

**Negative Portrayal of African American Women in the Media:
A Qualitative Study of Silencing Stereotypes and
Strategies for Change in Today's Media**

Honors Thesis 2013

MA's Journey

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MA's Journey

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ABSTRACT

“MA’s Journey” is the culmination of a life long endeavor to regain what was lost from childhood. It is my portrayal of self-redemption and the restoration of youthful joy. My father thought it best to move from our majority black neighborhood to an all white neighborhood. There was silent intimidation about not fitting in unless I acted like the negative portrayal of black women in film and television. I reached back and remembered as a child coursing through adulthood that the mammy portrayal was a source of discomfort I could not express, so I kept quiet.

Quiet until University of Arizona Film and Television coupled with Photography and Creative Writing encouraged me to research the essence of media portrayals, to look further than the surface of these characters, and to find out why these women played roles that depicted African American women in a negative way.

I did just that. Join me in MA’s Journey, a creative writing account of my childhood separation, photo collages of African American women in my life and on screen, a study of how my internships with the National Association of

Black Journalists helped me to open my perspectives, and my creative assessment of African American women actresses today.

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All photos taken by Mary Ann Warren, except where indicated.



DEVOTION

My Ma and Pa took Kilo (our dog) and me to the ocean every week. It's where I used to reverie, actually believe I could be whatever I wanted to be; as far as the ocean stretched, so did my vision.



Garfield and Frances Warren

CHAPTER ONE

I wanted to run and hide after my Principal announced my name and the status of my reading tests; my face was hot and little sweat beads were forming on my forehead. But I stayed seated at my new oak wood desk



The Calculated Making of a Fine Arts Soldier

My New Oak Wood Desk

My feng shui incensed classroom seemed to shrink in size; it was no longer the huge awesome room with a world of wonder. The novel room design of the ancient Chinese system of aesthetics, believed to use the laws of both astronomy and geography woven to create harmony and balance, wasn't my focus now. My peace love and happy room became the place where, as an eight-year-old, I am humiliated and shamed into believing I am inferior to the rest of the kids by an old ass xenophobic from the previous intolerant generation. My name is being repeated over and over, louder and louder, until finally, Mr. Manner, the Alvarado Elementary School Principal comes down my row and shakes my shoulder. I am so scared I'm trying not to pee.

“Young lady”, his voice slightly interrupted with the gurgle of phlegm in his throat, and he is standing well over six feet tall, “I do believe *we* have a special problem.” I slowly looked up from my brand new oak wood desk and followed his aged brown- spotted, wrinkled-up ass fingernails lined with dirt attached to his large wrinkled-up ass hand from my shoulder to look at his pants. Searing each piece of wrinkled clothing, mustard-stained tie, all the way up to his pale ass wrinkled-up face. Shaking to the point I knew my voice would quiver if I answer. So, I ain’t talkin.’ I just want this time to be over. I want to go home.

§

It seemed like it was such a long time ago when I welcomed being transferred here. I thought that it was going to be so different and that I would not have to be worried about anything. I want to go back to the colored school. No teacher or tall person called me out and labeled me. I was smart at the colored school. How did I become a ‘problem’ within such a short span of time? I am scared. I have never been wet under my arms before unless Mama was washing me. I do not like this feeling. I feel sick. I want to go home. I hate this classroom auditorium. It is dark, and only one window. I am excessively far away from the window. I cannot see out of it and I cannot divert my attention in any direction. Just keep my eyes on my new oak wood desk. My desk has writings carved in the upper left-hand corner in red ink. The letters are awkward, but I can read it clearly. The letters f u c and then the author of the cryptic letters stopped. Must have been caught by a teacher before he could finish. Had to be a stupid boy, no girl attending this school could think of something so vulgar. At any rate, I wish I could use the incomplete word to tell the tall man where to go. I do not even know fully what the word means, but I knew it was a bad thing to say in the colored neighborhood.

The tall man is so big that he covers all of my peripheral vision. I have a choice of looking down at my new oak wood desk, look at his wrinkled-ass

pants, or look up at his old wrinkled-ass face. I'll just sit here. He can declare my name all he wants, I ain't givin' in to him.

§

I'm bold now. Yeah, remember what my father, my sister, and my mama told me, I **am** smart. They told me not to listen when somebody tries to tell me otherwise. I didn't understand what all they meant when they told me this on the first day of Kindergarten, but now in the 5th grade, I do. I'm thinking of Daddy now. I'm thinking of what he would do if I told him what this fool man is saying. Thank God for my new oak wood desk. It's sturdy and steady. Smells of earth and groundness.

