THE CITY HAS CHANGED THEM

Storytelling, Memory, and the Family Photo Album

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April 2015

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Graduate Liberal Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University.
Abstract

My project is entitled *The City has Changed Them: Storytelling, Memory, and the Family Photo Album*. It is an interdisciplinary work that consists of five parts. Four of the parts have an analytical component as well as a personal story to accompany them. Along with the writings there are also seventeen images from one of my family’s photo albums. The purpose of the project is to locate a family through memoir and photos, and trace them through the American phenomenon known as the Great Migration. I used my maternal grandmother, Malqueen Goldsmith, and my father, James Woods, as anchors to the memoir pieces. I outline their departure from the south, their subsequent relocation to New York City, their search for work, interactions within their own communities and the larger social context in which they lived and raised a family from the mid-1940s to roughly 1975. The purpose of the project is for the researcher to view the African American family photo album as a serious historical object. I believe it to be an historical artifact as well as a visual record that warrants the same serious study as other more traditional historical objects.
CONTENTS

Abstract..............................................................................................................iii
List of Figures....................................................................................................v
Acknowledgments...............................................................................................vi

PREFACE

At Home in the World.........................................................................................1

PART 1

One Way Ticket..................................................................................................11
The Silver Meteor: Malqueen.............................................................................14

PART 2

Up South.............................................................................................................21
The Greyhound Bus: James.............................................................................30

PART 3

Working Day and Night.....................................................................................36
Nana and Grandaddy.........................................................................................40

PART 4

Change is Coming...............................................................................................50
Every Christmas Card I Write..........................................................................53

PART 5

Endings: Telling Stories....................................................................................62

CODA

Aka-ca-maka-ca-mary & Me..............................................................................67

BIBLIOGRAPHY.................................................................................................70
List of Figures

(All pictures are from my personal collection unless otherwise noted)

1. Picture of the Woods family album
2. Living Room at 949 East 214th street, Bronx, New York ~1970
3. Erica at 2 years old in Daddy’s closet. 1971
4. Daddy with John Wilkins (his father). Cleveland, Tennessee ~October 1939
5. Postcard from South Carolina, courtesy of the Rubenstein Library
7. Granddaddy (Harold) going to my christening, February 1970
9. Postcard from Tennessee, courtesy of Rubenstein Library
10. Nana and Granddaddy ~1968
11. Mommy at a party, 20 years old ~ 1962
13. Granddaddy sitting in leather Lazy-Boy
15. Calvin and Hobbes Cartoon, Bill Watterson, with permission from Universal U-Click
Acknowledgments

To Margaret Sartor, thank you for opening a door so I could walk through it.

To Harold Sr., Malqueen, Betty & James, Thank you for being such wonderful characters.

To my kids, Lauryn, Nathaniel & Vanessa, the best storytellers I know.

and

To Milton, who keeps lifting me up so I can fly
The migrants were gradually absorbed into the economic, social, and political life of the city. They have influenced and modified it. The city has, in turn, changed them.

—St. Clair Drake and Horace H. Cayton, Black Metropolis
Figure 1. Picture of my photo album that I’ve “borrowed” from my parents. It’s missing its front cover, and the comb binding is almost non existent.
Preface

At Home in the World

We shined like the new things we were.
— Patricia Smith

My first camera was a Kodak Ekralite 10 with a built in flash and a strap that never would stay firmly on my wrist. The camera came with a roll of 110 mm film and two AA batteries that I eagerly stuffed into the back of it as fast as I could and then waited impatiently for the low whine and the orange light that told me the flash was ready. It was the only present I played with that day.

I was 10, and it was Christmas, 1979.

Most of the photos I took that day are of my mother cooking chitlins, baking cakes, stuffing the turkey and mixing potato salad. There’s one of my father vacuuming with his headphones on, probably listening to Miles Davis or Charlie Parker. The rest are of my extended family, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents sandwiched together in our living room, not minding the closeness of bodies or the heat radiating from our thick beige wall-to-wall carpet. Rum, vodka and Harvey’s Bristol Cream flowed freely in heavy glass tumblers among oversized pillows and royal blue plastic covered sofa. The children snatched cheese doodles and potato chips from the coffee table, and ran back to the den with their goodies, without the adults ever seeing.

Even though every one of my first pictures turned out blurry, when I picked up my prints from the drugstore later that week, I thought they were masterpieces. I remember smiling all the way home in the car. With this batch of badly-taken pictures, I had been officially baptized into the unofficial hobby of my parents and their friends—photography.
As long as I can remember my parents owned cameras. They were always big and bulky with zoom lenses and numerous shutter adjustments. They had huge black itchy straps that clung to their necks and gave them the appearance of a National Geographic photographer, even when we were only at the Bronx Zoo. My parents loved these machines. They tinkered with the speeds, adjusted the light, the portable flashes, the shutters, anything to make the picture better. Over the years the mix of Cannons, Pentaxes, and Nikons have gone from neck, to closet, to box to storage unit. And in the empty place were always bigger and better cameras that eventually became digital.

For my father and mother, the camera became a tool to verify that the dreams they had whispered to one another before they were married had actually come true. And those dreams always included their family, friends, homes, cars, jobs, sports, vacations, and especially their only child. The pictures were a visual pinch to the arm to prove that they existed in a world that sometimes chose to deny their existence. And more importantly the pictures from those cameras breathed life into dreams that were hatched on the back seat of a Greyhound bus in 1960 and in the Jim Crow rail car of the Silver Meteor in 1948. The photos are also proof of a life lived well and proudly by my parents.

My family photos are also a map, a starting point for me and future generations of what the African American family looks like, not what it could look like, but what it does look like. Our family album, and others like it, act as a foil against the negative and cruel visualizations of what African Americans can and have been represented as: animalistic, childlike, unintelligent, and violent.1 Instead my album shows the real and beautiful life of one family. Not every picture is a happy one. The photos are of pensive, confused, enlightened, surprised (not all in a good way), and sometimes clearly angry people. But taken as a collection, the images serve as a

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1 Willis, Deborah. p. 17 Willis argues that vernacular photographers used the medium to challenge stereotypes that showed blacks as subordinates to whites. Blacks subverted the representations by offering alternatives images that were positive and reaffirming. These representations were closer to the way black lives were truly lived.
resource on how a life can be fashioned through reinvention, by bringing parts of a past with you in your suitcase and molding them like clay into the sculpture you want to see.
Figure 2. Living Room at 949 East 214th street, Bronx, New York around 1971
This picture (figure 2) is one of my favorites. I’m not sure who took it. It might have been my father, just testing one of his many cameras. Or my mother’s cousin Leon, who lived with us until I was two and was also an amateur photographer. But the photo, feels like it was probably taken by my mother, simply because of the huge urn of fake flowers in the photo. I don’t have a solid reasoning behind why the flowers are in the photo, I just don’t feel my father or Leon would have cared much about them, but my mother would have, and still does.

It’s strange that I like this picture, because as a child this was a room I was never allowed to spend time in. It was a room reserved solely for adults. My parents placed an unspoken but hefty value on this room and the objects in it. The weight of it was perceptible to anyone who ever came to visit us. And yet, forty years later whenever I look at this photograph, I can still see the raucous holiday parties, hear my father humming the latest Modern Jazz Quartet album, and the sounds of my mother’s low laughter as she gossiped with my grandmother on the phone.

The photo isn’t mine, really. I’ve borrowed it. “Stolen” might be a better word. And I haven’t been kind to it. There are creases throughout the photo that have come from looking at it too many times. There’s a pen mark on the back from the errant pens I keep in my handbag as well. The imperfect way I treat the photo might have something to do with the photo itself. It’s perfect. I stare at this perfect, quiet room and feel lonely afterwards. The room is too clean and looks like we don’t even live there. It’s as if historian Tina Campt has this room in mind when she writes, “Photography captures a given moment in the life of an individual while at the same time offering a means of creating an image of our lives and selves as we would like to be seen.”

There was never a time in my life that my family didn’t want to be seen as perfect to outsiders. Even in the photo, perfection is sewn into the neat heavy brocaded cream fabric curtains with tremendous blue roses to match the plastic covered satin loveseat. While a perfect picture child version of myself sits in the midst, watching.

2 Campt, p.5
Figure 3. Erica at 2 years old, Daddy’s closet. 949 East 214th Street, Bronx New York. 1971
This picture (figure 3) is one of scores of baby pictures my mother took of me for my father while he was at work. It’s another picture that has seen a lot of wear. There’s a tear on the bottom and the corners are a little scuffed. My mom has dozens of pictures of me at this age throughout the house in various spaces and in many of our family albums. She says that when I was this age, around two I guess, my favorite place to be was in my father’s closet. My closest guess as to why is that I missed him and there was lots of junk in his closet for a two year old to get into. (I imagine now that someone would have called Child Protective Services on my parents for having me in a closet, but it was the 1970s. I also sat the backseats of cars without a car seat or seatbelt, rode a bike without a helmet, and drank whole milk, but somehow I survived.) My father’s shoe shine box is to the left, opened, most likely by me, and torn apart, again, most likely by me. His shoe shine brush is turned upside down, and the chamois cloth is exposed, as is his brown polish for his favorite shoes. Even as I’m writing this, I can smell the odor that is the distinct acridness of shoe polish as it wafts out of that small brass can. And whether his shoes were brown, black, or blue, the shoe polish was always the Kiwi brand. It also seems there is an important call I can take only in my pajamas, with the company of a canister vacuum cleaner and the hanging sleeves of my father’s jackets, shirts, and suits hovering over me. The closet was my home and at the same time it wasn’t.

