected sex. Although, Denton could clearly be more reflective in this passage—particularly in hindsight with Black women’s rates of HIV continually increasing—the fact that she includes the account at all creates an opportunity for Black women to be able to have a meaningful dialogue about the subject.
Denton is a work in progress on a path toward healing that she shares with her readers. She believes that to get her life in order, she needs to be celibate. For her, this is the only way she can break the cycle of toxic relationships she is seemingly cursed by. Denton avows, “I have been on the not-so-special side too often. I have given myself away for cheap too many times. I can remember sitting there at dinner thinking, what will I have to do for this? As if I didn’t deserve a free meal”(196). By becoming celibate, she puts the spotlight on herself, flaws and all, so that she can investigate why she keeps finding the same kinds of men over and over.

In addition to becoming celibate and working on herself, Denton also shares that it is important to really think about the kind of men she wants to attract. She uses writing and journaling to achieve this goal. Denton shares,

I believe in writing things down, making a plan, and following it. I used to do this for most things of my life. I did it for everything except for the kind of man I wanted. I recently put together a list, a kind of blueprint for the kind of man I am looking for. And if he wants to be with me, he’s going to have to fit all the categories—not a couple, or some, but all (199).

Having higher expectations is particularly important for her since, as she has illustrated, she has not previously set reasonable standards for the men in her life. In her memoir, Denton shares the list of attributes she wants her next mate to have. To paraphrase, she highlights the importance of possessing spirituality, being ambitious and successful in a career, being honest and chivalrous—among other things (200-202). She then
admonishes her readers to make a list of things they find to be important. Denton asserts, “Make a list of the things you want from the man you’re with. Don’t settle for anything less” (203). By being celibate and making a list of what she wants and deserves, she shows major growth from the days when she was happy to accept anyone who was willing to show her attention. Many women who also suffer from a lack of low self-worth can adopt these simple but effective practices as well.

As she reflects on her life throughout the process of writing her narrative, she surmises that having unresolved issues with her father leaves her with abandonment issues and that being abused attacks her self-worth. Denton thereby masterfully creates a homeplace narrative because she adroitly conveys how reflecting on her life allows her to render some of her destructive patterns visible. Like Cupcake Brown, she subordinates her distinct voice and achievements to illuminate how she is similar to her audience and how her transformation can be reproduced by anyone. As bell hooks elucidates, she found that a psychologist could not help her sort through her issues because there was a lack of understanding about cultural difference and African-based forms of healing. There is often a lack of access to cultural-specific therapy, and there also remains a taboo in Africana communities about seeking professional psychological help. Homeplace narratives like Denton’s, however, do some of the work of helping readers to reflect on their lives in ways that will be transformational. In fact, Denton proclaims,

When I stared working on this book, I had a lot of things bottled up inside. There were things that I still didn’t want to talk about and things I didn’t even want to face. It took a minute, but I eventually opened up and I ended up sharing things
here that I’ve never told anyone—not even my family. This was my therapy—to get off my chest some of the things that I feel had stopped me from growing into the woman I was supposed to be…In the entertainment industry, everything is about appearances and how things look. People spend a lot of money to have the right image. But artists, celebrities, entertainers, are all human beings. We all have issues and a past, just like everybody else. I learned that doing this book, too. Not that I didn’t know they were all human, but in talking about some of the things in this book to my friends in the business, I realized how many of them had been through some of the same things—from the molestation to the abuse. My situation wasn’t so unique. I started writing this book for me. I was angry and bitter when I started…But I stopped being mad and started to see that every single thing that I went through—especially the bad stuff, ended up being a blessing. Because I survived it. And it made me stronger. But more than all of that, it put me in a place where my stories could help women get through their issues” (204-205).

Denton creates her homeplace narrative not only through sharing how she has learned from her mistakes, but also through detailing concrete steps she has taken towards healing.

As homeplace narrative does, Denton’s memoir illustrates the inexorable connection between writing and self-discovery. Denton effectively displays how cathartic the actual act of writing her memoir has been for her as she heals from past pains and tries to break a vicious cycle of abusive relationships. As I have established,
charting critical consciousness is a key function of homeplace narrative. The above passage is particularly exemplary in demonstrating how the act of writing not only conveys this development but also facilitates it. The fact that the very act of writing this book allows her to be introspective in ways she had not before is indeed instructive. Writing offers her the opportunity to assert the transformational process of self-definition and self-determination. As I have argued, however, this process is meant to not only show her growth, but to facilitate growth in others. She aptly creates homeplace, especially because many of the readers, like Denton, have emerged from fragmented communities where they do not have a space in which to construct healthy self-images and practices. Denton’s book, therefore, opens up a conversation and creates a support system for readers who do not have someone to guide them.

Conclusion

Often when people speak of Sandy “Pepa” Denton, it is with total admiration not only for the amazing accomplishments she has made in the music industry, but also for what seems to be unmistakable strength and fearlessness. She has shown the most bravery, however, in her willingness to shed this façade and to prove that, as Michelle Wallace argued over 20 years ago, the Black superwoman is a myth after all. Denton is not invincible; she has had the same hardships that many other women have had, and she is no less powerful because of it. In fact, her courage in coming to terms with her past
hurts and her fight to start a new life where she defines herself may be the most empowering things she has done for women yet.
Chapter 4

Strange Bedfellows: Karrine Steffans’ Critical Literacy Journey

Like any artist without an art form, she became dangerous.

