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# Choosing My Best Thing: Black Motherhood and Academia

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## CHOOSING MY BEST THING

### Black Motherhood and Academia

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#### The Author

KaaVonia Hinton-Johnson is an assistant professor at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and a freelance writer. She earned a B.S. in English education in 1995 and an M.A. in African American and English literature in 1996, both from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro; and a Ph.D. in English education in 2003 from The Ohio State University. Her specialization is English education with an interest in multicultural literature, particularly African American literature for adults, young adults, and children. Her writings have been accepted by *Social Education*, *Multicultural Review*, *VOYA*, *Kliatt*, *Encyclopedia of African American Literature*, *Journal of Children's Literature*, and *English Journal*. She is currently writing a book for Scarecrow Press.

The best thing she was, was her children.

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987, p. 251)

Scholars argue that White feminist theoretical undertakings concerning mothering are not appropriate for studying Black mothers because they rarely take race and culture into consideration (Collins, 1991; Joseph, 1991). Collins (1994) argues that the experiences of Black mothers are paramount to any inclusive discussion about mother/child relationships. Scholars who have turned their attention to the Black mother often do so via literary works and/or criticism (see, for example, Crews, 1996; Morrison, 1987; Wade-Gayles, 1984; Washington, 1990; Williams, 1986) or in reality (Collins, 1991, 1994; Roberts, 1997a). However, a computerized search for studies on the Black mother produces literature that concentrates on single Black “welfare” mothers (for example, Augustin, 1997; Roberts, 1997b). Little research is available on (1) Black mothers who choose to be single, (2) single Black mothers who are professionals, or (3) single Black mothers who are pursuing doctorate degrees.

Storytelling, a rich element of the oral tradition in African American culture, is a significant part of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, & Nebeker, 1998). Story is a powerful way to bear witness, to put forth a “counternarrative,” and to speak for oneself (Parker et al., 1998). For example, through the character Adam Nehemiah in Sherley Ann Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), Williams critiques the academy. The academy is a large part of the national narrative, for it has been paraded as the conduit of superior ways of knowing. However, Williams (1986) suggests

that Dessa's life experiences, and her ability to put them into narrative form by way of oral storytelling, have greater value than Nehemiah's—the self-appointed ethnographer who attempts to document Dessa's story—university-obtained knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, Nehemiah is perplexed and frustrated when Dessa answers his pointed questions with circular narratives, narratives he cannot fully comprehend. It is these narratives, the narratives of Black women, that have sustained me and made it possible for me to understand the importance of telling and preserving tales. I have chosen to use narrative discourse, a discourse Bell-Scott (1994) refers to as life notes, to talk about my experiences within the academy. This chapter is my contribution to the growing body of literature that focuses on the experiences of Black women as mothers, students, and professionals in a society that often renders them invisible.

### Putting Black Women at the Center

Black women writers have a tradition of writing texts that put Black women at the center. These writers create images of Black women that defy the many dehumanizing stereotypes that have been perpetuated about them (Collins, 2000). In these literary works, women confront issues some Black women face in reality: sexism, racism, motherhood, sisterhood, and so forth. Barbara Christian (1994) once wrote, "What I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life" (p. 357). For some of us who do not write, the power lies in what we read. Similar to Christian (1994), I have used literature, Black literature in particular, as a point of reference, as a tool to justify "that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is" (p. 357).

One of my favorite novels, *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987), includes several informative portraits of motherhood that intrigue me. Set during slavery, the novel reveals the pain and anguish felt by slave mothers who were not allowed to mother their children. According to Baby Suggs, a mother separated from her children was the "nastiness of life" (p. 23). Baby Suggs's memories of children taken from her and sold to distant plantations are heart wrenching: "She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. Did Patty lose her lisp? What color did Famous' skin finally take? Was that a cleft in Johnny's chin or just a dimple that would disappear soon's his jawbone change? . . . Does Ardelia still love the burned bottom of bread?" (p. 139). By the time Baby Suggs's eighth child, Halle, was born, she felt it was no longer "worth the trouble to try to learn features [she] would never see change into adulthood"

(p. 139). Legalities often interfered with the slave mother's (natural) desire to mother her children. Like the mothers themselves, the children were property, chattel, sold to the highest bidder.

For Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, motherhood brought a different set of challenges and disappointments. Pregnant when she escapes Sweet Home, she gives birth just before she reaches Baby Suggs's house, where her other three children are safely awaiting her arrival. However, when that safety is threatened and Sethe fears that she and her children will be returned to Sweet Home, "she just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (Morrison, 1987, p. 163). As Sethe recalls her attempt to kill her children and herself she argues:

[A]nybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing. . . . No undreamable dreams about whether the . . . bubbling-hot girls in the colored-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon. (Morrison, 1987, p. 251)

Paul D, recognizing Sethe's mothering as a demonstration of "thick love," explains the danger of it: "For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit" (Morrison, 1987, p. 164). However, Sethe disagrees: "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all." Further, Sethe explains the extent of a mother's love, a love that extends beyond adulthood: "Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that supposed to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing" (p. 164).

In several other novels, Morrison (1970, 1977) provides complex mother/child relationships that I have reflected upon throughout the years. For example, why did Milkman's (*Song of Solomon*, 1977) mother nurse him for so long, and do most mothers metaphorically nurse their sons (and perhaps

their daughters) beyond the reasonable time? And why didn't Paulette (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970) feel a greater sense of urgency around mothering?

In *Sula*, another novel by Morrison (1973), Eva teaches that motherhood is often synonymous for sacrifice. For years rumors circulate suggesting that the loss of one of Eva's legs was directly related to her need to provide for her children. Ironically, because Eva does not display physical affection, her daughter, Hannah, wonders if she loves her children. Eva's reply reveals that some mothers define love in terms of their ability to provide for their children:

You settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't. . . . With you al coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off and if you was sleepin' quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin' what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer? (Morrison, 1973, pp. 68–69)

As the novel progresses, Eva's love for Hannah seems apparent when she sacrifices her own safety in an attempt to rescue Hannah from a fire that kills her.

## Part I

I read these novels before I chose to be a mother, yet I wonder if I really understood the magnitude of the role. In many ways these stories helped me to imagine motherhood, and then, later, they helped me to reflect upon it.

## Part II

In eighth grade, I decided I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. But things did not go as I planned. While a junior in undergraduate school, I fell in love and got married. Despite this, I graduated with my class and enrolled in graduate school a few weeks later. After graduate school, I began teaching at a historically Black university, and it was there, three years into marriage, that my husband and I began to plan to conceive our first child. After several months, we were unsuccessful in our attempt. I got nervous; after all, timing was everything. I teach! The baby had to arrive during summer vacation, or I

would have to postpone conception for another year. This would not do; my life was already mapped out: have baby by 25, begin Ph.D. program the following year, graduate by 30, find job, evaluate life, squeeze more kids in if there is time, and don't forget about tenure. We conceived just in time. According to the plan, he would be born in August.

### Part III

Za'id did not stick to the plan. He was born in September, two weeks off schedule. Though there were no severe complications during my pregnancy, I was often nauseous and lethargic. The only time I truly came alive was when I was in the classroom. It did not matter that my stomach was unsettled 30 minutes before class or that only two hours before I was so sleepy I closed my office door, put my head on my desk, and prayed that my students would not remember when my office hours were. When I entered the classroom and began to engage students in a discussion about African American literature, I would become invigorated while Za'id remained still and listened.

The night I went into labor, I dreamt that my water broke while I was teaching the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845, 1986). When I awoke, it was obvious to me that I was in labor, but because of a false alarm the week before, I hesitated before calling the doctor. While waiting, I turned on the television. Ironically, there was a documentary about the life of Frederick Douglass on A&E. While I entertained the thought of taping the program, the labor pains grew sharper. It was not a false alarm.

Prior to feeling those intense labor pains, a degree of pain unlike any I had ever experienced in my life, I told everyone that I would have Za'id naturally. No epidural for me. When the pain intensified, that all changed with only a little persuasion from the doctor. I welcomed the anesthesiologist with open arms. However, I wish I hadn't, because the epidural left me unable to control my own body. I felt nothing. The doctor and nurses had to tell me when to push until, finally, to borrow Sethe's words, "my best thing" was born! Like an anthropologist, I kept field notes about him daily and documented all I had observed each Sunday (the day he was born). In the notebook I wrote:

10/19/97

Five weeks! As I sit at the computer holding you, I marvel at how much you have grown. I took you to get your second immunization shot this

weekend; you weigh 10 pounds and 4 ounces. . . . You discovered TV this week. . . . Your dad reenlisted this week. Now we are moving to Ohio for three years.

10/26/97

A lot has happened this week. You visited Norfolk State University, but that doesn't mean you have to attend that school. You might want to go to another HBCU, A&T, like Mommy. You took your first long car ride to Arkansas, which is 17 hours from Virginia. You were a very good baby. You started laughing really loud at your dad this week. . . .

Za'id needed my complete attention that first year, so I decided I would delay returning to teaching.