When I talk to my mother about this photograph her thoughts are not as complex as mine, “You were just a child who liked to play in the closet” \(^3\) is her response to the question of why I loved to be in Daddy’s closet. But my mother’s reading of the photograph doesn’t explain why I think of this photo so much. And why I have decided it should explain the complicated relationship my father and I have. So I continue to cling to this image. And like bell hooks, I believe that this is one of the photos that “provides a way for me to know him [my father] that makes it possible to love him again, and past all the other images, the ones that stand in the way

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\(^3\) hooks, p. 44. hooks talks here how she and her sisters “read” a photograph of her father very differently because of their relationship to him. In my case I read this photograph in terms of my complex relationship with my father and my mother doesn’t “read” the photograph the same way.
of love.”

Most of the photographs of my family and friends are taken in the Northeast Bronx in the late 1960s to mid-1980s, an area that stands in sharp relief to the burnt out shells and blight that were (and sometimes still are) broadcast on nightly newscasts across the country or in movies like *Fort Apache, the Bronx*. I lived a fairly happy life, more like *Ossie and Harriet* or *Leave it to Beaver* than *Good Times* or even *The Wire*. Our first house was one of many private houses owned or rented by migrants from the American South, Europe, and the Caribbean. All the adults worked during the day, the children under five stayed with grandmothers or aunties on the days when they didn’t have “day’s work,” and the older children went to “good” schools in the neighborhood and sometimes beyond the neighborhood.

Our narrow, tall private house at 949 E. 214th St., was my home for the first five years of my life. My mom was a nurse and my dad an office worker. When I was six, we moved ten minutes away to a co-op building where my grandfather was the porter or janitor and my grandmother did day’s work for many of the tenants. Instead of the factory workers, bus drivers, and construction workers who lived with us on 214th, we now lived with postal workers, nurses, teachers, a few college professors, office managers, social workers, and laboratory operators. I suppose we were “moving on up” like the family in the 1970s sitcom the *Jeffersons*. We lived there in relative happiness for almost thirty years.

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4 hooks, p.44

5 When Grandmothers and aunties were unavailable, men who were out of work, or youngster who were not in school watched the children, albeit not quite as closely as the women. But for me, my grandmother, one of my aunts, or one of the dozens of female friends of my mother’s were always available. I never spent any time being watched by a male family member.
PART 1
Figure 4. Daddy and John Wilkins (his father), Cleveland Tennessee. October 1939
One Way Ticket

I pick up my life
And take it away
On a one-way ticket—
Gone up North,
Gone out West,
Gone!
—Langston Hughes

My family’s arrival to the Bronx was a result of both sides participating in the greatest voluntary movement of Americans in the twentieth century, the Great Migration. They were part of the six million blacks who left the South and moved to other parts of the country, most notably to the urban areas of New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Newark, New Jersey, Gary, Indiana, Cleveland, Ohio, and St. Louis, Missouri. The first major wave of the migration started right after World War I, when blacks were used to substitute for European immigrants in Northern factories.

My family’s story starts during the second wave of the migration from 1940 to 1970. My maternal grandparents and mother made their journey in 1948 from Branchville, South Carolina, and my father travelled to Harlem from Cleveland, Tennessee in 1960. They were part of a movement that was epic in scope, yet largely ignored and downplayed by sociologists and historians as it was happening, even though as the historian Ira Berlin notes,

The 1.5 million black migrants who departed the region [the South] during the 1940s more than equaled the sum total of those who left the South during the previous three decades, and the migration continued in the decades, that followed…The three million black men and women who exited the South between 1940 and 1960 almost doubled the number who left between 1910 and 1930.

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6 Wilkerson, p. 9
7 Grossman, p. 3
8 Wilkerson, p. 539
9 Berlin, Ira. p. 155
How could a group of people be overlooked as they were shifting the economic, social, and political balance of the country? Why didn’t politicians, sociologists and other academics “see” the movement of African American families as an important historical moment?

Like many families, my family was fleeing a Jim Crow system that constricted the movements of black people and was delayed from being overthrown due to McCarthyism. This delay retarded the economic, growth and political and social progress of the South for decades, fostering spaces of division and inequality for blacks in the South. As historian Grace Hale explains,

the construction of a culture of segregation enabled southern European Americans to identify their place in an American nation that was fast becoming modern. To hold the Negroes to a lower status was to help lift white southerners, with their regional inferiority complexes, to a false level of equality with northern white brethren.

The blacks who lived and loved the land of the South became unwitting victims of a system they had no vested power in, and therefore had no say in what happened. Instead of continuing to fight the overt and discrete forms of Jim Crow, my family decided to leave the South behind and hopefully find salvation in the North.

It’s this “moment” that I’m fascinated with. How do my family’s actions intersect with this historical moment? How does my family make the decision to leave everything they’ve ever known and everything they’ve earned to go to a world that is completely foreign to them? And then choose to fashion themselves into Northerners? Did they transform themselves or did they just adapt?

I think they did both.

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10 Biondi, p. 275
11 Hale, p. 183
Figure 5. Postcard from South Carolina, courtesy of the Rubenstein Library, Duke University
The Silver Meteor: Malqueen

*They Say it’s better up There.*
— Patricia Smith

Winter 1948 / Charleston, South Carolina to Penn Station

She was 29 now, and had had her share of heartbreak. At 14, she had lost her mother to a mysterious disease, and had to give up her dreams of being a schoolteacher and living in the city with her aunt. Instead she returned to Branchville to a father who was clueless about raising children or balancing checkbooks. At 26, her twins were born dead and she had been shaken so badly by it she wasn’t sure if she wanted to live or die. There was no doctor to go to, no hospital that would’ve taken her.

And now she was leaving the only home she’d ever known on the Silver Meteor. The train that took all the Negroes outta the South. She was bound for the unknown. She’d heard all about the route. Her brothers had left years before. Two had joined the army and another left the indignities of the South and their father. Her sister Sarah had taken this same train two years before when she got married and went to New York City, so she wouldn’t be alone when they got there. But it wouldn’t be the same as being at her house with Harold’s mother, whom she called, “Momma.” They wouldn’t be together in the house anymore, laughing and cooking, and going to Mays Chapel. She wouldn’t have a house again for a long time.

The coat she had on was too long and hung onto the floor. Her sister-in-law had sent it for Christmas last year. They never could remember that she wasn’t even 5 feet tall. They were all giants. Her feet weren’t even touching the floor of the rail car. But her good suit was getting ruined by the hair oil in Betty Mae’s hair and the drool from Toots, the baby. Everybody else in the car was talking, laughing, looking out the window, excited like they were going to the fair. She didn’t know anybody here. She was alone. Her lipstick had long smeared off, and the curl in her hair was flattening out. And her pantyhose were falling down. All this and juggling a six year old
and an infant into comfortable positions, while she kept the tears from forming. This was
supposed to be a happy time. There were only good things in New York. Good things.

Maybe going to New York wouldn’t be too bad. At least they weren’t going back to
Philadelphia. She hadn’t minded Philadelphia so much, but Harold had hated it. And when he
hated something he made everybody miserable. They didn’t have Toots then. Only Betty Mae and
Harold Jr. They slipped out of Harold’s sister Mary’s house while she was at work, and caught
the train back to Orangeburg. She had hated that they left Mary’s house that way. Mary had been
so good to them, but Harold would not be talked out of leaving. He couldn’t find a job, and he
didn’t want to work in the post office with his four older brothers. His brothers and sisters there
thought they acted too country and weren’t smart.. They always had to prove themselves. And
Harold had had enough. When Harold made up his mind, there was no talking sense to him, it
was easier to pack all their things, the children and just leave. It was 1946, Junior was a baby,
Betty Mae was 4, the twins were still dead, and to make matters worse they had to sit in the
Colored car when they arrived in Washington, DC..

When they returned to Branchville, things had changed. And living there went from
bearable to horrible. She endured the indignity of living in the sharecropper shack because their
own house had been rented out, and she endured the long searches for jobs. But then Junior got
polio from one of their neighbors. One day he had a fever, and the next day he couldn’t walk.
Suddenly living in Branchville had become like a strait jacket. If it hadn’t been for Momma and
the church folks she surely would have gone insane. Junior was placed in the big community
hospital in Orangeburg (Mama arranged with the folks that ran things in the county to get him a
bed.) Then somehow she got someone to drive them to Charleston with Junior to get better help.
She didn’t know what Momma had promised those folks, but she worked miracles for Junior. But
the hospital bills were building, and their saving drained. Something drastic had to happen.

“They say there’s lots of jobs in New York.”

“Who’s they?
“Your sisters.”

“Hmmph”

“Harold,” Momma said, “Enough. There ain’t nothin’ here no mo’. You tried.”

It was settled, Harold would go and find work. He’d have to leave again.

This time he’d go to New York.

He’d go first. He’d send for them later.

This was later.

The train slugged up the tracks and Betty Mae in her pretty dress slept and the baby was getting fidgety. She was too. This time it had to work. Harold could not be impatient and stubborn this time. There was too much at stake. New York had to be their new home. Her children had to have a stable place to live Junior had to have hospitals and doctors that didn’t care that he was a black boy, just that he was sick. She was giving up her church, her friends, her “place.” She was going from being a landowner to be a tenant. She was sacrificing her life. He had to sacrifice too. This had to work. She’d leave the ground she loved to someone else if it meant her children would have a better life. Harold was stubborn, but so was she.

They were going to stay with Maggie, Harold’s older sister, the sweet one. Maggie doted on her, Betty Mae and the baby and told her not to mind the other sisters and brothers. Maggie and Momma were the only ones who stood up for her. Even Harold would forget sometimes, especially when he was too busy being the “baby of the family.”