_Sula_—Toni Morrison

Karrine Steffans is a study in contradiction when one observes the ease with which she can appear on _Oprah_ and discuss her past with grace and dignity and then argue down an urban radio personality for ridiculing her for her past indiscretions. On many days, she is demure and polished, and on many others she is blunt, loud talking and crass. She has been accused of being a pathological liar, and, given occasional discrepancies in interviews, this may be true. But moral judgments aside, she is an absolutely fascinating character. What sets her apart from the countless, nameless and faceless strippers, prostitutes, groupies, video models and porn stars--and she has been all of these things--is that she has been given an opportunity to write about her life and she has run with it. How many can say, sex workers or otherwise, that they are a _New York Times_ best-selling author three times over? Defying attempts to affix her to a single notion of identity, Steffans has been able to maneuver through avenues not traditionally meant for her.

In this chapter, I discuss how Steffans has been swiftly creating a respectable body of work that extends far beyond her days as a “groupie” and—especially when read as a homeplace narrative—gives insight into the impact that the hip-hop industry and a celebrity-driven society have on the psyches of young women. Additionally, I argue that
when she began writing, her work seemed to function as a case study that demonstrated how destructive behavior may result from a young woman not having an adequate support system or protection from abuse and negligence. However, as Steffans has grown and learned increasingly more from her mistakes, she has felt more empowered to reach outward and share advice that she thinks will help young women lead more fulfilling lives. Her first two books are memoirs, and the last is an advice entry that uses her life story as a backdrop to hopefully inspire women. It reads much like a memoir as well.

**Motherless Child**

*Confessions of a Video Vixen*, Karrine Steffans’ wildly popular first memoir, has been perceived to be a trashy tell-all, but in actuality it is a thoughtful homeplace narrative. Steffans, who grew up in St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, recalls a simpler time in the Caribbean when she could enjoy being a child. While her abusive mother brutalized her even then, frequently beating and berating her, Steffans was living in the home of her loving maternal grandmother, who would provide protection from her mother’s anger as much as possible. Steffans asserts that her mother resented her because she felt that they were in competition for attention (16).

When Steffans was ten, she was uprooted from St. Thomas and relocated to Tampa, Florida. This move proved traumatic for Steffans because she was ripped away from her grandmother, who was the only one who exhibited love toward her (21). Her
mother’s abuse intensified, and Steffans eventually ran away at the age of fifteen. She lived on the street for several weeks. When her mother found her, Steffans implored legal authorities not to mandate a return to her mother’s home. As a result, the police tracked down her father, who at the time lived in Phoenix, and he assumed custody. Steffans’ relationship with her father had been good, but their contact had become sporadic after he left St. Thomas. Her stay in Phoenix was positive at first; her father showered her with gifts. The living situation became strained, however, when her father remarried and had a new baby. The financial burden proved too much for him to handle, and he began to treat Steffans differently. As she had once before, she ran away from home.

Unfortunately, the only way she saw to sustain her life as an independent sixteen year old was to become a stripper. While stripping is clearly not the only option for a young woman on her own, Steffans followed her mother’s example that you use your body to get what you need. This is how she met her first husband, pioneering rapper Kool G. Rap. Steffans contends that her relationship with her husband was extremely volatile from early on, but she didn’t feel like she had anywhere else to go where she would have a stable life (62).

Steffans finally found the courage to leave her marriage behind, and she traveled to Los Angeles, where her reputation as a “groupie” would be established. She admits sleeping with successful men in the entertainment industry in the hopes of improving her lifestyle (121). She also discusses how she regarded many of the celebrities she was attached to as friends. When she became once again homeless, however, due to drug use and poor fiscal management, everyone turned his back on her (136). At her low point,
Steffans began to ponder the importance of being financially independent. She managed to open a massage business but later closed it to devote all of her time to writing (149).

After sharing her idea for a memoir with several people who had influence in the entertainment industry such as Andre Harrell and Damon Dash, she was able to create enough buzz to garner a sizable book deal (150). As soon as she was able to find a way to support herself without sleeping with men, she seized the opportunity. She now proclaims that she no longer looks for a man to make her life better or to take care of her financially; she cherishes being able to have control over her own life (157).

Everyone who has read Steffans or is familiar with her story seems to have strong opinions about her life choices. While she obviously doesn’t have control over how people perceive her, she demonstrates in The Vixen Diaries, her second memoir, that she is invested in taking control over her image. For example, she refused to allow a feature story to appear in an Australian magazine accompanied by photos from her Confessions—the publisher wanted to cut costs. Instead, Steffans used her own money for a photo shoot to ensure that the pictures accompanying the story would be appropriate, professional and up to her standards (14). Lamenting the difficulties of making these kinds of decisions, with minimal resources, Steffans maintains, “I sometimes feel like a one woman show, but that’s the way it has to be if I am to take responsibility for making my life and career what I want them to be: successful and enduring” (16).

Vixen Diaries is similar to the first book in that Steffans does talk about famous men she has slept with, but she also spends a great deal of time discussing her critical-
consciousness development and her journey toward financial independence. In addition, *Vixen Diaries* addresses some of the fallout as well as some positive feedback Steffans received from writing the first book. She shares how some media outlets were especially brutal, vilifying her for breaking the unspoken code that one never discloses names (x). Steffans always expected writing her initial memoir to lead to other life-changing opportunities, but that she is constantly accused of only caring about money. To this she simply retorts, “Even the Bible is sold” (xv).