#### Part IV

Scholars have written about the mythology that undergirds the image of Black motherhood (Bernard, 2000; Borab, 1998; Collins, 2000; Wade-Gayles, 1984). As Wade-Gayles (1984) explains, "One of the most pervasive images in American thought and in Black American culture is the image of superstrong Black mothers. . . . They are devoted, self-sacrificing, understanding, and wise. Their love is enduring, unconditional, and without error" (p. 8). Similarly, Borab (1998) reminds us that "the depiction of mothers who failed to live up to their responsibilities" was missing from earlier literature, and mothers generally "were not allowed to escape oppression by abandoning their children or even by going insane" (p. 86). After choosing to become a mother, I reread *Beloved* and *Sula* and found that the texts were wrought with new meaning for me. For example, when Eva suggests to Sula that she should consider becoming a mother and Sula retorts, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself," I applauded (Morrison, 1973, p. 92). Sula realized what I had not: at 25 years old I had no clue who I was or what I really wanted to do with my life. I had made someone else, but what about me? Had I made myself?

#### Part V

I had no idea that I would be a single mother. After all, I *was* married. But, once again things did not go as planned. After five years of marriage, I separated from my husband and reevaluated my life. I knew what the research

said about people like me. I knew “scholars” wrote compelling reports that claimed all “female [read Black female] headed households . . . are dysfunctional and deviant [as] is perpetuated by such patronizing, racist, and sexist writings as the *Moynihan Report* (1965)” (Kuwabong, 2000, p. 68). I was familiar with literature that suggested the blame for social ills rests on female-headed families. And I was also aware that society claimed that “sons of single mothers will have difficulties developing masculine tendencies and normal emotional development with the absence of a significant male” (Gearing & Campbell, 2000, p. 47). Nevertheless, I put these myths aside, made some calls, filled out some papers, and prepared for my/our future.

We chose to move to Ohio because it was home to one of the few universities in the country that offered a Ph.D. in English education. However, I had postponed pursuing a terminal degree in exchange for caring for my newborn full-time.<sup>2</sup> Once I became a single mother, I felt that pursuing the Ph.D. was important for my son and me.

In African American culture, caring for children has most often been viewed as “a collective responsibility” (Collins, 1991, p. 45). This notion of “othermothering” redefines motherhood in a way that includes biological mothers as well as other women and men within the community who take on the responsibility of rearing children (see chapter 6 by Tinaya Webb). My grandmother was one of the best “othermothers” in my community. She unofficially adopted people (Whites and Blacks, young and old) from all around the county, so I knew that “the concept of motherhood [is not] reduced to a biological function” (Joseph & Lewis, 1981, p. 83). I knew that I would need to have several quality “othermothers” in place as well as the support of Za’id’s father once I enrolled in school part-time.

## Part VI

My academic advisor, also a new mother, fully understood that I had particular needs and concerns that differed from those of traditional students. From the beginning, it was obvious to her that my son impacted every decision I made, and I believe he also impacted the way in which she advised me and served as an advocate on my behalf. It was not unusual for us to decide whether a particular “opportunity” was right for me based on whether or not it interfered with my responsibilities as a mother. For instance, we chose graduate assistantships that allowed me to work when my son was in preschool.<sup>3</sup> Although one of my assistantships required that I work one Saturday a month, Za’id was allowed to come to work with me when necessary.<sup>4</sup> As a

result, when members of the project, a group of K–12 teachers of color, began to have children of their own, they felt comfortable bringing them to meetings. Though this may seem unprofessional or unorganized, it was actually important, because the stability of the project was maintained: members were more likely to attend monthly meetings if they did not have to concern themselves with securing child care.

My experiences led me to conclude that the academy can be a child-friendly atmosphere. At the end of my first semester in doctoral school, my advisor encouraged me to present at a symposium sponsored by the college of education. I had written a paper, “Yet, Artists We Will Be,” based on the anthology, *Black-Eyed Susans and Midnight Birds: Stories by and about Black Women* (1990), compiled by Mary Helen Washington. In part of the paper, I discussed the literary works that contained thwarted Black women artists, women who virtually had to steal small segments of time to create art, because their duties as mothers and wives were so demanding. As I stood at the podium discussing my paper, Za’id, who was two years old at the time, tugged at my skirt and insisted that I stop reading the paper and put his shoe back on his foot. Try as I might, I could not gently persuade him to sit down, nor could I simply ignore him and continue presenting. Za’id’s act represented both the epitome of my talk and my attempt to balance motherhood and academia.