In Philadelphia, the only thing that mattered to Harold’s family, the Goldsmiths, was living on Woodstock Street and erasing their memories of the South. They all said, “Let the South be buried.” They had lived in the North so long that they didn’t even consider themselves Southerners anymore. But she couldn’t bury the South. She wouldn’t bury it. His brothers may have had “good” jobs in the post office, four Goldsmith boys working in the post office, but Harold was different, he was meant to work on the land. It was the one thing he did better than
most and the ruling white folks of the county wouldn’t allow him to do it. Even Momma couldn’t get them to change their minds on their “rules.” Every time he brought the produce to the market place in the wagon they ignored him, or they gave him pennies for all his hard work. They treated him like he was a sharecropper. But they weren’t sharecroppers! They owned their own land. They had the deed. But it was their skin that was the difference. She knew that. So did Harold. Maybe New York wouldn’t care so much about their skin, or at least have the good manners to ignore it. She hoped he would get work soon. She needed her own kitchen, her own stove, her own hat rack, even if there were only two rooms she needed it to be theirs and theirs alone.

The windows of the train shook and she looked around the dark, cold rail car. All these people are going too. Are they scared too? She adjusted all their coats. It was winter time. Almost Christmas. The seats were lumpy and her back ached while she held Toots, but she still smiled. They’d spend their first Christmas in New York. She opened the big bag next to her and in it were the shoeboxes that Momma had made for them filled with food. Everyone on the train had a shoebox filled with fried chicken, pieces of pie, cornbread or biscuits, anything to keep their stomachs from grumbling through the ride. She picked at the food and looked out the windows and counted the stops from Charleston until Penn Station. Looking out at the rocks and dirt speed by her, she knew she’d never go back to the South to live again.

But in Branchville she had known people, had things, and had lived on land that was owned by black folks. In New York she would live in a box. But she wouldn’t go back. Better to live in a box than to be disrespected and starve on your own land.
Figure 6. Nana (Malqueen). On Rye beach 1963 with family friends.
Figure 7. Granddaddy (Harold) on his way to my christening, February 1970
PART 2
The picture of my grandmother at Rye Beach in 1963 (figure 6) is the earliest picture of her that I have. It’s actually the earliest photo of her that our entire family has. It’s also the most candid photo. My grandmother was a formal woman who sometimes wore white gloves and kitten heels to her day’s work. She never sat on the floor, or leaned on walls, or stood without a straight back. It could have been because she was only 4’ 10” and didn’t want to seem smaller than she already was. But more than likely it was because of the training she received from her mother and aunt as a young girl. Seeing her in a bathing suit for the first time, I blushed. My grandmother didn’t enjoy the camera, and was an expert at avoiding the lens. But the really amazing aspect of the photo for my entire family is that my grandmother is sitting leisurely on the sand. For a long time my mother and I refused to believe it was her and thought it was her sister Sara instead. But it’s her. She is relaxed, with the faint smile she usually wore when she was in her own world and barely listening to you. She wore that smile often when my grandfather spoke or went on a tirade about dinner, being tired or the Mets losing the baseball game. And even in this relaxed moment, there is no hair out of place, her legs are tucked demurely behind her and I imagine that there’s a warm breeze on her legs. She is savoring the sun on her legs with her youngest son Michael in front of her. It’s the first and only time I see her loosen her impervious mask of respectability and dignity.

My grandmother’s mask was a defense mechanism to the de facto Jim Crow laws that led to my grandparents’ decision to leave the land they had worked for years and move to New York City. They were both the last of their respective families to leave. My grandfather’s siblings had moved to either Philadelphia or New York. In Philadelphia five of his siblings lived on the same street and two of his sisters lived within blocks of one another in the Bronx. Many of the men in my family took advantage of wars and drafts and left the South never to return, while some of my aunts and female cousins married and left with their husbands hoping to find work when they
arrived. Then there were also many women in my family who just went to the North on their own.\textsuperscript{12} It was surprising that my grandfather’s and grandmother’s family left the south. They were all landowners and in some cases had professional careers. But they were not immune to white supremacy or to the political, social, and economic hold that whites had over the South. As Ira Berlin makes clear,

> Behind the hammer blows of economic change stood the region’s seemingly immutable commitment to white supremacy. Represented most horrifically by the broken, mutilated bodies that swayed from a lynch noose, the protocols of white supremacy were embedded in the most commonplace acts of everyday life.\textsuperscript{13}

So they left the south, hoping that they would no longer have to worry about violence, hate and the intimidation they endured every day.

For my grandfather the intersection of everyday life and white supremacy occurred when he attempted to be a farmer in Branchville and sell his produce at market. Unlike his brothers who became soldiers and then postal workers in Philadelphia, he had always wanted to be a farmer. He had always worked with his hands and was most at ease when he was toiling in the dark South Carolina soil. But he constantly had to tell people outside of Branchville that he wasn’t a sharecropper, which was difficult because so many Black farmers in that region and in the most of the south were. Most independent white farmers had agents or people who would help them sell their products at market \textsuperscript{14} and since my grandfather didn’t have one he was forced to sell his produce himself. He was blocked in the markets because of his skin color and he could never make enough money to feed his growing family. The inability to feed his family wasn’t just about economics, it was also about pride. The idea of being an American male was embodied in the ability to feed and clothe your children and take care of them with your hard work. My grandfather had grown up in a middle class Black family; it confused him to now be considered

\textsuperscript{12} Berlin, p. 160
\textsuperscript{13} Berlin, p. 163
\textsuperscript{14} Grossman, p.51
poor. He was a formal man who took pride in his appearance, and never wanted for money (Figure 7). It wasn’t unusual for him to wear dress pants and a tie, or to have his hair cut every week. Formality was a uniform that he wore regularly and wore well. He believed it was necessary to dress well in order to repel the many rejections by the whites who thought he was trying to be more than he should be. And Goldsmiths just did some things differently than other people. To be denied a chance through no fault of his own was unacceptable to him. The choice had to be made whether to stay in South Carolina or to go to a northern city where there was work.

   And then the conversation, which never changes, even over the children’s squeals:/They say it’s better up there, it begins, and it is always /the woman who says this, and the man lowers his head/to the table and feels the day collapse beneath his shirt.\[15\]

The woman who came up with the plan was not my grandmother, Malqueen, but my grandfather’s mother, Lara. She thought it was time to close up the house and move to Philadelphia, to leave the South to be with the rest of her family.

   So while Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson were integrating Major League Baseball in 1946\[16\]; Harold and Malqueen, my mother, her brother and my great-grandmother Lara, got on the Silver Meteor headed for Philadelphia.

   Philadelphia was a cultural shock to them. They moved in with Mary, Harold’s oldest sister who worked in an office as a secretary. And every day my grandfather went to look for work. His four other brothers: Stanford, Leroy, Samuel, and Alonzo all worked in some capacity at the post office. The post office jobs had allowed them to obtain a new type of living in the North, a taste of an established middle class. As Isabel Wilkerson notes in *Warmth of Other Suns*, my great uncles and aunts were part of “a solid though tenuous middle class of Pullman porters, postal workers, ministers, and business men who were anxious to keep the status and

\[15\] Smith, Patricia. *Shoulda been Jimi Savannah*, “Fixing on the Next Star” p.5
\[16\] Biondi, p.34
gains they had won.”\textsuperscript{17} And even though my uncles and aunts owned their own row houses they were still restricted to the black sections of Philadelphia. In my family’s case, five of my grandfather’s siblings lived on Woodstock Street, no more than two doors away from one another. As Wilkerson explains further, “The color line restricted them to the oldest housing in the least desirable section of town no matter what their class, but they had tried to make the best of it and had created a world within a world for themselves.”\textsuperscript{18}

In Philadelphia, my grandmother tries to adapt as much as she can, but my grandfather has a difficult time. He’s unable to work at the post office because unlike his brothers he hasn’t been in the Army, hasn’t finished high school and is unskilled. There are too many people and no one understands their accents. Their own family thinks they act too much life country folks and is constantly telling them how to act, how to dress and how to take care of their children. He has a hard time finding menial work in Philadelphia. Frustrated and broke they get back on the train, back to Branchville.

What my grandparents didn’t know about Philadelphia is that there are strict, tacit systems regarding the employment of blacks in the city of Brotherly love. The “Promised Land” has its own caste system that, while not as oppressive as the one they abandoned in South Carolina, is constritive and weighted towards whites and European immigrants. Many migrants began to say the North was “Up South” when they talked about Northern cities like Philadelphia. Cities that looked like they held promise, but still kept the remnants of southern racism.\textsuperscript{19} Even those blacks who did have jobs were treated poorly and discriminated against. Those who were able to get jobs outside of the domestic sphere (day’s work, janitors, etc.) were constantly in fear of their jobs and faced daily discrimination. Even skin color seemed to be a job requirement for some,

\textsuperscript{17} Wilkerson, p.287
\textsuperscript{18} Wilkerson, p. 287
\textsuperscript{19} Countryman, p. 10
“Bendix Aviation had placed an order to federal government’s United States Employment Service (USES) for “light skinned” women to work as matrons…Sun Shipbuilding in Chester, south of Philadelphia, had announced plans to hire 9,000 black workers but to maintain a rigidly segregated workplace. My grandfather wasn’t the right color, didn’t have the right education and skills, and wasn’t wanted in Philadelphia. And like many, he decided that going home was the best, and only alternative for his family. At least in Branchville, he wouldn’t be fooled into believing he was equal. While moving back to Branchville was not ideal for my mother and her parents, their decision to move back wasn’t unique. Many migrants made several attempts before deciding whether or not to stay in the North. This contradicts what many historians like James Gregory, who believe that “Black Southerners were much less interested in the ‘revolving door,’” and remained in whatever city they first came to. While giving up on the South and never returning was an option for some migrants, especially men, Darlene Clark Hine notes that many migrants, especially women, couldn’t completely settle in the North because they often had children or elderly relatives still in the south who were dependent on them financially or for care. Many women would go back and forth many times, never able to fully commit to one place or another.