While Steffans speaks out about the difficulty of being harshly judged during a conversation with talk show host Tyra Banks, whom she pegged as a representative of an “overlooked breed of female chauvinists,” as well as about being taunted and called names during many radio interviews, all of her experiences have not been negative. In fact, she feels validated to have had a wonderful experience with the woman who matters the most in the media, asserting that she and Oprah connected because of their similar childhoods of abuse and promiscuity (21). Accordingly, Steffans praises Oprah for not being judgmental and for being open to hearing her story. Steffans declares, “Appearing with Oprah represented more than just the realization of a dream for me. It broadened my horizon and set the bar higher for what I should expect—what I have a right to expect in my dealings with the press” (23).

While Steffans has had a great deal of bad press, she uses her second memoir to discuss her pride in the way her writing has positioned her to be an inspiration to other women. She writes, for example, of being invited to her first speaking engagement at
Philander Smith, a private Historically Black College (31). This would be the first of many opportunities to go around the nation and inspire and encourage young women.

Steffans still talks about some of her sexual relationships with celebrities in the second memoir, but she makes sure to highlight the fact that they were not for financial need. Much of her discussion of men centers on her rather long and highly problematic relationship with talking head Bill Maher. Here, she addresses her unhealthy obsession with him and her breakdown after their split—she admits that she slit her wrists because she was so distraught (53).

If nothing else, *Vixen Diaries*, becomes a chance for Steffans to analyze her dysfunction. Being introspective in this way becomes a model for others (47). Steffans also shows growth concerning her mother, as she goes from proclaiming in her first book that she hates her to demonstrating her attempt to at least have a civil relationship. In fact, Steffans maintains that her purging in *Confessions* is what facilitated her new outlook (80). Despite controversy, Steffans still declares, “My goal as an author is to tell the truth as candidly as I can, so that those who have no one will at least have me. They can share my experiences and perhaps positively alter theirs” (92-93). Steffans goes on to detail how she comes into contact with so many women who communicate that they appreciate her telling her story because they can relate to it and it inspires them to change their lives (93). Overall, this text functions to assert that while Steffans is demonized in certain circles, she is not allowing that to overshadow the positive impact her writing has had on women who, like her, grew up in isolation with no support system. She maintains that she will not be deterred from this important work.
Steffans’ third literary effort, *The Vixen Manual: How to Find, Seduce and Keep the Man You Want*, is her opportunity to further impact the lives of the women she desires to reach. Of course, she immediately has to address the issue of authority in the beginning of the text. But she argues that because she has learned from so many mistakes, she is an ideal candidate to write an advice book (xv). She then proceeds to show the many lessons she has learned from her sordid past. She now speaks against casual sex (15) and argues, like Denton, that celibacy is a powerful tool to improve one’s life (19). She also discusses the pain of not being able to shed a bad reputation (19). Steffans stresses the importance of dealing well with rejection, something she previously was unable to do (40). She also speaks against women using their bodies to get what they want; she says that instead they should be as invested in their own self-improvement in order to be in a position to take care of themselves (47). Not surprisingly, a common thread throughout the text is the importance of financial independence (79). Steffans also emphasizes the importance of healing from insecurities before getting into a relationship (121).

Ironically, while many may presuppose that this text is a sex manual, only one chapter is based on sex, and Steffans continually emphasizes that she is espousing that sex should be in the context of a committed relationship. Steffans’ text might also surprise readers in its traditionalism and conservatism regarding relationships. Her advice to “play the damsel in distress” can come across as anti-feminist (153). Depending on how one reads the text, some sections might even read as a Stepford-Wife manual. Although her approach may not find favor with everyone, it is clear that she has
formed a strong value system and is consistent in upholding what she thinks is moral behavior. In this way, Steffans has further established her critical-consciousness development and solidified her role as a person committed to the uplift of women. In fact, she admits that much of the advice she gives in the book involves things that a mother would pass down to her daughter. Since Steffans virtually grew up motherless, she had to learn these lessons on her own in the most painful way, and she doesn’t wish the path she took on anyone.

**Withstanding Standards**

Why do we care about these half-naked, gyrating “video ho’s” who reinforce the stereotypes that many Black women have tried so hard to combat? In *Check It While I Wreck It*, Gwendolyn Pough asserts that “young black women, like it or not, are getting their life lessons from rap music” (Pough 192). Particularly damaging are the standards of beauty portrayed and the depictions of low expectations for interpersonal relationships.

In *Confessions*, Steffans admits that she was first seduced by hip-hop videos at a particularly vulnerable time in her life, a time during which she was being brutally abused, even to the point of being hospitalized, by her husband Kool G. Rap. She recalls longingly watching these videos, feeling unattractive, useless and inadequate, as many battered women do. Steffans writes:

> I looked enviously at the women in these videos, their bodies perfect and voluptuous while mine was gaunt and disgusting. Their faces were all made up,
and mine was plain…their clothes were tight fitting, and mine hung loosely from
my stick-like frame. I wanted to be there, wherever they were. It was my greatest
wish, to be beautiful and strong and free. (*Confessions* 61)

In a needy time, not long before attempted suicide, the degradation she saw in these
videos seemed like a way out. What was more like bondage seemed like freedom.