§

So look, I learned early that in order to alleviate the pain of hot embarrassment-you know, that kind that causes sweat beads to form on your forehead, I start thinking back to the first day of attendance at my new white school. Pa had to go to work at the Navy Shipyards as a welder, so he asked my older sister to take me. My sister spoke well, meaning she talked like white people talked when necessary, my father saw to that. My sister who is a black feminist 'sista' hates hateful people, so much so to the point; she in fact has become one of those people. She experienced too many negative ploys from high school teachers and principals who tried to keep her from getting a good education let alone a higher education. Her elementary and high school principals told most of the colored girls her age some variation of, "you don't need College Preparation courses because all your kind of people are going to do is get pregnant and live on top of a garage and collect welfare." Do you know my sister came home from that school and told this same exact sentence with the exact same attitude from the principal to our Father? Glory Be, the after effects shockwave of my sister's voice imitating those exact words, leaving her mouth and entering my Father's ears all seem to be in slow motion. All eyes were on my sister's lips. Her tone, volume, and specificity of words, sentence structure, her intentional eye-to-gazing-eye contact with my father, and her lips pursed to show exaggeration. Truly that day was and still is arid

in the family heritage memory album. Pa did not say anything. No expression, no comment, no nothin'. Pa led the procession to our old oakwood dinner table. We all sat down for dinner that night. Silence. Just the crisp sound of crunching broccoli and all eyes on our dinner plates.

§

The fact that Pa took off from work the very next day, something he absolutely never ever does, spoke volumes. To visualize the severity of this event, because it is important that you understand my Father's work ethics, I will share an event that happened on his job. When Pa accidentally burned a hole in his head with his hot welding tool bit, he was immediately taken to the hospital, operated on to remove the welding tool bit and then bandaged up. The doctor gave him pain medication, which he did not take cause he did not want to be swoozie. Do you know my Daddy still went back to work that very same day, couldn't hardly see or walk, but he went back to his job and completed his share of welding tasks for the Navy Shipyard. And did it well according to his welding supervisor.

But for this, Pa said, "this statement coming from an uneducated piece of trash, and why they always put the reject principles and teachers, and old used books and used beat up furniture from the white schools in the colored neighborhood schools? Our Colored money taxes go to support the white schools." Pa is mad, I mean real mad.

As my sister tells the valiant story to her friends, "This fool principal told his daughter (pointing to herself) that she (pointing to herself again) did not need College Prep, and my Pa took off from work, went to my high school principal's office, *without an appointment*. Grrrrrrlllll, my Pa walked right by that dumbfounded big butt secretary and even though her mouth was widening to say something, Pa kept right on walking. He opened the

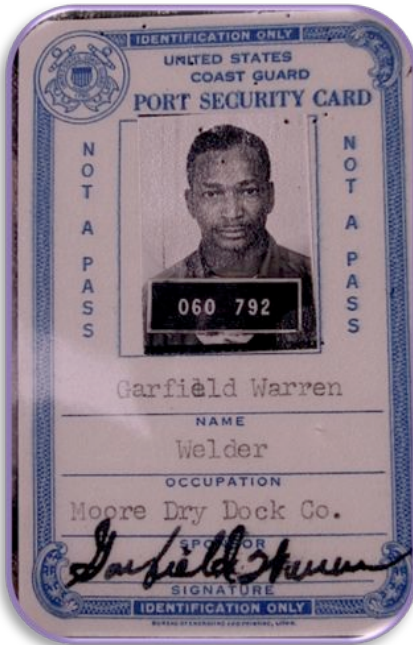
Principal's office door, walked in, and closed the door behind him. To this day, we don't know what was said. All we know is the meeting took place on a Friday. That Monday, Grrrrrrrrlllll, I was enrolled in every single College Prep class."

§

Remember I was telling you about my first day of school and I didn't know what nervous jitters were. The night before I couldn't sleep. I was scared. And I am hoping that no teacher or principal will dare say something as stupid as you don't need an education because you are a colored girl, therefore will be a welfare queen as our Governor Ronald Reagan coined Colored women. Lawd, Lawd, I could not take an episode of a one-on-one-delegation talk between my Pa and my Principal.

New kids. New house built from the ground up. No kid in the neighborhood looked like me.

Inside the teacher's office, I was oblivious to the conversation my sister was having with the white lady teacher. I concentrated on the white lady teacher's skin that resembled the Malto Meal cereal, a type of porridge, my mother made for me that morning. Her white skin had all sorts of tiny little pores and her bright red lipstick contrasted her cereal looking pores. She had on a Dashiki and her hair was long and frizzy. I had never seen a white lady so up close before, except at the bank, grocery store, and utility institutions that my father took me to on a weekly basis to pay our family bills. Looking deep into the white lady teacher's skin reminded me of how I would sit in front of our new big bay window of our new home that overlooked the San Francisco Bay and wait for Pa to pick me up to go to the bank and interact with white people. I would always see the bank manager meet and greet my father. Did not matter that he came straight from the Navy Shipyards with greased up



welding clothes on.

So I'm thinking my

father must have been important because the bank manager met him either at the entrance door or pulled him out of the bank teller's line to tell him personally, "let me help you sir." I knew my father had good standing combined with excellent credit in both the colored and white communities. That is what the white people always said about my father. I would hear them boast about my father being one of the "good Negroes." All the white people in our neighborhood and utility institutions liked and respected him, so he must have been a good person. They depended on him to make the correct voting choices. Our house was the neighborhood-registration and voting booth where they came to learn about the candidates. Yeah, so since the white people liked him, he must have been a good man. That's what I gleaned from the '50's, 60's, 70's television shows, white people is good and always right, colored people is lazy and stupid, Mexicans steal, and Asians do laundry.