My grandfather’s restlessness caused them financial and emotional stress. By 1948 they were compelled to get back on the train once again, come North.

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20 Countryman, p 29. These companies were also targets of the NAACP and other civil rights groups during the 1940 and ’50s. Unfortunately the NAACP victories came too late to help my grandfather.
21 Wilkerson, p. 369-70
22 Gregory, p.17
23 Hine, p. 132. Many women had two households to take care of until they could make a full transition to the North. It took my grandmother three trips to unite her family after they left Branchville in December 1948. She had left her toddler son who was stricken with polio and couldn’t start work or create a regular schedule for her school age child (my mother who was 6) until she was able to get him and her mother-in-law. She dropped her mother-in-law in Philadelphia, then rode the rest of the way to New York with three small children by herself on the train.
In a similar time and different place in the South, another young man is angry about the things he’s seen in his hometown and in the South and wonders what will happen to him if he stays in a place he loves and fears.

My father, James Woods, was a witness to southern civil rights history, as was any southerner who lived through the 1950s and 60s in the south. For him this history was part of his formative years. The events leading up to what is now known as the modern day civil rights movement were happening when my father was a teenager in Cleveland, Tennessee. And they were occurring, in some cases, to teenagers just like him.

In 1955, Emmett Till was killed for supposedly whistling and talking the wrong way to a white woman, in Mississippi. He was 14 years old and from Chicago. His mangled and lynched body was put in an open casket by his mother so the world could see what was done to her son. A photograph of the murdered teen in his casket was in every black newspaper in the South as well as Jet magazine. My father was 16 years old, a sophomore in high school. When I was younger and asked him about it he said, “Everyone knew about it, and they were mad. But there was nothing to do but be mad. Those crackers would kill you if you said anything about it. So we were all just mad at school and talked about how we would have killed those crackers if we had ever found them.”

There were other events that played with the mind of a young man trying to understand why the constitution didn’t negate the white signs with black lettering he sees near his home,24 downtown, and in every store, including the one his mother shops in on Wednesdays, the days Negroes were allowed to go downtown. A Black woman gets arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for not giving up her seat on the city bus to a White person in 1953. James is 14. James is 15, when the court in Washington, DC says that black children can go to school with white children, but no one in Cleveland, TN makes it happen. Instead the governor refuses to compel local school

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24 The signs I’m referring to here are the white signs with black lettering that usually spelled out “WHITES ONLY”, “NO NEGROS SERVED HERE” or “COLORED ONLY”.

26
boards to comply with the law saying, “It [The Brown decision] did not purport to require the states to mix arbitrarily persons of different races in the schools.”

Even though some counties in Tennessee don’t offer high school educations to Blacks, my father graduates from College Hill high school in Cleveland. He’s the first high school graduate in his family. With his diploma in hand Daddy looks for work. The only work available is the work he had been doing before at the country club, collecting balls and caddying for the white judges, businessmen, and Church of God pastors. This is the club where they called him “boy” and “forgot” to tip him, and would routinely ask where his father was.

During my father’s adolescence, Cleveland’s protest movement is almost non-existent because of the presence of the Church of God (COG), an evangelical protestant church that is headquartered in Cleveland and is almost the only denomination in Cleveland. Like the public restrooms, the church in Cleveland, is segregated into a black COG and a white COG. The white COG doesn’t want the civil rights movement in Cleveland, so it convinces its black counterpart that it’s in the best interest of the black people of Cleveland to not get involved with these “outsiders.” Every Sunday the parents of the young people are told to keep their young close and to douse their anger or the meager jobs you have will be lost.

But the sit-in and protest movements come to Tennessee anyway. In 1955, folks in Tennessee are aware of the bus boycotts in Montgomery and during a time when the state denied blacks the opportunities to become bus drivers, mechanics or managers in any bus companies in the state. In early 1960, on the heels of the unlawful prosecution of a black man in Burton County who was charged with killing a white deputy even though another deputy said he didn’t

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25Lovett, p. 52 Although the governor does recognize that blacks are tax payers and should have access to equal education, he will not put any resources toward helping to desegregate the school system.
26 Lovett, p. 30 Even by 1950 [four years before Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, and three years before my father begins high school] thirty of Tennessee’s ninety-five counties offered no high school education for Negro citizens.
27 Lovett, p.133
28 Lovett, p.107-109
do it, riots break out in Chattanooga, which is only 20 miles from Cleveland over the newly formed sit-in movement.

The war on civil rights was coming closer and closer to Cleveland whether the COG wanted it to or not. But the young blacks of Cleveland (and their parents) had to ask themselves. “How do you stay in a warzone when you have no artillery to fight with?”

My father’s answer was: “You don’t.”
Figure 8. Daddy bowling at the Harlem Lanes, 1962.
A Greyhound Bus: James

We watch them catch buses in the evening,
The black shadows of their backs
The last we see of them.

— Jacqueline Woodson

Fall 1960 / Cleveland, Tennessee to Harlem, NYC

The bus seemed like a good idea at the time. Hell, it was the only idea unless you had a car. Which he and Bubba didn’t. They hardly had the bus fare to get on the bus. But they did have a plan; they were going to New York City. And to make it even better, they were going to live with Bubba’s aunt, Mrs. Pierce, in her apartment in Harlem! His dream was coming true! He would find work, he would see all his Jazz idols, he’d wear good clothes, he’d send Momma money, and she could come next, and stop working for those folks. She was already starting to stoop over some from being at the stove so much.

But first they’d have to take Gary back home. His nephew/brother who was 10 years younger and didn’t want him to leave. As they walked the long road to the bus depot his nephew Gary trailed behind.

“Go on back to Momma an ‘em Gar.”

“Nah, I wanna go with you!”

“Nah. Go on, now. Your momma and granmomma’ll kill me they see you going to the depot with me. Go on.”

“No.”

“Gar. C’mon now. I’m going, but I’ll be back.”

“No you won’t. Tie-Dye, Richie, an ‘em didn’t come back.”

“Well, I will. Then you can come back with me. But I gotta have a place for us first. And you a kid. Go on now.”
“No.”

So they walked the mile back to 1st street where Momma was on the porch looking worried, and then looking angry when she saw him and Gary.

“Boy! Yo’ momma and daddy losin’ their minds over you. What you think you doing.”

“Going with JameWalta to see Harlem.”

Yes! He was going to Harlem! But the only reason he was able to go was because Mrs. Pierce was a friend of Momma’s—otherwise this enterprise of going to New York would have been nipped in the bud before it even got started. There weren’t many things James Walter feared or revered, but his mother was definitely one of them. And when she said no, it didn’t happen. It wasn’t that he was a momma’s boy, but she just wasn’t usually wrong about these types of things. But this time he was determined to leave Cleveland, the white signs with the black letters telling him where to stand, sit, or drink were too much. And she must have known it. So she let him go this time. On this bus. If he had known what the bus was going to be like, Gotdamn! He might have walked!

Though the Greyhound was gleaming and silver on the outside as it sat ready to go up the highway towards New York, the inside was hot and clammy. The seats in the back were sticky and scratched. Some still smelled of the last body that had sat in it, and of course the bathroom was nearby. For someone trying to sleep in the back, the bad smell of the toilet was only matched by the annoying sound of the door opening and closing. And though he knew it was the price to pay for freedom, as he sat in his seat he thought to himself, “This the last time, I’ll ever take a Greyhound. And I’ll never ever sit in the back.”

Twenty-two hours later and they were in another world. A new depot. In the middle of a city far from where they came from and far from where they still had to go. But he still smiled, he was finally in New York! He had Bubba, his bag, and his records and before he knew it he was on his first ride on a subway on his way up to Harlem and Mrs. Pierce’s apartment. He tried not to look too “country” when he got on the “A” train as they rode uptown, but he couldn’t stop
smiling and looking around at everything. He kept quiet. He didn’t want the other folks on the train to know he wasn’t a New Yorker. (Though later on he’d say that they probably knew already.) As the train sped up the tunnel he couldn’t stop thinking about Harlem! There he’d be able to go to the Apollo and see all the people he idolized. In Harlem there would be black folks doing things and saying things he’d only heard about on the radio. All the black folk who were in the movies or on the radio lived there. All the boxers had homes there, even Clay had a place there, and maybe he’d walk by one or two of those folks. And he’d be able to hear the music he loved instead of that Tennessee honky-tonk, or those drab Christian songs. The Jazz folks never did come South. He didn’t blame them. But now he was here, so it didn’t matter. No one in Cleveland was a Jazz man, but him. In New York, he knew he’d find people who would understand his obsession and not think him weird. He could hardly contain himself. But he had to. He looked to his right, he was with Bubba, and Bubba was, well, Bubba and he saw New York a lot differently. Bubba didn’t think there was any danger in New York. James Walter knew different, it was a “promised land,” but even Eden had its snake.

He was the only one from his family to come. His brother-in-law couldn’t understand why “Walt” didn’t just find something to do in Cleveland. Find a girl, he was 21 already. Time to start being a man. Running behind Marshall or “Tie Dye” going to New York when there were perfectly good jobs to be had at the paper mill. Marshall would have been set if he’d just come to work in the paper mill.