While the present project does not focus solely on hip hop, it does seek to engage
a segment of the population that is deeply entrenched in hip-hop culture. Like Pough, I
see the importance of exploring the much-vilified art form in order to “harness the energy
of the youth culture and revitalize its activist beginnings” (Pough 13). Pough is hopeful
that hip hop can be used toward liberatory ends. My work extends hers by shifting the
focus from female rappers in order to show the impact that video models have had on
standards of beauty and on how some young Black women have developed notions of
desirability. Because these models are often silenced, exposed bodies, Steffans’ work
gives a rare insight into the mind of a young woman that chooses such a degrading
livelihood. Pough profoundly argues, “the life stories [of Africana women within hip-
hop culture] are road maps for how to, and sometimes how not to, navigate life” (114).
Steffans’ texts are indeed shining examples of what not to do and of how to recover if
you have gone down the wrong path. Anyone doing service projects with young women
might be unpleasantly surprised when they find that for many young women being in rap
videos is an aspiration, as it was for Steffans. Without a doubt, intervention is necessary,
and as uncomfortable as some might be with the idea, going to the source of this
degradation can prove to be fruitful. Steffans’ work gives depth and understanding to
this lifestyle. It also helps to demystify some of the misconceptions that outsiders might have of this career path.

**Searching for Homeplace**

Steffans, who migrated to the U.S. from St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, found herself in a new environment disconnected from extended family, with little contact with her father and with a mother who was woefully incompetent. The intersecting systems of domination that function to relegate Africana women to a place of insignificance represent an uphill battle even for those who are fortunate enough to be part of an intact community. Those forces are absolutely devastating for those who don’t belong to such generative communities. Unable to find an adequate support system as a young woman, Steffans fell victim to extremely destructive behavior, including substance abuse and self-mutilation in the form of cutting. Throughout her life, however, she is drawn to writing, which allows her escape from her immediate circumstances and affords her a space to give voice to the pain she suffers. Steffans would continue to return to her writing to retain some semblance of sanity, and it would literally, as we have seen, save her life. Writing became a homeplace for Steffans; she attached herself to the longstanding community of African women’s voices who use narrative to forge communities of resistance.

Steffans creates homeplace by using her writing as a model that encourages women to define themselves on their own terms and to provide tools of empowerment for
others. Although writing did not save her from some of the destructive behavior she pursued due to a lack of guidance, she uses writing to implore others to avoid the pitfalls she wishes she had been able to avoid. She encourages young women who do not have family to seek out older mentors from whom they can learn. Her writing becomes healing for her in this way, and, given how she inspires others, it takes on a noble purpose. In an online CBS interview promoting *The Vixen Diaries*, Steffans proclaimed, “What I know for sure is that I was put here to do this, and this is the reason why I went through all the things I went through because if I hadn’t then I wouldn’t have this story.” (www.youtube/user/CBSNewsOnline). Because Steffans is introspective about how stereotypical renderings of Black women have shaped her life, and she clearly outlines the path on which she embarked to create a new selfhood, her texts create a community of resistance for others who hail from similar circumstances.

While such writing is a form of activism in and of itself, it also necessitates further action. Steffans has found a way of spreading her message by speaking to young women all over the country. She is also planning to write books specifically geared towards young adults that will better help them more easily navigate through the treacherous terrain of an oppressive society (www.youtube/user/CBSNewsOnline). For all of the women in this study, life writing has had an integral part in their growth and their quest to impact society in a more meaningful way. Steffans’ writing has allowed her to have a respectable career and to establish what is becoming a literary empire. From *Confessions of a Video Vixen* to *The Vixen Diaries* to *The Vixen Manual*, she has created a viable franchise. She is a masterful rhetor because she effectively provides a
sense of continuity throughout each text, delivering on her readers’ expectations for the brand while still fulfilling her own goals and the overall effort to uplift. To be overly judgmental of Steffans is to miss the many teachable moments in her texts. She has created three homeplace narratives that can inspire and uplift young women who often fall through the cracks and are discarded by society.

**Names, Images and Agency**

It is instructive to examine the ways that Steffans’ texts challenge what Patricia Hill Collins calls the “controlling images of black womanhood” by giving depth to women that are all too often objectified and silenced in the public sphere. Her search for agency is most clearly illustrated in the theme of naming, which appears mostly throughout her first narrative. Steffens argues that her first step toward healing was shedding the alias, Yizette Santiago, which she had hid behind for years. She gave herself the name minutes before her first performance at a strip club when she was sixteen. The name functioned as a coping mechanism to distance her psychologically from the demeaning job she felt forced to take on as a runaway with no support system and no other source of income. While the alias enabled a form of escape, it obviously did not allow her to transcend her circumstances in practical terms. The name had to be consciously problematized and discarded. Steffans recounts,

I was determined to do better, to reflect on my life, pinpoint my mistakes, and make them worth the pain. I would start by no longer being identified as Yizette
Santiago because Yizette wasn’t real. Yizette thought she was invincible, but her behavior led to immense self-destruction that was not only tore apart her life but the life of the little boy who depended on her. It was time for me to stop being afraid of myself. I welcomed back Karrine Steffans. (*Confessions* 135)

While this indeed was a pivotal moment in her life, Steffans had yet another moniker to contend with, the demeaning title she had come to be known as within the hip-hop industry—“Superhead.”