§

All of the memories I wrapped in my mind as a sort of security blanket for the first day of school. The white lady teacher tried to smile with my sister, but sista girl was not playing that. My sister had a list of memorized quips for

the white lady teacher. “She has been home school trained, she knows her ABCs, 123s ...,” it seemed everything my sister said settled in to short da, da, das. Soon the white lady teacher’s smile faded when she saw my sister was not going to return the smiling façade game. Moreover, when she finally handed me over to the white lady teacher, that, that is when my life began, that is when memory of creativity, the skill set of learning the *freedom to be anything I wanted to be*, began. When I sat at my new oak wood desk.

The white lady teacher took my hand and led me into what looked like a museum of arts and crafts, musical plays, wonderment, peace, kindness, and quietness. She kneeled down to my eye level, slightly adjusting her body weight by placing her hand on the polished floor to keep herself from falling, and smiled so wide you could see a smudge of the bright red lipstick on the top of her right front tooth. The white lady teacher hugged me so tight that my nappy braids rubbed against her Malto Meal cereal-looking pore face.



Mary Doodle
(Nick-named by my Pa)

I knew my nappy braids must have itched her face because she tried to rub her cheek without me seeing. While she was hugging me again, one of those, *even though I’m white, I understand the colored’s plight and I am a part of the Civil Rights movement*, kind of hugs, I could smell the whipped Patchouli Vanilla Shea Butter on her neck. I always reflect on this smell as only being

worn by smart innovative hippie women. It is a unique smell, not perfumery, more astute and intelligent. You have to be strong to wear such a scent. My hippie teacher lady told me everything was going to be all right and that I would have fun. She did not lie. That day was the beginning of my calculated upward thinking life, safe and secure behind my new oak wood desk.

§

When I was introduced to the class, my eyes fixated on all the pinkness of the classroom and I couldn't get over how those little white girls had everything, all in pink. Pink faces, pink gums, pink dresses, pink bows. The little girls looked like the 'Children of the Corn', except all in pink. The latest Crayola Crayons, pink pencils with little pink furry toppings, shiny pink patent leather shoes and pink socks with frills on them.

Arts and crafts class time would be the really show off your pink-crap-time of day. It was if the makers of Pepto Bismol exploded all over the classroom. The little white girls would display their pink scissors, pink pencils, pink erasers, pink braces, spare pink barrettes (I found out later it was to replace the ones on their blonde heads just in case one fell off during recess on the pink jungle gym), pink paper clips all neatly packed in a pink Mickey Mouse Club carrying case. I would always have to sit behind a blonde girl who flung her hair over her shoulders and would brush it every day, the same time during lunch. Her stringy blonde strands would usually inevitably fall into my Bologna sandwich. Nevertheless, I had to endure it because the little white girls I thought were the key to my survival. They had stuff. Pretty stuff. They were little pink powerful girls that had little girly pink stuff. I could not imagine asking my father for girly stuff. Especially anything pink. My Pa always told me that he must pay for bills first. However, the girls were kind and they shared their pink stuff. It was worth the blonde strands in my Bologna sandwich, kind of a trade off. Put up with the strands in my sandwich

(which I didn't eat because it was usually dry and dull compared to my classmates' lunches that were filled with albacore tuna salads, Ghirardelli chocolates) and then I would get stuff. Pretty pink stuff. I even succumbed to being a part of their designated powerful playhouse during recess.

There were two other girls of color in our school, Japanese. We immediately made eye contact with each other and joined the Pink Power Social Club. I do not know why we cliqued, other than we saw we were different from the Pink Power Regime. When we agreed to play the roles assigned to us, we were immediately cast into our subservient positions. Since the other girls were white, they were the dominant family structure, as in Mama and Daddy and Child. The two Asian girls were assigned to play the role of laundry workers, and because I was the only colored girl, I of course was the maid. I 'sho 'nuff did not tell my father about this.

§

I am in 5th grade now. Moreover, the Principal is on my case.



Something has gone woefully wrong.

"Young lady," Principal Manner repeated louder and definitely more annoyed, "I do believe *we* have a special problem." Back to concentrating on each piece of his wrinkled clothing, some *Gunsmoke* cowboy type of belt buckle, mustard-stained tie, all the way up to his pale-ass wrinkled-up face again. Yeah, he is from the '50's old school intolerant type. The type my Daddy always talks about, wantin' us colored people to stay in our place.

Okay, I am gon' look up at 'chu. Fight them tears back. Now, look up at 'im. "Did you hear me young lady? I said I believe *we* have a problem." My eyes are big now, right along with my mind. I am so tired of this man trying to embarrass me in front of everybody. Everything about me is big, I sit up straight in my new oak wood desk now, and I look straight into his wrinkled-up-ass face. His eyes are bloodshot and his big-ass nose is red. Not a Santa Claus red, but a drunken-ass-had-too-much-to-drink-the night-before-alcoholic red.

"Yes, I hear you Mr. Manner."

My voice is unusually deep and sullen for a child. My voice causes a sort of surprise reaction, since I rarely talk in class. All ears and eyes on my voice and me.

§

I hate my voice. When I called friends, what few I had, on the telephone, oh God how I hated when their moms answered. Moms immediately assumed I was a little boy because of the deepness of my voice. "What, no, I am a girl." "*Well, you don't sound like a little girl to me. Don't call here anymore.*" Click.