But he didn’t want to.
And neither did “Walt.”

“You’ll be back.”

“There’s nothing in New York.”

“Those people there are evil.”

“You can work right here.”
But he can’t. He’s tried to work right there. He can’t stomach working right there anymore.

Fetching golf balls for judges and businessmen and having them calling him “boy” until he was stooped over and clearly an old man. No, he can’t stay in Cleveland anymore.

So he left. Just like many of his friends who weren’t in the army. Bubba, Tie Dye, Raymond, they all took a Greyhound bus at one time or another. Leaving Cleveland. Some with small bags, paper bags, or no bags at all. But leaving just the same. Leaving boyhood for something else. Too bad he only has ten dollars left. He’ll have to get a job quickly. But he knows one thing for sure.

The next time he goes back to Cleveland, he’ll fly.
Figure 9. Postcard from Tennessee, courtesy of Rubenstein Library, Duke University
PART 3
Working Day and Night

The New York of 1948 was a promised land for Blacks who were leaving the south, including my grandparents. The era after the Second World War is one of prosperity in New York. The second influx of migrants to New York City is even larger than the one after the First World War. In New York, between 1940 and 1950 the black population increases in New York by 62 percent (rising from 458,000 in 1940 to 700,000 to 1948.)29 So while migrants came to New York City looking for economic prosperity, they also came looking for a social equality that is absent in the south. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. echoes this sentiment when he says that blacks “will be satisfied with nothing short of complete equity—political, economic, educational, religious, and social.”30 Yet, the city turns out not to be the “promised land” it was hoped to be. There is widespread and legal job discrimination that prevents many black men and women including my grandfather from getting jobs in the various defense plants in the New York area like Grumman.31 And while the North is supposed to be a place where not much discrimination exists, the reality is that racism is just as rampant and just as prevalent in ways that aren’t reported on in the same ways that they were in the South.32

My grandfather who had always worked with his hands was forced to find jobs that used little of his intelligence and all of physical brawn. He was a janitor, a porter, and a super. Working from dawn to dusk. And while my grandmother did not have to work outside the home in South Carolina, for her New York was not as kind. Her limited skills as a teacher did not offer any sustainable work. Her schedule also had to be flexible to allow for my ailing uncle’s doctor’s appointments. So like many women she began doing day’s work.

29 Biondi, Martha. p.3
30 Biondi, p.1
31 Biondi, p.3
32 Biondi, p.81. Biondi gives the example of Josephine Baker and her husband having to go to thirty-six hotels in New York before they were allowed to rent a room. Instead of the white signs with the black letters that said “Colored” in the South, the phrase in New York for many businesses was, “We Prefer Not to Serve Negroes.”
In New York City, when black women looked for day’s work, especially in the Bronx many stood on street corners hoping someone would pick them up. It was no different than the South where white women who didn’t have money for a full time maid would come and “hire out” women for the day. 33 The only thing that was different in the Bronx and other New York boroughs was that the women who hired were usually middle class Jewish, Italian and Polish women who lived in Westchester or Long Island. Many would come to “hubs” and hire Black women for work. 34 My grandmother was never one of the women they’d hire, because she never stood on the corner for work. Her sisters-in-laws worked in the offices of men whose wives stayed at home and they always needed a housekeeper or a babysitter. My grandmother started small and eventually had her own clientele of middle class women who loved her services. And my grandmother was able to make her own hours.

But her rules were simple. Just because you were a housekeeper didn’t mean you had to dress as one, so she always dressed as though she was going to tea instead of to her “business.” She’d walk out on women who gave her clothes in lieu of cash for her services, and many times was called an uppity Negro. And her daughters and granddaughters were never to do this work. So when there were big jobs and a client would say, “Mal, you should ask one of your daughters or granddaughters to help you.” She’d tell them, “This is my work. They’ve got their own work to do.” 35

The domestic work that female migrants do is rarely restricted to house cleaning. The move to the North for many black women was about caregiving and aiding the men and women who had already made the trip North. For my great-grandmother and many women like her, the need to help relatives adapt to living in the North or help with their daily lives was the reasons for their migration. My great aunts were all married and had children and needed someone to watch their children while they did day’s work, or worked in office buildings. In Making a Way out of

33 Boehm, 147
34 Boehm, 101
35 Interview with Betty Goldsmith
No Way, female migrants tell their stories of why they left their homes to make the treks to “the promised land” and one of the primary reasons was to be a caregiver for children. In her story, Ester Woods cites her brother’s need for help with his children when their mother goes into the hospital. “And I came here—frankly, that’s why I came here—to help him with those kids.”  

Long before the modern feminist movement, black women have outside jobs and are coming home to be wives and mothers in order to survive in their new world. Migrant women are working just as hard as men to make sure that the “Promised Land” lives up to their dreams.

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Figure 10. Nana and Granddaddy (Harold & Malqueen) ~1968
Nana & Grandaddy

She beats time on the rugs,
blows dust from the broom
like dandelion spores, each one
a wish for something better

-- Natasha Trethewey

Let's not fool ourselves,
we are far from the Promised Land
both north and south.

-- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Before my ninth birthday, I spent most of my time with my grandparents.
My parents worked.
My parents were part of a generation that was in perpetual motion to distance themselves from the Southern farmers and domestic servants that their own parents once were, and sometimes still were. So they worked long hours, had large social lives, and hosted grand dinner parties. Children were an accessory. A loved accessory, but an accessory nonetheless. During the week they wore the uniforms they were required to and on the weekends they dressed in bright colors, in light silks and cottons with heavy beads and shiny black shoes and danced and drank all night. Children were rarely good drinking partners at cocktail parties.

Malqueen and Harold watched me while they worked, or danced and drank.

And I hated it.

Five year-olds want to be with their parents, no matter how much love their grandparents give them. I was not different.

And anyway, they smelled funny. My grandfather pulled garbage and worked in an incinerator during the day. When he got home he’d stick both his feet in a tub of almost scalding hot water with a ½ cup of Epsom salts for a half hour. He’d dry them with an old coarse blue
towel, then put Absorbine Jr. on them to take away the swelling. The combination of Epsom salts and Absorbine Jr. were like a pungent eye watering cologne that no one would ever want to buy in a store. Before bed, my grandmother would go into the bathroom with a basket of confections for her face and skin. Jars and sprays of different sizes and colors fought for space in the blue plastic basket. When she emerged the small amount of makeup she had worn to “business’” was gone and in its place was my grandmother’s smooth ebony skin. The bathroom was completely filled with steam and smelled like Pond's cold cream and Noxzema.

And they ate funny things. I was forced to eat a constant parade of hoofs, tails, and internal organs that were sometimes smothered, roasted or basted with what I thought was the same gravies and juices. Turnip greens were my spinach, and chicken livers were the special treat we ate on Fridays. My five year-old self wanted cheeseburgers, French fries, and the bags of chips I imagined my classmates eating at their dining room tables. Why couldn’t I order a whopper jr. from the Burger King down the street?

But one of their redeeming qualities was that they were master storytellers.

Their stories were always majestic tales of good and evil. And they would include black versions of Greek and Biblical characters. Hera, Zeus, Hercules, Sampson, Delilah, David, Goliath and Moses lived with us as they spoke, except in my grandparents’ versions their names were Alexander, Maggie, Samuel, and Lara. Saviors, devils, harlots, and cads, made their ways through their stories and into my psyche. All set in the small town of Branchville, SC. Their stories made me feel as though I too, was a Southern girl from Branchville even though I was a little girl from the Bronx.

Often they would retell the tale of their Odyssey from Branchville to the Bronx. Medusa and the other monsters were named Emma, Junior, and Willie. But instead of Athena floating them to a new land there was the East/West Railroad, and the plagues they endured were polio, measles and Jim Crow. And while Odysseus returns home in triumph, my grandparents never leave the Bronx. As a child I ached to be the heroine of those stories and triumph over the men
and women of Dixie who had prevented them from living on their own land. I would ride my horse and present an offering to my grandparents: the heads of the men who prevented my grandparents from living in Branchville. But I was powerless, so instead I just listened and nodded when they said, “Erc, you’ll always need to watch out for those crackers, they’re slick.”

When they weren’t telling stories or working or talking to their families down South on the phone, my grandparents napped, a lot. When they did, I would explore their apartment and look for lost treasure. Their bedroom held cigar and hat boxes with trinkets from their jobs. There were multi-colored hairpins, funny looking pennies, bottle caps, and key rings from different states, and flowers pressed in inexpensive copies of Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer and Macbeth. There was a huge clear bag of funeral programs in one corner, costume jewelry in cups brought back from their children’s trips to places like Trinidad and Tobago or Puerto Rico. On their bureaus strange but familiar faces stared at me, and by some form of magic had the same nose as me, or my eyebrows, or my lips. Some of the faces in the frames are also on the fronts of the funeral programs in the huge plastic bag. Their obituaries told of men and women who had owned stores, fought in wars, been the first black person to deliver mail in the town, or to be a nurse in a hospital, or manage an office. Their origins all the same as my grandparents: Branchville. On the bed stand I’d flip through the pages of the large black bible and make sure my name had not disappeared. I was the only Erica in a sea of Ellens, Bettys, Marys, and Maggies.