Interestingly, Superhead is a name Steffans claims she gave herself during a tryst with a well-known rapper whom she began to sleep with regularly. She argues that the name didn’t turn into something degrading and shameful until it left her circle of so-called friends and caught on within the hip-hop industry (though astute readers might think differently of the account) (*Confessions* 80). Whether or not her recollection of the initial harmlessness of the name is doubtful to some, it is clear that the name nevertheless becomes what she calls her “scarlet letter.” As she became less enamored with the celebrity lifestyle, she realized the necessity of taking control over the hyper-sexualized symbol, which she did so by trade marking the name Superhead, thereby literally taking ownership of it. Although she cannot change peoples’ perception of her, she can prevent others from capitalizing on her devaluation (151). Moreover, Steffans no longer associated Superhead with the sexual acts she performed that gained her notoriety within the hip-hop industry. She chose to take on the connotation popular in the UK: Superhead signifies intelligence (151). She overcame a past of sexual exploitation and has become, through the written word, financially independent. So the title was well earned. And by
the time she has written her follow-up memoir *Vixen Diaries*, she shed the title altogether. In fact, she becomes extremely indignant with anyone who refers to her as Superhead. Steffans declares that she now detests the name “with every fiber of [her] being” (*Diaries* 139). She much more prefers the title of *New York Times* best-selling author. By the third book *Vixen Manual*, Steffans does not even refer to the previous infamous title. It is rumored that at her 30th birthday party in Atlanta, GA, in 2008, she publically retired Superhead (www.theinsider.com). Since she technically owns the label, it is hers to throw away. While she has no power over whether or not others actually continue to associate her with the title, the retirement was symbolic of her own growth as a self-respecting woman, a woman very astute at manipulating images.

For example, if Steffans’ lack of clothing on the cover of her latest book and her past were accurate indications, one would expect *Vixen Manual* to be a book that teaches women how to employ the techniques that made Steffans infamous. On the contrary, while the book talks briefly about sex (one chapter), the focus is how a woman can empower herself so that finding a man is not the only thing she wants out of life.

Throughout the text, Steffans addresses the issue of authority because she knows that she is not on anyone’s shortlist when healthy relationships are the topic. The preface of the book is entitled “Who Died and Made You an Expert,” and the author acknowledges,

> Some people would be well within their rights to question my ability or qualifications to give advice of any kind, much less that which pertains to the improvement of female behavior and the guidelines of healthy male-female relationships. Who the hell do I think I am? (*Vixen Manual* xv)
One might imagine that because Steffans worked so hard to change the narrative of her life, she would go in a different direction for the cover of her book. Realistically, however, her choice is actually quite genius because it feeds into the public’s perception of her just enough to pull them in. No one would argue whether she knows about sex. She shares just enough of her expertise in that area to make the book—replete with detailed diagrams—at least remotely make good on what people are expecting. She then goes on to write the story she wants to write, one that is inspiring and uplifting and more about self-improvement than finding a mate.

The Vixen Manual, like Steffans’ previous works, is honest and humble in tone. One of the lasting thoughts she leaves her reader with in her latest book is that she aspires to live up to what she has written. She sees the suggestions she has provided as ideals, and she aspires to live up to what she has written. She submits, “Turning thirty has been good to me, but just you wait until I hit my prime and let it be no surprise when this book meets its match by way of its maker” (250). Surely, she has come a long way from the woman she depicts in Confessions of a Video Vixen who was drunk, high and sprawled out on the bathroom floor of Mr. Chow’s restaurant, so out of control that she temporarily lost custody of her child and who felt she had nothing for which to live. She has surpassed the expectations of the men who saw no more value in her than to pass her around for sport. While her detractors might question why she should be the conduit from which this life-saving knowledge flows, one can easily ask, why shouldn’t she be?
The Indelible Scarlet Letter

While it seems that Steffans has been spectacularly successful in turning her life around, it has not been without opposition. Because of her sordid past, it has been almost impossible for some to accept that she would have any worthwhile knowledge to impart. Not only do many not respect her, detractors often exhibit venomous disgust toward this groupie-turned-author. In an interview promoting her second book with journalist Kam Williams, Steffans admitted that she has become somewhat of a recluse because of how she has been treated:

I just want to be home and not have to talk to anybody. I know everybody has a show in pop culture. I’ll never say never, because you never know what opportunities will come up that might be in your best interest. But I’m presently not interested. That’s not my plan. I just want to go home to the way my life was before this book dropped (www.aalbc.com).

It is clear that Steffans yearns for the quiet, comfortable life being a successful author can offer, yet she laments the ways she has been forced to go through life branded with a “scarlet letter” because of the mistakes she has made. She maintains,

I feel bad for people who can’t move forward. Because what it does, and this something I’ve learned from talking to my psychologist a lot, and by going into psychology myself, when someone has a hard time getting over me it’s because of something within themselves. Maybe they have a hard time moving on in their own lives, and God forbid I should be the one to move forward and do better than they are. So, it’s like they’re projecting. I get a lot of projections. I’ve been
careful now to call it out and tell people not to project their nonsense on to me.

I’ll say, “I’ve never met you before. Why do you have such strong feelings about someone you’ve never met?” And even some people I’ve met, I don’t have any feelings for. I’m a content individual. So, the only thing I can project is my happiness and structure and blessings. I just feel sorry for those people.