§

Still looking up at his mouth, the orifice where the poisoned words are coming out of and straining my neck to look in his stained grayish eyes that are filled with yellowish white crust, proving he did not wash his face, I can feel everyone looking at me. Everyone staring at me, there is no noise, no moving. My new oak wood desk is my shield. It helped me in a way, as I turned my hot mess embarrassment into being 'sista girl' (not yet invented) pissed off, I started to feel okay that I was getting this attention. However, I kept waiting to hear what the problem with me was. I cocked my head, batted my eyes, *as if to say*, well, what is it, fool?

"As your Principal, I must tell you that I think *we* have attention deficit problems." "What?" I replied with a frown on my face. "You have a hard time paying attention to what is going on and there may be a chance of moving you to a special education class."

Okay. Now. I can just imagine telling my Father this, and soon after my father contacting Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to have a rally on the school grounds *or* maybe I should learn how to start taking care of this kind of crap now. Before I knew it, I had my own attention to the deficit remarks coming out of my mouth. New oak wood desk, give me power to reply to this man.

“Mr. Manner, my voice is vibrating, when something is interesting and is relative to me in a positive light, I have no problem listening. The problem *we*, rather *I* have is, there has been nothing worth listening to. Look around the walls; every picture posted on each wall is of some white person inventing something or quoting something. In our books, all the smart people are white. All the Mama and Daddy with the perfect little Sally, Jane, and Jack-ass families are white. The only mention of a Colored person is Frederick Douglass and even that is half of a half of a half paragraph. Moreover, during recess, all of the Disney play toys have white princes and white princesses. I get to have ‘Lil’ Black Sambo’ being turned into yella butter. Where do I fit in, Mr. Manner? My Daddy told me not to listen to anything that makes a Colored person seem stupid. My *sista*, correcting myself, I say proudly, my sister told me not to participate in any negative portrayal of Colored people. So no, Mr. Manner, I do not listen or accept the teachings against my home training. I have been taught to do otherwise.

Silence.

More silence. My eyes back on my new oak wood desk. My island, my desk.

Awkward silence. My eyes drift to my Pink Power Pack Club. I get approval from their smiles.

Uncomfortable silence.

Pink girl, third row, second from the front, farted. Normally, this would be funny. Not today.

“Uh Mr. Manner, do *we* still have a problem now?”

Mr. Manner?

The classroom auditorium seemed to return to its original feng Shui size now. Harmony and Peace has returned. The white figures demonstrating Positive Life Skills on the walls were nothing to stare at anymore. Disney cartoons are not for me.

“Young Lady, please see me in my office after class.”

“Yes, suh, with my Mama and Daddy, we be glad to.”

§

SO NOW WHAT?

Today, I reflect and wrap my arms o'er my childhood. It has wrought and bent my adulthood. I know anger without logic. Even though I am so very appreciative of the care and concern shown by my parents, they did not know how to teach me how not to be hateful rather take the negative energy and turn it into learning. They could not ask me what did you learn from the experience. What are you going to do about that experience? They did not know how to help me though this process of feeling the shame.

I use to worry at night believing that if the elementary school principal says I'm stupid, do I believe him and just accept that you are stupid? The Principal was my first contact with an authoritative figure that I remember. For me, during the reflective years of 1950s, White was Right. Whenever a White man spoke, it was the nearest thing to a .99 store Bible gospel. So how, if you are a colored child and new to an all white school, how do you know to prove him wrong? He is White and a Man. He must be right. Right? Should I secretly believe him and keep this to myself, a sort of quiet mental abuse. Why does it not matter if I studied harder and tried at every turn to be exceptional? Thank God for my father, he told me yeah, you are different and you are smart. He told me I was smart every other day. I was not allowed to watch Sapphire, Aunt Jemima, and anything that portrayed colored folks as anything less than. Especially colored women. Pa told me didn't matter if they were Mexican, Indian, or Chinese (by the way, every Asian person on television was labeled

Chinese in my family), if they were of color and acting stupid, I couldn't watch it.

Perfect example was, the 1960's *Have Gun Will Travel*, starring Richard Boone as a too intelligent to be a common playboy, extremely knowledgeable in all political, arts, medical subject matters, middle aged man named Paladin. He was rugged and virile. I thought he treated all women of color and non-color as attainable sex playmates. This was the first western I saw that touted interracial flirtation interest. Paladin was seen cozying up to dark skinned Tahitian women, three at one time sitting on each side of his lap, whispering in his ear. He nuzzled nose to nose with Latinas, danced throughout the night with Egyptian women. But he never kissed them. He was only seen kissing white women. What displeased my father thereby *blacklisting* the show from our television set was how he treated the 'Ritz Hotel' mainstay servants, affectionately addressed as 'Hey boy' and 'Hey girl'.

My father said these are regular mainstay characters in the show and they are depicted as Paladin's glorified servants. Their real role was supposed to be bell hops, but yet Paladin used them in a much more egregious manner. And 'Hey Girl's role was much more subservient in an uncomfortable way, she was always on her knees when addressing Paladin if he were sitting down. My father said you would never see a white woman behaving in such a way with a man of color.