But my favorite treasure was in the hallway. Between the bathroom and the bedrooms I would walk softly over the parquet floor to the lone bookshelf in the entire apartment. I would rub my hands across the raised lettering of the set of peacock blue World Book Encyclopedias. The 1960s tomes sat on a dark brown bookshelf, untouched and unread after my youngest aunt had graduated college. I always made sure the black stripe on the spines with the letters were all in order and equal. Volume 1 “A” was the biggest, and Q was given its own volume, but N and O
had to share. I thought that extremely unfair, since no person who mattered had a name that began with Q. The books were old, the information out of date at times, but I always marveled at the pictures. Mahatma Gandhi, asteroids, caterpillars, the Holocaust, and oceans frequently kept me entertained. Sometimes I would already know what letter I would pick out way before I got off the bus in front of their house and opened one of the large books, like “A” eagerly, looking at pictures of ants, aardvarks, and antelopes. No matter what letter I started with, I always wanted to take the “E” volume home with me. But I could only look, not take. My grandparents prided themselves on having paid for the complete set and having one volume gone would be worse than having a tooth knocked out.

When Harold and Malqueen woke from their naps they’d call my name and then curse like sailors about my curiosity, or at each other, or at the television. The curses were part of their normal vernacular and never meant to harm. In fact, it was years before I realized that not every family used curse words on a regular basis. They cursed at the radio when the baseball game was on, at the television when Walter Cronkite was talking about President Nixon, at the neighbors who had parties every weekend, and even sometimes at each other. In fact, my grandmother’s favorite phrase was, “Oh shit, Harold.” But the curses were never coarse or painful, they were just a normal part of my life.

My life was school, dinner, the Flintstones, bed with the occasional bath, and up the next morning to do it all over again. But my afternoons and evenings were always with Harold and Malqueen. And they were always the same. I would climb the huge concrete hill leading from the doors of Public School 41. To my left was the hard stone playground where men and boys played handball and smoked blunts, girls with big ponytails and Charlie Angels’ makeup sat outside the courts waiting for their “men,” smoking hand rolled cigarettes while blowing the smoke over their shoulders. None of the girls were over thirteen but all the boys seemed like men. I walked by them fast so they couldn’t see me envy their freedom. On my right were exactly 12 houses, all weird shaped colonials in colors that could have come out of a Crayola box, but for the light
sheen of dirt that seemed to linger on anything in our neighborhood that sat still for more than 10 minutes.

My grandmother always stood at the top of that hill, all 4’ 10” of her. As I tried to ignore the girls in the park, count the houses, and drown out the echoes of students snickering at the multicolored smocks, knee-highs, and thick-soled Buster Browns that made up my “school uniform,” she stood there, waiting patiently. No smile. Just waiting. And she always only said one thing to me.

“C’mon Erica. I have to get back to work.”

I’d trudge along with her to the next corner, the elevated platform of the subway looming above us like an old rickety wooden roller coaster as she dictated her “work” rules to me:

“Okay, we’ll go into the <substitute name here> apartment. You sit and do your homework. I won’t have time to help you until later, so if you don’t understand your lessons skip it and read a book. We’ll look at it when we go home. After homework, I will give you a snack. You ask me if you can go to the bathroom. I don’t want you messing up stuff. Okay?”

“Yes, M’am. ”

The names of the people she cleaned for were unfamiliar to my young brain: Bloom, Krause, Levine, Goldfarb, and Feldstein. As a child I didn’t understand what it meant to be Black, much less Jewish, Polish, Italian or anything else. I didn’t understand that in my grandparents’ world names had power, and that power could trickle down to even the woman who cleaned for them. Or was it the other way around? Did my grandmother’s presence as their housekeeper give them power? I don’t know. Some of the women enjoyed the irony of my grandmother’s last name being Goldsmith and having her work for them. I do remember my mother and aunts saying that my grandmother only cleaned for the crème de la crème. I didn’t know what that meant either, I only knew that if I didn’t sit and do what she said, “my butt would get tore up,” by Malqueen (and later by Momma.) So I sat at dining room tables, or on sofas as
she cleaned out bathrooms, emptied garbage, and dusted off photos of children who had gone to
the best schools and universities, but could never seem to visit their parents.

The employers would always walk in right as Nana ended her day. They could never
bring themselves to say her full name: Malqueen. Instead they chopped off the “queen” and
elongated the remaining letters to something that sounded like a moans of a wounded animal.
The conversations would usually start with: “MAAAAAAAL! I had no idea you’d still be here! I
thought you would have finished and gone home already.” The refrain sometimes sounded nasal
or shrill, but it always seemed to be punctuated with disbelief and disgust that she was still there
and they’d have to have an uncomfortable conversation with “the help.”

I was unsuccessful at ignoring them. I knew they didn’t care about her. I actually did.
These uncomfortable conversations they would have with my grandmother were always be
centered on money. My grandmother had to constantly remind folks who had sprawling
apartments, large cars, and were the pillar of their synagogues (sometimes they were even the
Rabbis) that they had shorted her on her fee. Often she would have one hand on her hip and the
other on the large garbage bag of clothes they had left for her in lieu of payment. These were
always painful conversations for the employer, but for my grandmother, the conversations were
games that I knew she’d win. She always did.

Daydreaming was my only escape from the confines of my family’s rules. In my
daydreams I was a star. Sometimes I was a singer on Broadway. Or I was a traveler in Europe
and had lots of boyfriends but never married. Boys were dumb, anyway. In my dreams I had
legions of friends who loved me and my homemade smocks and envied the knee highs I wore and
prayed that they could one day wear the thick poopy brown Buster Browns my mother bought me
every Fall. I dreamt of writing books and never growing old.

Nana and I would leave whatever apartment she’d just finished haggling in and walk to
the bus. We always had to take at least two buses running across busy intersections to make our
connections, and she would push me on the bus before the driver was sure if I was supposed to
pay the bus fee or not. When we got off the bus, my grandmother’s 4’ 10” frame went walking briskly and methodically through the crowds of people, wild weeds and potholes that covered the streets. Clenching my hand in hers in a vice grip that a wrestler would envy, she dragged me up the crooked walkways on our route. We’d walk by the basketball courts where boys and men would run up and down the court in a loud and stomping ballet. I would hold my breath every time one of those men would jump and fly through the air. The men were beautiful. They soared. I envied these men, like I did the girls and boys at the handball court. For a few seconds they were birds and I wanted to fly like they did.

Nana and I would cross the street into the forest of 30-story buildings that blocked out the sun. I went to school with almost every kid that lived there. As we’d pass some of the children would speak to me. Because I was with an adult, others would eye me harshly. At the edge of the forest was our bus, the mechanical horse taking my grandmother, me, and countless other kids and grandmothers to Fordham road to catch the BX 20 and get dropped right in front of a new urban forest: The Marble Hill houses. These were housing projects too, but like anything my grandmother touched or was a part of, it felt as though they were better than others.

We were usually weighed down with bags from the small grocery store across the street or the small kosher butcher two blocks away. Wobbling to the front door we were often denied the option of taking the elevator or the stairs since the elevator would usually sit in the sometimes clean lobby not working. We’d have to walk up stairwells whose walls were covered with stars but whose aroma was distinctly earthly. My grandmother often climbed those stairs with no complaint. I did not. “Nana, I’m tired. Nana it’s hot. Nana, why do you gotta live on the fifth floor?” Her advice to me always was: “Erica, don’t walk up the stairs too fast. A young lady should never sweat.” Etiquette was always important to Nana. “Okay Nana,” I whispered. As we reached the fifth floor, I would be drenched in sweat and she would just have a fine line of sweat on her upper lip. She’d smile, hand me the keys and I’d open the door.

“Hey Erc”, said my grandfather as the door opened.
I always remember him as being a man who moved fast. Everything he did, from eating, to walking, to talking was done economically. Granddaddy was so fast he didn’t have time to pronounce the vowels in my name. So he just called me “Erc.” The name made no sense, but it defied my mother’s prohibition on nicknames and made me feel wanted and loved.

It felt like no matter what time we left, he would arrive home before us. After ten hours of collecting garbage, mopping floors, tending to tenant complaints, fixing things, and making the outside of the building spotless, he’d walk quickly to the porter’s lounge. It was a small room just big enough for a tiny bathroom, a table, and a loveseat. In that room he’d change from his dark blue porter’s uniform into a pristine white shirt, khaki pants and black socks. His shoes were always black. This was his “going home” uniform. He’d wash his hands twice before putting on one of his fedoras. While patting his shirt pocket to make sure his pipe tobacco was there, he’d nod goodbye to the super and walk out the service door. His route would include taking the train and the bus and he still arrived before us. Even in his sixties he was able to run the five flights of stairs to their apartment.

And though he could, he never waited for us, even though we were usually leaving from the same place. I think he didn’t wait because things were supposed to be different here in the North. In his mind, my grandmother shouldn’t have to work for white folks. She should have been a teacher, or a nurse, not a housekeeper. This new paradise they travelled to was supposed to be better than where they came from, not worse. And if he waited for us at the door of one of her “clients,” he’d be reminded that he had been duped. His heart wasn’t as impenetrable as he pretended it to be.
Figure 11. Mommy at a party, 20 years old ~ 1962
PART 4
Change is Coming

The 1960’s were a wonderful era to live in New York. And living in Harlem was like hitting the lottery in terms of Black exceptionalism. My father quickly declared himself a New Yorker. Grossman describes my father’s experiences and other migrant’s like him as “the rapidity with which migrants adopted urban leisure habits paralleled their ready adaptation to industrial work discipline…they bought radios, frequented movies, attended baseball games, crowded cabarets and vice resorts and patronized chain stores…a break from the migrants’ southern pasts.” But even though my father was indulging his musical curiosity at the Apollo and the Cotton Club he was also becoming socially conscious.