As it turned out, Za’id would accompany me to a number of presentations, each one more memorable than the next. For instance, two years later, I presented on the Africanist presence (Morrison, 1992) in Judy Blume’s novels. After I concluded the talk, I asked, “Any questions?” The first one came from Za’id. He wanted to know if he could eat his crackers. I was always somewhat ashamed that I had to bring my son along to conferences. However, Delpit (2002) officially confirmed what I had begun to notice: it was not just me, the single Black mother, who brought her child to academic functions; a number of parents, mothers and fathers, take their children to conferences when they need/wish to do so.<sup>5</sup>

I am fortunate that Za’id has been such an active participant in this process. But we have had to make sacrifices. Whereas students without children might have written their comprehensive exams at the university library, I wrote mine in McDonald’s Play Place. However, I am sure they did not have the attentive study partner I had. Za’id listened as I prepared my job talk. After a few slides, he left the room and went into his own room to play with his toys. When I yelled after him that I was not finished with my presentation, he yelled back, “I can still hear you in here!” as he continued

playing with his trucks. He helped me prepare for interviews too. After he finished asking me questions about my work, he said, “My turn, Mommy. You ask me some questions.” Of course I did. After all, we are a team. The dissertation defense was the final test for me, and I did not take it lightly. I told Za’id I was worried about not passing the defense. In his nonchalant way he said, “Mom, you’ve been working on that thing all year. You really ought to know it by now.” He was right. I am fortunate that I had Za’id to motivate, encourage, and support me. Before I graduated I wrote,

[My] son serves as a powerful motivational force for me. He has been with me every step of the way. His mere presence reminds me daily that I must be persistent in my effort to obtain a terminal degree. I cannot tell him we went through the stress and uncertainty of candidacy exams to give up now. He would never understand why during Christmas break I spent more time shut up in my room trying to type a dissertation proposal than I spent playing with him, only to give up and give in. I want my son to see me and know what perseverance looks and feels like. Most of all, I want him to know that our sacrifices, his and mine, have not been in vain. (Hinton-Johnson, 2003, p. 38)

Reflecting on the significant part Za’id played during “my journey to the Ph.D.,” I regret more than ever that he did not attend my graduation (Green & Scott, 2003). A few weeks before I graduated, I decided it was best for him to take his annual vacation with my mother because the last-minute details of writing and submitting the dissertation electronically were overwhelming when coupled with planning a move to another state to take a new job.

## Part VII

As I write this chapter, Za’id leans over me, peers at the laptop, and immediately recognizes his name. “Why is my name in your story, Mommy?” he asks. “Because you are an important part of my story,” I say. He immediately gets an idea. “When you’re done, Mommy, staple it, and I will learn to read it all and take it to show-and-tell on Friday.” I laugh because I know he is serious; however, I subconsciously note that he is well on his way to appreciating the power of stories.

Today, we are on a new journey. I recently began working as an assistant professor at a university in the Midwest. Once again, we are in a town, a state, a region where we have no family. I teach classes that I absolutely love

but dread going to because they are in the evening. Not only does the guilt of being a single mother contribute to the dread, but also the fear of leaving my baby with strangers (Gearing & Campbell, 2000). I search frantically for child care in a town where I know virtually no one. And when I find someone I think will take good care of Za'id for four hours two evenings a week, he tells me the woman is in the wrong profession. I listen to him because, as my mother says, "The boy has been in day care enough to know." Once again, I am frantic! I try to explain to Za'id that I have to work; it is our livelihood. But, my five-year-old only looks at me and says, "Mom, what's more important, your job or your son?"

I think we both know who is *more* important, but we also know that although I realize that choosing motherhood means having great responsibilities, I will not *give up* my personal goals, because they are an important part of who I am. There is no doubt that I will do as Black mothers—academics—before me have done: I will learn to balance mothering and the academy.

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## Endnotes

1. It is important to note that while Dessa is imprisoned because of her involvement in a slave revolt, she is also pregnant with a son.
2. I returned to teaching when my son was six months old.
3. After a year of taking classes part time, my advisor helped me secure enough funding to take a leave of absence from high school teaching to work on a Ph.D. full time.
4. The director of the program, a Black male, was supportive of me and served as a role model for Za'id.
5. Delpit (2002) recalls a discussion she had with her daughter regarding the use of Black English vernacular versus mainstream American English: "I know how to code switch!" 'Code switch,' I [Delpit] repeat in astonishment. 'Where did you hear that term?' The eleven-year-old who has accompanied me to conferences and speaking engagements since she was an infant answered, 'You know, I do listen to you sometimes'" (p. 39).