§

This is the mantra that was disciplined into my brain, if colored folks ain't seen in a positive manner on TV, then no TV. Family night television consisted of *Wild Kingdom*, *Mutual of Omaha*, Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, Walter Cronkite, *The Lawrence Welk Show*, and *Sing A Long with Mitch*. Why was this list of shows the approved TV list? *Wild Kingdom* was about nature and its inhabitants. No racial overtones. And when the insurance owned television show did show the native people, they were in a positive manner, as in being in charge of the animals. *Lawrence Welk* featured a colored man. A

colored man that tapped dance. Pa, this is very confusing to me I pleaded. Why can't I watch Shirley Temple? They have colored men dancing on her show? Pa told me in a slight agitated manner, those colored men did the *buffoonery bucked eyed make yo massa happy dancing* that made white folks laugh. And the colored women on that show don't look or act nothin' like you or your mother.

But do you know how difficult this psychosomatic turmoil was made to explain to my classmates during recess...I mean all the girls talking about their new 'Shirley Temple' life-size dolls and the latest 'Heidi' episode. I would try and explain these traumatic events to Pa but with no success. Well, at least I did not think so.

It wasn't until the following Christmas when I received a life-size colored doll. I was elated and could not believe they even made such a beautiful doll. My sister told me Pa asked the manager at Montgomery Wards to order the blackest doll they could find that was life-size for a little girl. I loved my doll so much because she affirmed that I was pretty. I love my Pa for doing this.





photo taken <http://testdb.msmmaganie.com/naturalhair-Barbie.jpg>

Today's Black Barbie dolls for young Black girls. However, wouldn't you know, this is a *special order*. Not available on shelves at Toys R Us, Walmart, Target or any other frequently visited by the middle class stores.

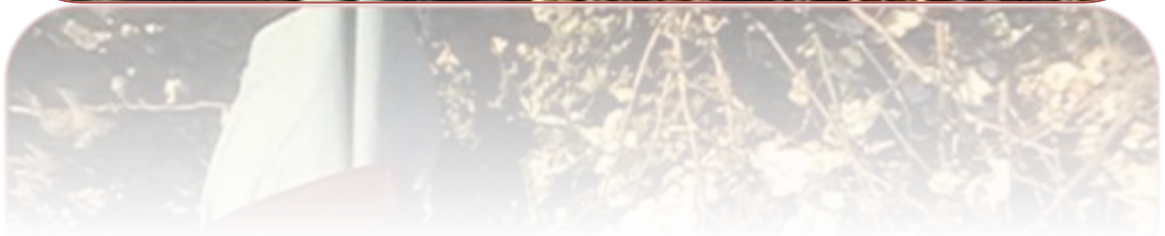
§

BUT WHAT IF...

What if I believed what my elementary school principal had told me. In some aspects I carried this statement for a while, here and there. And what if I believed him totally from the beginning and carried his statements of inferiority to my heart and allowed for his ignorance to transfuse throughout my bloodstream to my brain. What if I did not have parents who were strong enough to explain to me that the media portrayal of 'me' was something

conjured up to direct my path in life? Pa told me that yes; there are colored women who were loud, ignorant, abrasive and obese, plenty. He also emphasized that there are equally intelligent colored women like your sisters, aunts, and your mother. There are definitive reasons and goals why the media portrayal of women of color try to define you as a subservient embarrassment. There are several reasons why it was and still is important to reflect people of color in a certain manner. My parents picked cotton. Each and every day they picked cotton, Mama and Daddy spoke these words:

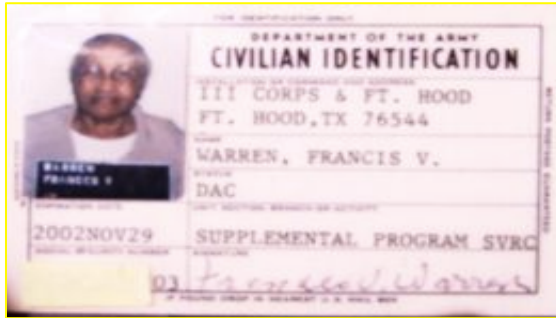
‘My children ain’t gon pick no cotton. They gon be educated.’



Mama demonstrating on how to pick cotton on Tangerine Drive, Marana, Arizona in 2008

According Pa, it was important to have a defined class set of people. There has to be a class of intelligent superior and a class of the ignorant subservient. And it is divided by the color shading of your skin. The darker you are, the more stupid you must be portrayed. Pa was serious in stating that weak-minded men must always feel powerful by putting someone else down. Whether it is in politics, religion, music, film and television...there are plenty of examples of Pa's theory.