The events of the 1960s demanded that everyone have an opinion on politics. Whether it was a casual utterance of dislike for the President, or participation in a rally against Vietnam. Everyone was involved in some way in the political fever of the 1960s. In Harlem, that political fever centered on Southern civil rights. Living in Harlem allowed my father to hear the teachings of communists, socialists, the Nation of Islam, Garveyites, and the Northern satellite offices of many Southern civil rights organizations, like CORE, (the Congress on Racial Equality), The SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), and SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). There was rarely an evening or a weekend that speakers weren’t on street corners in Harlem shouting their philosophy to a young eager audience, many of whom were Southern migrants.

But even though he was riding the trains, going to concerts, and had just met a nice young woman named Betty from South Carolina, he could not escape the images of the horror that was going on in the South. And the anger he thought he had buried came back quickly.

My father’s anger was similar if not greater to the anger that George Swanson has in The Warmth of Other Suns. Swanson has escaped Florida and lives in New York. As he sit on the

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37 Grossman, p.263
subway in 1963 and reads about the marches in Alabama and the dogs and water hoses that have been set on the marchers,

    Something welled up in George. Everything raced before him: the cheating foreman in the groves, his running for his life, the hanging and burnings, the little southern dog that would rather die than be black, the bomb going off on Christmas Day under the bed of a good man trying to bring justice to Florida….And now the heat was turning up in the South again. Hosing and police dogs and people watching it as if it were a made-for-TV movie and the blacks just having to take it like they had for generations.\textsuperscript{38}

And my father was furious that he was unable to help his family and friends. And though he didn’t know the people in Alabama personally, there was a bond and empathy with any part of the South where Black people were being persecuted.

    That empathy extends to his new home as well. There are parallel changes occurring in New York; living in Harlem, my father again becomes a witness to history.

    But even while history is rapidly changing and the politics of the nation are creating a “New Society,” life continues for people. New lives are formed. The nice girl from South Carolina becomes Mrs. James Woods and the link between the Goldsmiths and the Woods is formed. New traditions begin and the freedom that both my father, mother, and grandparents had longed for seemed attainable.

    In small doses.

\textsuperscript{38} Wilkerson, 379
Figure 12. Daddy in Christmas Hat, Christmas ~ 1970
With Every Christmas Card I Write

This is a picture of Daddy at Christmas (Figure 12). We think it is 1970 or ’71. Mom and I aren’t sure, and anyone else who might know has long since passed away. But Mom is certain that it is Christmas time, because the hat he’s wearing is the one my aunt Lorraine would wear around the holidays, and he’s wearing his “Christmas” sweater. My mother also says, we’re at my grandparent’s house. The picture was taken before Mom took over the family Christmas dinners exclusively. Daddy is standing in the middle of the maze that is my grandparent’s apartment not far from the house where I was born. In the background all the “heavy” southern food we eat once a year, is sitting waiting for us.

It’s a silly picture of Daddy. A fun picture. A rare glimpse of frivolity in a father who worked hard to present himself as likable, but never silly. As with many of my favorite photos, I’ve abused this one too. I’ve left it at the bottom of purses and most recently as a placeholder in a James Baldwin book. I’m surprised it survives, but it does. And then a week later I lose it again. I’m not exactly sure what to say about me losing and finding this photo, but there might just be something there, psychologically speaking, about the complex relationship my father and I have with one another or how I feel about Christmas in general. Add in my extended family and my mother, and I’m sure my malady can be found in the Clinical Handbook of Psychological Disorders.

My grandparent’s maze of an apartment was the lower level of a huge private house. It was a labyrinth of voluminous closets and bedrooms, an enormous living room and a cavernous dining room that sat twelve. It was the home Nana wished for as she rode in the railcar from Branchville to New York City. Finally she had gotten it. And while her children left the nest, they never went far. My parents and I lived just around the corner from them. My grandparents’ home was a place where someone would always listen to you, and the kitchen was always open.
Figure 13. Granddaddy sitting in his leather Lazy-Boy
Figure 14. Daddy, Aunt Lorraine, “Aunt Jackie” ~Christmas 1972
Our neighborhood was filled with a mix of working class migrants from the South along with immigrants from the Caribbean, and Europe. We were a miniature United Nations. Our landlords were Italian, our neighbors were Greek, and my father’s card buddies were from St. Croix, Jamaica, Bermuda, and the Dominican Republic. And everyone had dreams of conquering America, if only they could hit the number!

If they hit the number in December, it meant their families would have a great Christmas. In our neighborhood everyone took all the holidays seriously, and Christmas time was the most serious time of the year. Our small block was as festive as Rockefeller Center. It wasn’t unusual to see Christmas trees, nativity scenes and wreaths in windows the day after Thanksgiving. Piles of tinsel, fake snow and homemade snowflakes filled the eaves of apartment doors and hallways. In our neighborhood, the motto was: the more tinsel, snow and baby Jesuses the better. Men who were too busy to attend church eleven months of the year because of six day work weeks on assembly lines and basements, joined their wives, girlfriends, mothers, and aunties at Trinity Baptist, Immaculate Conception or St. Luke’s Episcopal with crumbled five and ten dollar bills for the offering baskets. Their Sunday suits a little tighter in the waist and shinier in the shins than the year before. Sometimes their pockets were a little heavier with holiday bonuses and their holiday tables filled with the occasional turkey given to them by “appreciative” bosses to gobble on December 25th. My grandfather always received a holiday bonus from his job and a 20-pound turkey from his union. Though you can’t see it, I’m sure the gobbler is on the table behind my father; stuffed, roasted and sitting on my grandmother’s vine covered platter. And though he’s not in this picture, my grandfather is almost definitely sitting in his black leather La-z-boy impatiently waiting for dinner to start. In his uniform of dark pants and clean white undershirt and starched white dress shirt (figure 13). He’s usually sitting at an angle in front of the wood-paneled, floor model television set they got as the “family” gift that year, watching anything. He wasn’t picky, he just liked the television set to be on. This was also the year diabetes devoured his big toe and he began to wear black Frankenstein shoes. No matter what the discussion was in the
living room, my grandfather would find a way to slip in his motto: “Some folks been here longer, and have done a lot worse, with a lot more. We’ve done just fine.” A sort of grace said from a barca lounger, with a sad smile.

In later years, when Christmas festivities moved to my parents’ house, we’d have a seven-foot tall artificial tree. My father would invariably curse at the stand while screwing in the base and matching the colored dots on the “spine” with the colored markings on the “limbs.” But at my grandparents’ house, the tree was always real. According to my mother, “Your grandfather would always go to the “farm” with a saw and cut down the one he wanted, then have the three boys bring it home. Before they bought the Pontiac, the boys would lift the tree over their heads and walk the tree home. With your grandfather in the front, and your uncle Michael in the back. It was years before anyone outside of the boys and your grandfather knew that they were actually walking to Bronx Park, which was a fifteen minute walk and about ten blocks away and they were illegally cutting down Christmas trees. For some reason no one ever questioned how the tree showed up!” Before they arrived, my grandmother would have the corner of the foyer (calling it a hallway was passé for my family; none of us called hallways, “hallways” when we’re in New York) spotless. Then she’d lay down newspaper, a garbage bag, then the Christmas rug, then put the tree holder out. My grandfather and the boys would make a big deal of hauling that tree up the stairs, and then plopping it into the holder. For me as a child I felt the ornaments appeared and jumped onto the tree like something out of one of those Bunim and Murray classics, except there was no Bumble to put the star on top, and Rudolph never showed up. My grandparents’ ornaments and the ornaments of many of our neighbors, no matter what the nationality, were always elaborate affairs. Glass blown confections of silver, gold, and pewter. Some round, some oblong, some banana shaped. Spread across pine needles while Burl Ives wished everyone a Holly Jolly Christmas. There was no frivolity on the tree. Nothing even hinted that children constantly ran through that house. It was as though only [they?]were celebrating Christmas and Lawrence Welk was decorating the house.
And like any other family, we saw the family we never saw any other time except on this day, hence the viney china and the free turkey, and my grandfather’s clean white shirt. My great aunt Francena and her boyfriend Al were there. Francena, was different from her sister, my grandmother. Where my grandmother was short at 4’ 10’, Francena was tall at 5’ 11”, where my grandmother was curvy in a sexy and provocative Sophia Loren way, Francena was a swizzle stick who smoked a pack of Virginia Slims every day and had no curves at all. While my grandmother made her hair lay obediently by using a hot comb and a horse hair brush every week, Francena had an unkempt afro that she occasionally took care of. A Christmas wasn’t complete without her coming to dinner at least an hour early, dressed in all black, with a mink hat, a full mink coat, and a Virginia Slims hanging from her bottom lip. Al was her appendage who adored her and was a black equivalent to Jerry Lewis’ Nutty Professor. He liked to invent things, but was much better at dismantling complicated electronics. He always wore the same grey turtleneck sweater, plaid blazer, and grey pants. And despite his best efforts to clean up, there were always specks of oil under his fingernails.

My uncles would all show up with their girlfriends, every year different from the last, and Nana, Granddaddy, the kids, my mom, aunts, and my Dad would be prepped before one of the couples came, about our etiquette, that we were not to mistakenly mention the last girl, or call the new girl by the name of the last girl, or mention how much one of us might have liked the last girl. Is was so that my grandfather wouldn’t say, “Oh, what happened to Nadine?” or my Aunt Francena say, “What about that gal who was studying to be a nurse, she was nice.” So we wouldn’t get in trouble, we just wouldn’t say anything and just stare or talk about anything else except the girl in the room.