(www.aalbc.com)

Nonetheless, negative posts about her continue to appear on numerous Internet message boards.

While many have disdain for her promiscuity, there seems to be more hatred for her success and her desire to help others. It seems as though people find a sadistic joy in ridiculing Steffans and hoping that she suffers in life. Steffans vents:

What I wish is that when I tell people that I’m okay and that I’m happy that they would accept it and not fight it. And that my son is fine. I feel almost that people were wishing that he and I were damaged and unhappy, because when they ask questions, they ask them in accusatory ways. My son is fine. He’s nine years old. He has no idea what’s going on. As far as he knows, everything’s great. He doesn’t pay attention to adult things. And yes, he’s well read, and well spoken. He speaks three different languages (www.aalbc.com).

Of course, it is impossible for any mother to speak with any certainty about the ways their actions will impact their children long term. What is important, however, is that Steffans is taking the steps to bring stability and security to her family, even though her growth is not being acknowledged by some. There are enough supporters who are
buying her books, however, so that she can live in a gated community, send her children
to a private school and provide them with a relatively affluent lifestyle.

The notion of the adulterous woman being the sacrificial lamb and thereby unifier
of the community is not at all new, nor is it present in only African American
communities. It is a theme that continues to come up in literature, for example, perhaps
with the most widely alluded to instance being Hawthorne’s *Scarlett Letter*. While
Hester Prynne is ostracized partially because she refuses to tell whom she has had an
affair with, the public castigation of the “wanton woman” is still present. Similarly,
Morrison’s *Sula* eloquently elucidates how the town “harlot” helps to define the moral
codes of the community. Though the casting out of the Peace women becomes a
metaphor for the ways systems of domination function to define those in power by
othering and vilifying the disempowered, the propensity to relegate women to the
polarizing categories of either virgins or whores is still a way to objectify and oppress
women across races and social class. Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Red Letter Plays* also speaks to
the role of woman of ill repute as scapegoat. In fact, the cover of her compilation is
particularly demonstrative. The red and black cover displays half of the face of a young
African American girl. The focal point of the picture is her eye, which has a red “A”
scrawled in the pupil and a single tear streaming down her face. While Steffans in her
real life bears the brunt of such ostracizing, she speaks back by refusing to live in the
boundaries that society has assigned to “loose women.” In the interest of womanism, it is
important for women to think more deeply about the ways they are complicit in their own
subjugation by willingly adhering to the stringent external definitions that have been put
in place by patriarchy. Steffans’ female detractors are not only projecting, as Steffans' psychologist has pointed out, but also upholding their own oppression. Here, discussion of the backlash for Steffans' writing becomes fertile ground to begin to attack this all too common impulse.

**Us vs. Them**

In the groundbreaking text, *When Chicken Heads Come Home to Roost*, Joan Morgan shows the intersections between Black feminism and hip hop but also demonstrates the ways women like Steffans are labeled and subsequently pushed to the fringes of their communities. Her work is invaluable in its ability to make womanism relevant and accessible for those whose lives have been shaped, in great part, by misogynistic rap. Morgan also stresses the importance of Africana women being proactive in creating visions of Black womanhood that are empowering to them. They should not, in Morgan’s view, define themselves only by their oppression, which she warns “denies us the very magic of who we are” (60).

Although Morgan’s work sheds light on the significance of a hip-hop feminism, it also demonstrates the hierarchies within Black womanhood where the “good hard working women” are separated from the “chicken heads,” whom she asserts are money hungry, conniving and materialistic—women like Karrine Steffans. In fact, Morgan blames the breakdown in relationships between Black men and women at least partially on those whose she deems lesser women. Morgan maintains, “men’s fascination with
chicken heads leaves us convinced that they have no interest in dating, let alone marrying, their equals” (58). Morgan is correct in her assertion that the “100 or so video ho’s that turn up—g-string in hand—for any given shoot” are just as complicit in their oppression as rappers are, a point Steffans readily concedes. But Morgan leaves little room for critical examination of the women that participate in reinforcing disturbing representations of Black womanhood.

Throughout Morgan’s text, which is otherwise exceedingly useful in making feminism or Africana womanism matter for women who may have very little access to such concepts, she inadvertently silences and further objectifies women who perform in hip-hop videos. In fact, in one instance, she argues that in order for hip-hop feminism to have meaning in African American communities Black men have to join the “good” Black women in saving the lives of these helpless “chicken heads.” While one would hope that an empowering feminism would help give voice and depth to these degraded women, Morgan instead renders them transparent and incapable of gaining agency. She also perceives that these video dancers and models are in competition with “good women”—an attitude that is unmistakably a detrimental byproduct of patriarchy where women are pitted against one another. Morgan asserts,

Despite our knowledge that [B]lack Prince Charmings are rare indeed, we do feel that if anybody’s going to end up with one of them it should be one of us. As hard as we work, we deserve them. (187)

She continues with this language of competition by conducting a series of interviews with prominent men in the hip-hop industry to determine if chicken heads indeed “win.” She
seems vindicated by the responses of rappers and recording executives who assure her that chicken heads are just there for fun, not to take seriously—and certainly not to marry.

Indeed, Morgan’s text is invaluable in helping to conceive of ways in which hip hop might be more politically empowering, but she doesn’t stress the magnitude of also gaining more understanding of women like Steffans. While Morgan reduces these women to their g-strings and lewd behavior, Steffans reminds us that such women are thinking human beings that are capable of reflecting on and maybe even transforming their lives if given the opportunity.