In our weekly sessions on race relations, Pa would have us read news articles, watch TV news, and listen to the radio. Regarding politics, he would point out to me how they are trying to demonize MLK. Pa asked, have you seen MLK speak a negative word or carry a gun? He is a man of no violence, but see how they label him? And look how the TV portrays him as a rebel rouser and someone who is trying to make coloreds equal to the white race. Why that man has his doctorate degree, did you know that doodle? Imagine that, Pa gazing at the television, I want you chile to imagine having a doctorate degree. They don't say that on TV, that he has a doctorate degree. Now if you listen to your 90-year old neighbor she can tell you all about that movie star Ronald Reagan. Governor Reagan. I remember (as a child) when Ronald Reagan made a hateful statement against women of color, much like Rick Santorum (today)- an attempt to gain political score points. Nevertheless, Reagan's statement went much deeper when he referred to women of color as "Welfare Queens". I remember Mama hearing that phrase from Reagan's mouth. She heard it after she had just pulled a double shift working at the Dole Cannery. I remember looking at the lines of confusion that formed a sorrowful expression. She couldn't understand what Reagan meant by "Welfare Queen." Mama was not on welfare and never had been. She had no idea of how to even go about it.



Mama worked all of Her life. She was my military family member and travelled with me throughout the world. Each and ever location I was stationed, Mama wanted to work. Her last job was in 2002 well in her 80's. So no, 'Welfare Queen' does not apply.

However, I can tell she was hurt and my Pa was mad. He was so mad that he made it known by writing to his congressman. I mean this was the seventies, and my Pa was a political hawk. He made it clear to Reagan that just because he was in the movies and most of the Black actors he was privy to played in subservient roles, did not mean that all Blacks were inferior and dependent on government.



I feel like I was robbed of being able to brag on my parents and grandparents the way my white classmates constantly swanked on their relatives. I used to hear them bragging on their 'Nanas' with warm antidotes like, Nana is going to buy me this, and Nana is going to take me to Disneyland. I couldn't say anything remotely related to that. Yes, my grandmother loved, but how do I explain to my classmates about picking cotton? That she was taught to hold her head down in the midst of white folk and if you see white folks coming down the street sidewalk, get off the sidewalk and allow them to stride by.

However my grandmother taught me strength and fortitude. She owned her own two-story Victorian home located in the San Francisco Bay Area. She relied on no one. She told me the story of when haters came to her Arkansas farm at night; she met them on the front porch. She would sit in her rocking chair with a sawed off shotgun. Just rocking away and waiting with her cocked shotgun. No one bothered my grandmother. She was not loud, I never saw her angry. She just took care of business and did what needed to be done. She is the one that taught me not to engage in anger without logic.

Understand the complete episode of hatred that is being heaped on you first.



Mama told us stories about her great grandmother being from the Cherokee Tribal Nation and having long silver hair. Beautiful, silent, strong.

I guess I could have shared this fact with my white classmates that my grandma was part Indian. Mama told me not to say that because too many colored people were trying to be something other than colored. Mama said *you*

is a Negro colored girl, period. It was not relevant anyway since the media portrayed colored women all colored women differently than white women. They were not portrayed like my mother, grandmother or great grandmother. Mama may have picked cotton, but she did so with pride.

In fact, the major reason why I did not talk about family was because of television and film. To share with classmates who have never experienced even talking to black people was trying to explain in a foreign language. Their only perception came from the media. I will never forget the little strawberry blond girl, Connie asking me if my mother wore a rag on her head and worked for a white family.



Ethel Waters
Starring in 1949 *Pinky*

I knew why

she would think this. *Amos and Andy*, *The Beulah Sho'*, Shirley Temple, and practically any television show that had colored folks in it. Even the cartoons portrayed Black women as scary. The everlasting childhood mental scar happened while watching cartoons one afternoon at my first visit to Connie's house. This horrendous Black woman came running down the street using the same thumping sound effects as T-Rex from *Jurassic Park*. Connie laughed hysterically and asked me if my Mom did this...



Above: Vintage 1950's Walt Disney USA Mickey Mouse

Each and every one these programs featured Black women as loud, aggressive buck eyed, who always wore bandanas working as maids.



Hattie McDaniel, *Gone With The Wind*, 1939.

So my conversations were short. Because of the stereotypes shown in the media, I remember the exact day of the week when the one Black friend I had

on the other side of the freeway decided she wanted to be White. I panicked. It made me contemplate if I wanted to be white too. I started being different and disassociating myself from anything colored. It was so baffling to the point of constipation. I had a white male principle telling me I was stupid, and the media validating that I was going to be stupid in my immediate future. My options were limited to: being a maid, vixen, sapphire, a maid with her own television show, a 1960-70's prostitute, and welfare queen (as told to us by another white man, Governor Reagan).

I kept it from being a topic of conversation growing up, and I must have been in a different crowd that felt we were progressing. I mean after all, Sammy Davis was part of the 'Rat Pack' and it wasn't until he had his own show that I found out that he could not enter through the front doors of the venues where he was the star singer. He could not stay in the same hotels as Sinatra. Same for Nat King Cole, Ray Charles and Louis Armstrong.