My middle aunt Lorraine would always be the fashion plate at Christmas (Figure 14). She was very fortunate to never spend a dime on any of the new fashions. My mother was the unfortunate one, because Lorraine would come over to our apartment and raid my mother’s closet for the newest fashions. Never without a boyfriend, a Kool’s cigarette or a can of Miller,
my aunt was always the life of the party. She knew everyone, she could play all the card games, Tunk, Spades, War, and Gin rummy. And she knew how to hotwire cars. You never really knew what would happen when you were with her, but you always had a good time. She’s a missionary with a Baptist church now. Singing the soprano parts in the senior choir, and catching the access-a-ride van back home when service is done. I’m always a little dumbstruck when I see her nowadays. She was a borderline criminal. But she was always happy, so I can’t fault her much. And as they say, every saint was once a sinner.

That neighborhood is gone. Well, it’s still there, but no one who lived there when I did remains. All the children who were my age have left New York. We’re all in the far reaches of the country and the world. Our parents are elderly, and many of our grandparents are gone. The eaves are no longer filled with snowflakes and the windows are devoid of trees. It’s been years since I’ve had a glass ornament on my tree. I no longer celebrate Christmas that way. I am no longer a child who keeps the secrets of uncles. I now have my own. Some are tied with bows and others are hidden in the eaves and hallways of the past.
Figure 15. An excerpt from a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon by Bill Watterson, Courtesy of Universal-Uclick.com
PART 5
Endings: Telling Stories

My project started with a small note I made in my journal a few days after my grandmother died in 2011.

“She won’t be at the top of the hill waiting for me anymore.”

I found the note several months after she had died, when I was unpacking boxes. A note about a small time in my life that had made a huge impact on me. And that summed up my grandmother as well. She was a short woman, who had made a large impact on her six children, fourteen grandchildren, and seven great grandchildren. And while I knew much about her life from her stories and from what my mother had told me. I wondered if there were more stories “waiting for me” to discover. And of course, there were.

The most remarkable story was that from 1942 to 1948 my grandmother had given birth to five children, buried two, packed up all her possessions moved to Philadelphia, then moved back to South Carolina. She lived in a two room shack with three children and a husband. She had to leave her sick toddler in South Carolina with her mother-in-law while she, her 6 year old and 9 month old daughters boarded a train in the winter and rode to New York City, a city she’d never been to, in order to reunite with her husband and find work. The following Spring she got back on the train with her children to return to South Carolina, get her son, and bring him back to New York to begin what would be three years of intense physical therapy. Maybe many families have a similar story, I’m not sure. But it seems like a story that needs to be told.

The British historian Annette Kuhn calls the need to create projects like this as doing “memory work,” it’s
a re-reading of the past through its recorded images, a practice of engagement with a cultural history committed to “unearthing” and making public untold stories.39

But even after doing the research, writing the memoir pieces and scouring the family albums, I was unsure whether this was my story to tell. I mean, it’s my family, and they are my people. But the stories had been filtered through a young person, who was at times ambivalent about the relatives around her, and as she got older, sometimes emotionally distant from the relatives who showed her the most love and attention.

And while the stories didn’t originate with me, and may not be “mine.” the manner of telling the stories definitely is. The way I tell the story is the way I want the story to go into the world. And I don’t think I can avoid creating deities and demons as I craft the stories to go along with the pictures in the album. Nor do I think I want to. It’s a paradigm that everyone can understand and it’s my truth, so it’s worth telling. And my telling is already coming under fire. My mother and my aunt don’t believe their mother and father would have told the stories the way I tell them, and that my telling doesn’t sound like Harold and Malqueen at all. They’re certainly entitled to their opinion, but as I told my mother on the phone one evening, “This is memoir, not an encyclopedia. The facts are the facts and they are indisputable, but my interpretation and feelings toward them are just as important.” Needless to say, the rest of the conversation was not a pleasant one.

The same points about telling and interpretation could be said in regards to “reading” the family photo album. The facts are there. A family has gone on vacation and a mom and two kids are smiling at someone, probably dad. That’s a fact. But when the photo goes in the book and 20 years later those same four people look at it again, there are four interpretations of that very “perfect” moment. Someone hates the picture. Someone loves it. Someone remembers the picture was taken the week before a memorable moment in history has happened. And maybe the other

39 Miller, Nancy p. 52
person remembers that they lost their job soon after. For each of them, the picture becomes a stepping stone to a larger story and is seen in ways that differ from the “moment.”

For me, the memoir and the family photos included here are stepping stones to something much larger, a search for a people that I spent my entire childhood and most of my young adulthood with and never saw as actual people who lived and existed before I was born. Nancy Miller calls that the “temporal dissonance” of autobiographical images. “Seeing yourself in relation to these parents (and in my case also grandparents) now dead and living in your head even as your write.” The family album and the memoir are also notable for what was not there. Both forms give you the freedom to craft your story around certain chosen moments in your life instead of your entirety of your life. And as I’ve found, in some cases it can allow the photographer or the memoirist to evade the demonization of family members and continue to create deities wherever possible, or needed.

This is a story of my Gods who migrated. But I have another set of Gods (my father’s family) who stayed put in Tennessee. And their lives are as fruitful and bold as the deities who made it to New York City. In the research for this project, I found a real name of a grandfather I never knew and a cadre of cousins who lived lives as part of the Black professional class in Chattanooga. I can only hope that they too will experience a telling of their story, in a project of their own. Because there is always room for more stories.

As for the story of my father, I have used memoir and our family album to reconstruct a relationship that is now beyond repair. Marianne Hirsch has identified this as a “reversal of children looking at parents. It connects images to loss and mourning for a parental-child relationship that can never be” I wanted to create a simple, rowdy, loud, and confident relationship to replace the complex, polite, quiet, and unsure relationship we now have. That dynamic is only further complicated by his Alzheimer’s diagnosis and our now living 500 miles

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40 Miller, Nancy, cited in Familial Gaze, p. 64
41 Hirsch, Marianne Familial Gaze, xi
apart from one another. His Herculean presence here is created by me to serve as visual and verbal breadcrumbs for my own children to follow a man who got on a bus with little more than a dream and created a family while acquiring pieces of the American pie. I think it’s only fair for children who are being cheated out of their Pop-Pop by fate and disease to have their own personal superhero. It’s my hope that they’ll be smart enough to see their own father’s migration story in their grandfather’s and connect the dots about relationships, family, sacrifice, and love a lot earlier than I did.

And not be afraid to tell their own stories someday.
Figure 16. Mom, Dad, and me. High school graduation party, July 1987.
CODA

Aká ca maka ká Mary & Me

_He wanted to shoot muscle through whatever I was called, arm each syllable with tiny weaponry so no one would mistake me for anything other than a tricky whisperer with a switchblade in my shoe._

– Patricia Smith

_I actually have no idea how this name should be spelled but this is how it sounds:_

Aká ca maka ká Mary.

_Thank goodness my mother had a subscription to Ebony Magazine in 1969._

_Otherwise my name would have been Aka ca maka ka mary._

_My father came home one day from work and announced to my very pregnant mother that this was the name he wanted for his child whether it was a boy or a girl._

_“I don’t want no slave names for our child. This baby ain’t gonna be shackled to the White Man”_

_My mother stared at him, blinked more than a few times and calmly told him,_

_“This child might not be shackled, but it will surely get its ass kicked every time it walks onto a playground with a name like that.”_  

_My father had come to New York in 1960, and rubbed elbows with “street” intellectuals who were against everything that was American and oppressed black people. To a man who had just come from a military state where he couldn’t drink out of the fountain he wanted or walk on the sidewalk in the manner he felt like, the rhetoric and lectures of Garveyites, Black Pride, and the Nation of Islam were salves to wounds that at times didn’t seem as though they would ever heal. Through those lectures in small apartments or on the long thoroughfares of Lenox Avenue and_
Seventh Avenue my father was “schooled” by scholars who believed that the Black man could do way better without any interference from a white society. His favorite group to quote from was the Nation of Islam, and while he was a huge fan of Malcolm X, he always said he could never be a true disciple.

“Hell, I love pork way too much to be a Muslim.”

But he refused to have any “country fried” sounding name attached to his child.

His child would have a name that was strong, noble. And didn’t remind anyone of the small towns in the South where women like his mother could only shop downtown on Wednesdays, or where women like his sisters were still called “gal” by the old women they worked for. The name he picked wouldn’t have any link to small white signs with black letters nailed to rotten posts that sometimes ruled black people’s lives. His child would have a name that would make him or her different.

My mother, on the other hand, was a pragmatist and didn’t want to enroll her child in boxing classes before she enrolled it in kindergarten. So she listened to my father calmly, but hoped that God would send a sign that would make Jimmy see the light.

And as the legend goes, my mother came home after a long day of work at the hospital in July. She was seven months pregnant with swollen ankles and very little patience. She pulled the mail from the antiquated tiny mailbox at the foot of the almost vertical set of stairs and then slowly ascended to our apartment on the second floor. She sits on the sticky plastic covered navy blue love seat holding a huge glass of lemonade. Besides bills, there was the new Ebony magazine with a feature article about Bill Cosby42, his beautiful wife, and their one-year old daughter, Erika.

“I like that name. I won’t tell him yet. ” She thought, “I’ll make up some revolutionary aspects of the name so he’ll feel vindicated.”

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42At this time Bill Cosby was a beloved comic and an idol in our family. There were no abuse allegations in the media at this time.
And maybe if my father had had a stomach for hospitals and been at my birth, he might have at least had a say on whether Elise should have been my middle name or not.
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Figure 17. Betty Mae Goldsmith and James Walter Woods. June 19, 1965, Bronx, New York