**Conclusion**

Steffens’ texts are salient because they give models to young women about how they can deal with the pressures of systems of domination. Steffans’ texts elucidate that even if someone is regarded as trash, she can prove that she is so much more than what she is perceived to be. To truly create homeplace, cultural workers must meet the youth where they are and equip them with relatable and realistic tools and resources that will help them soar to where they want to be.
Chapter 5

Considering the Relevance of Homeplace Narratives within the Academy

We who believe in freedom cannot rest.

--Ella Baker

The downturn in the economy has created a burdensome demand on many universities in urban areas. Community colleges and public universities in particular are feeling the strain of higher enrollment from segments of the population that have largely been historically excluded from higher education. As working-class families are feeling more pressure to obtain increased levels of higher education, it is important for educators to continue thinking about ways to acclimate the underserved population to academic literacies. The texts examined in this study are just a sampling of memoirs that are continuing to proliferate that are able to help do such important work. Memoirs like those by Brown, Denton and Steffans concisely and eloquently point to the ways structures of domination decimate the psyches of many Africana women. These writers show that they have much to say and much to teach concerning the difficult task of circumnavigating an oppressive system meant for their obliteration. Such life writing can thereby help Africana women coming into the university to have a greater grounding in academic literacies in a way that affirms or at least acknowledges some of their experiences and world views. Moreover, it is absolutely necessary for Africana women students to be exposed to these traditions so that they may learn not only how to improve their writing
but how to use writing to forge new and creative ways to change conditions which limit them in the first place.

**Carving Out Africana Space in the Ivory Tower**

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

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

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

Communication scholar Olga Idriss Davis, in her article “In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy through Safe Space of Resistance,” speaks to this situation, commenting that Africana women continue to “strive to illuminate the liberatory function of African American women’s communication and its continued legacy of struggle in American society” (379). Although Davis does a great job of showing the ways Africana women have been alienated from the academy in which they struggle and work, she also demonstrates that particularly within a womanist framework these women must be committed to being centered in community. Such a coalition is vital for all involved because it multiplies and fortifies the voices of Africana women. It demonstrates the
complexity and diversity of such voices, but also shows the common goal of uplifting and strengthening Africana communities. While scholars like hooks and Davis point to the fact that Africana women are so often relegated to spaces marked domestic or private, they profoundly assert that we must transcend such limitations by creating a united front in battling the constricting negative renderings of Black womanhood. Writing and reading the narratives of Africana women who have spoken out against such constraints leave evidence that it is possible to break free of these boundaries and to create new possibilities. As such voices proliferate and the demand for such work intensifies, Africana women scholars will be in a better position to intellectually engage such texts—as I am doing in the cases of Brown, Denton, and Steffans—and give them more of a presence in academic settings. In addition, it will continue to be important for Africana women to create publications that will feature such voices in a space that will not eclipse these works with competing, delegitimizing ideologies of the dominant culture.

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

*The Womanist* is meant to be a gathering place for afrocentric feminist researchers who are struggling to devise, develop and disseminate womanist methodologies
within traditional academic disciplines…a place where we can share ideas, ask questions and engage in supportive criticism in order to strengthen our mission, de-marginalize our activities and provide wider access to our perspectives (1016).

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

**Revolutionary Representations in Composition Classrooms**

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

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

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

Chernekoff’s essay is particularly helpful in demonstrating how her students have been transformed through their writing, which helps develop their critical thinking skills. She stresses that the emphasis is not on forwarding a particular political agenda but on encouraging the further development of sophisticated and independent thinking. Chernekoff concludes, “By working closely with students, we may discover what they can get from our writing classes, and perhaps we can also expand the boundaries of what is acceptable in the context of the writing classroom and in writing discourse” (135). As I have argued, the works of Denton, Brown and Steffans perform a similar pedagogy as
the autobiographies of women such as Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown. How they explode notions of who has the authority to speak and the manner in which they impose their Black female bodies into the public sphere in unconventional ways are models of how to transgress through both words and action. Recognizing the validity of non-traditional voices within academic settings automatically calls into question the legitimacy of the structure that undermines such voices to begin with. The ultimate goal from my perspective is to transform the academy so that the value of such voices becomes commonplace. In Meeting the Challenge: Innovative Feminist Pedagogies in Action, edited by Maralee Mayberry and Eileen Cronan Rose, contributors illumine how practical applications of feminist principles can transform the academy. These scholars “represent the imaginative new pedagogical approaches that feminist educators have implemented in diverse institutional settings across the United States and internationally” (Mayberry et. al. viii). In the essay “Teaching in Environments of Resistance,” for example, Sandra Bell, Marina Morrow and Evangelina Tastaglou argue that “in contrast to traditional curricula and pedagogies, critical, feminist and antiracist pedagogies are designed to disrupt the canon of the academy in order to bring about social change” (23). The authors assert that legitimizing alternative traditions of knowledge and experiential knowledge will help to expand the academy in order to better serve the diverse population within and beyond university walls (23). The authors insist that teachers must challenge the status quo to cultivate critical thinking, positing, “ideally, critical thinking skills should be applied to feminist and antiracist course materials. This makes students engaged and helps move them from reflection to action” (23).
Bell, Morrow and Tastaglou admit that there is sometimes resistance to introducing such non-traditional texts. They say that much of this push back can be alleviated by immediately addressing the distinction between “ideological impositions” and “liberatory pedagogies (26).” A key approach for accomplishing this goal is to encourage students to interrogate the ways their experiences are shaped socially rather than to impose any particular conclusions (Bell et. al. 26). The authors also stress the importance of experiential knowledge, asserting that “identity politics and the authorization of the individual experience can be empowering for those who have never had any public space to have their voices heard” (27). They do acknowledge constraints to such projects, however, and argue that a delicate balance between the personal and theoretical needs to be achieved. The narratives examined in this study, for example, like most ethnic women’s life writing, are more communal rather than emphasizing the self.