The next race session was on religion and how Pa stated this is the most segregated forum of all. Just don't make no sense that all these white people say they believe in Jesus, but hate the colored race. Pa didn't go to church regularly. In fact, I don't recall seeing but one time when Pa when to church. And oh my God, it would have to be the one time the colored deacon says, 'All we need is Jesus, we don't need no education.' My father jumped up, grabbed my hand and took me home. No need for discussion. Pa told me, 'you see, you see, that is what the white man tells us coloreds. We don't have to go to school; Jesus will take care of us.' Pa said that Jesus had both the learned and unlearned as disciples. He never told anybody they couldn't go to school. Jesus said in Matthew 7:7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." That sound like some mighty fine encouragement to go to school. '

So what if I just gave up and started acting the way my principal tried to mentally torture me into believing, you know, like in a concentration camp. Prior to Pa moving me to the white neighborhood and him making the concrete explanation of differences, I would not have known what or how to decipher

real from reality. Like the little girls in my previous neighborhood, I might have believed the portrayal of colored women on TV and film. When I recollect my thoughts of past, I remember the colored girls immolating the characters on TV. I remember the horror of finding out a girl that was my same age, we used to play together before I moved, I remember my parents told me I shouldn't contact her anymore. And I did not know the reason why at the time. We grew apart anyway; I was in a different world. I was pre-teen that was constantly told by my Pa that the world was before me, the Black Panther Party Revolution was igniting, Civil Rights Bill passed, my already nappy hair was now becoming the in-thing. What was the deal about the girl my parents did not want me to contact anymore?

Mama came into my heavily laden room that had wall-to-wall posters of Jimi Hendrix, The Who, Sly and the Family Stone, Jefferson Starship all glowed in the dark. She loved coming into my room and laughing with me. Mama told me I was a strange colored chile, and she seemed proud of that. She was proud that I was not like the other girl(s) that she and Pa were hinting for me to stay away from. Mama finally told me that the girl had a baby. And that the girl did not know she was pregnant, she had a stomach ache, her parents took her to the hospital, and burp, out popped a baby. Apparently this happened some time ago. No one told me until I passed the college preparation courses.

This is the second connection of how negative media portrayal of colored women became painfully honest. As I stated in the beginning, elementary school was a test of endurance by just being a nappy-headed colored girl with crooked teeth in an all white school. Television defined and introduced me as a little colored girl to my white classmates. When it was time for recess, we played the familial game of Mama, Daddy, Child, the white kids were the parents and child, the Asians kids were the laundry workers, and I of course was the maid. Junior High – High school presented new racially challenges because the movies told me I was a 'ho', bitch, and prostitute. I was not an object a love or something to be loved but a brown thing to be

objectified. I was something to be used. Pa and Ma brought this to my attention by using the pregnant girl on the other side of the tracks as an example. Pa says she did not have anyone to educate her on the role of the media and how she was not to be a part in it. She and her beautiful sisters all got pregnant. They all had babies, and dumped them on their mom. I know 'dumped' is a harsh word, but it is the truth. Their mom was tired. She put the babies in front of a television. The babies grew up watching....and they too had babies, and they too had babies. Some lived, most were shot. When the *Superfly* gangster movies came out, so did the babies who were raised in front of a television come out as gangsters. They grew up watching gangsters, shooting each other over ...fill in the blank. Mama told me that one of the kids shot the other kid because they were arguing over whether Jesus...I don't remember the rest.

CHAPTER TWO

THE JOURNEY OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Since the moment of Honors College inception as in declaring I want to explore creating an Honors Thesis, I kept a journal of what I would like to include; a list of I want to..., but what if..., and I don't want to.

I want to incorporate my own story within my thesis. Not so much it's 'all about me,' rather I am the thesis. I am sometimes the abrasive ignorant 'Madea', the wise 'Oprah' and my caring 'Mama'. I want to write and share the whole experience as being Thesis owned. This is my thesis, I own it, it is not a requirement to graduate, rather a requirement to plug a distant gap in my life. I am tired of being angry each and every time I am portrayed as a human being that is unreasonable, easily upset, unloved and cannot be loved due to the loud brashness who has an out of control mouth that is either engaged in a feeding frenzy or spuming hateful quips. I cannot tell you, you the reader, how tired I am in trying to mask my hurt feelings when young white women walk on the other side because they are afraid of me, me, a woman myself, they are afraid of me when walking in dark garage parking place. More than likely I make quite a bit more financially than they will ever see, but they still view me as the one that wants to rob their belongings, or what...hurt them? Really? So where did they get this notion from? They never met me. What would make them think I am a danger to them?

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My journey of investigation, the heart of my thesis began in elementary school as I shared in the preface. These frightened women must have seen something from the media that taught them that a woman of color is a threat of some sort, of a dangerous nature.

I took an aggressive stance in wanting to start life all over after the Army, by returning to school and majoring in Creative Writing, Photography, and School of Theatre, Film and Television. I took a class where a professor dared to go where I didn't know we could go. The syllabus actually included a section exploring the portrayal of black women in the media. What? And she is white! She introduced me to venues of research inquiry and institutions such as the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ). Prior to attending my first conference, Professor Mary Beth Haralovich helped me sculpt a presentation regarding the portrayal of women of color in the media. This single act opened the doors to succession of opportunities such as meeting the cast of *The Help*, Reverend Al Sharpton, Director Spike Lee, and much more.