Brown, Denton, and Steffans speak to the dangers of being in isolation and the importance of healthy interdependent relationships. These writers also speak more pointedly to a communal history rather than a personal history and highlight how historical societal factors often over determine the lives of Africana women. In this way, the texts of Brown, Denton, and Steffans can also serve as historical, sociological and psychological studies. For these reasons, these texts would be ideal content for the innovative classroom Bell, Morrow and Tastaglou envision.

One of the most powerful approaches for such self-interrogation that Bell, Morrow, and Tastaglou propose is journaling. Interestingly enough, the importance of journaling to become more self-reflective is exercised and emphasized in all of the
homeplace narratives in this study. In fact, Brown, Denton and Steffans all claim that journaling became a steppingstone for their memoirs.

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

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

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

In “Letting Knowledge Serve the City,” Melissa Kesler Gilbert, Carol Holdt and Kristin Christopherson further articulate how writing groups (which they call learning groups) become transformative in the lives of students and communities. They argue that Women’s Studies was always meant to be community-based and that it has now become too centered on the academy. For this reason, they have created a senior capstone project for which their students are required to become involved with a community agency (Christopherson et al. 319). In the study reported in their essay, students worked with an agency to ascertain why young mothers were dropping out of a program that was geared to aid them in development of both life and parenting skills. To prepare for this task, students were asked to be introspective in order to think about the process of going from “self-interrogation” to “self-correction” (325). They then went into small, collaborative learning groups to better recognize and acknowledge the diversity of the classroom and ponder where the fit in. Lastly, the students went out into the community and examined what role they would play and how they could contribute (327). The authors emphasize that the key to building community is creating a strong support network where “students could share workload, communicate their accomplishments and frustrations and critique each other’s work” (329). The authors conclude,

Our community project helped to move our students’ knowledge of the inequities of society from inside of the boundaries of our feminist classroom outside to a community where they lived, worked and went to school…we encouraged them
Gilbert, Holdt and Christopherson also contend that through the duration of the course, students devised many plans to bring feminism into the community in productive ways as well as to get first-hand understanding of the difficulties and rewards of activism. Such community projects are generative ways to bring the university and community together, particularly when the focus is empowering young Africana women to see the relevance of higher education and how it can provide resources that can improve the communities in which they are invested. The memoirs examined here help as a model of introspective writing and how it can be used to help determine the particular needs of a community. When students learn to write like this and find ways that they can contribute to changing their own lives and the lives of those around them, they will be passionate about advocacy.

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

**Conclusion**

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

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

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

Despite the increasing numbers of African Americans who attend college, consistently poor retention rates seem to reflect the ways in which African American
students are alienated from these institutions. It would make sense, then—as the African American female scholarship across disciplines implores—that action must be taken to ensure that the education these students receive is relevant to and can help to improve their lives. While there are often non-academic efforts in place such as mentoring programs and diversity initiatives, these efforts do not get at the heart of the issue. Instead of making these educational institutions merely more comfortable for African Americans, steps must be taken, in addition, to change the structure of these universities to better serve the needs of a variety of students. Critical literacy and pedagogy theorists such as Paulo Freire\(^1\) and Donaldo Macedo\(^2\) accurately assert that if students are taught to think critically, then they will be better equipped and inspired to initiate programs that will enact true change, and not merely reform. Collins agrees with this assumption, arguing, “Increased literacy among African Americans has provided new opportunities for Black women to transform former institutional sites of domination such as scholarship and literature into institutional sites of resistance” (Collins 102). Empowering students with the necessary tools to help revolutionize these institutions can only happen if students are able both to cultivate their political consciousnesses and learn to convey

\(^1\) See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, Continuum, 1993) for delineation of liberatory pedagogy and the importance of critical thinking.

challenges effectively to oppressive systems through the written word in a manner that will demand respect in academic spaces. The homeplace narratives featured in the present study provide just a few examples of works that can help to challenge our thinking about how we legitimate authorial voices and what is at stake when we challenge commonly held notions of what constitutes academic literacies.


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Education

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<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Institution &amp; Program</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ph. D.</td>
<td>English, Penn State University</td>
<td>December 2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>English, Penn State University</td>
<td>May 2003</td>
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<td>B.A.</td>
<td>English, Hampton University, <em>Cum Laude</em></td>
<td>2001</td>
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Teaching Experience

Penn State University, 2001-Present

- English 15 – Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition (7 sections)
- English 30 – Honors Introduction to Rhetoric and Composition: African American Women’s Autobiographies (1 section)
- English 5 – Undergraduate Writing Center Instructor (3 sections)

Selected Conferences and Presentations


Professional Affiliations

- National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE)
- College Language Association (CLA)