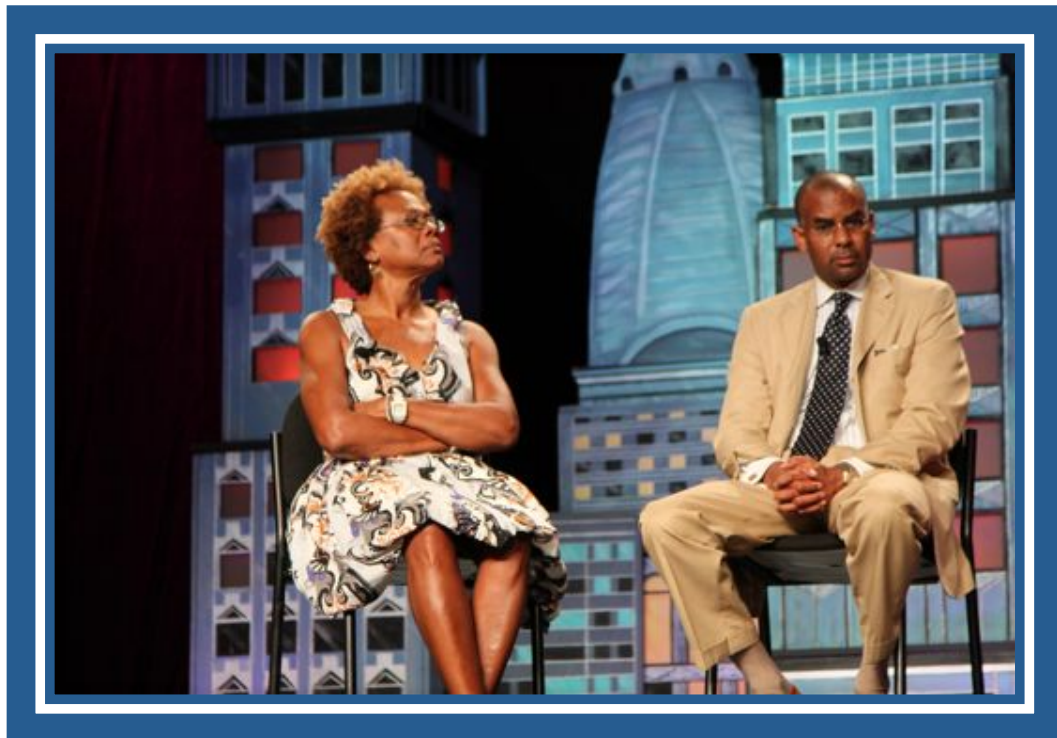
A summary of what I have been feeling for the majority of my life comes from Srividya Ramasubramanian who is an assistant professor in the Department of Communications at Texas A&M University.

Her study concentrates on the role of media in *facilitating and inhibiting the accessibility of stereotypes primed by race-related news stories. Specifically, it examines experimentally the effects of two strategies for reducing stereotype accessibility: an audience-centered approach that explicitly instructs audiences to be critical media consumers, a goal of media literacy training; and a message-centered approach using stereo-type-disconfirming, counter-stereotypical news stories. Participants viewed either a literacy or control video before reading stereotypical or counter-stereotypical news stories about African Americans or Asian Indians. Implicit stereotypes were measured using response latencies to hostile and benevolent stereotypical words in a lexical decision task. Results suggest that a combination of audience-centered and message-centered approaches may reduce racial stereotypes activated by news stories.*

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Mary Ann Warren: Statement of Proposed Research

Examination of entertainment media representations of African-American women reveals stereotypes and dominant ideologies about gender-roles of the African-American woman. At the core of my research is the assumption that entertainment media employ portrayals of black women with negative attitudes. In today's society, there are intricate and subtle racial patterns in the media. Repeated and powerful images play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of Whites toward Blacks and how Blacks view themselves. This research is my own effort to bring awareness about this plight of portrayals that are hurtful, insulting, and disrespectful to my ancestors. My research will test these assumptions against the perceptions of African Americans working in entertainment and news media today. I am grateful for Paula Madison, (below) CEO, Diversity, MSNBC for opening this discussion and continuing to bring it to the forefront of action.



I was accepted as an intern because my research question was and still is the plight of her job description. Do entertainment and news media endorse the use of negative portrayals of the African American female: is negative portrayal required by the film and television roles available to African American women? Do performers and creative artists consider these images indeed harmful to the prospect of unity among the races?

Honors Thesis: The Methodology

In line with my coursework in Film & Television, Creative Writing, and Photography, this project has four parts.

First, I created a photographic collage of historical images of angry obese aggressive African American women from the earliest days of “Mammy” roles through the supposedly post-racial entertainers of today.

Second, during my internships with the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), I showed this collage to performers and producers that I met through the NABJ. I arrived at NABJ with interview questions that would (a) identify fundamental issues about racial stereotypes from critical race studies theories and critics; and (b) work with NABJ journalists to refine my interview approach and skills. I asked NABJ participants for their input and this Honors Thesis emerges from what they shared with me.



(Director, Donovan Tate, and author, Kathryn Stockett, (*The Help*),

Producers, (BET, CNN, George Lucas) and directors (Spike Lee, Daniel Lee) helped me to understand the views of African Americans working within the entertainment and news media. As Chapter Three reveals, my experience, I refined not only my interview approach and skills, I also refined my understanding of what it is like to create African American characters in films and television today. I developed a stronger appreciation for the efforts to place performers of color in the film marketplace, of the strength that can come from ownership of images, even difficult roles and positions.

The third part of my thesis is a creative writing and photo collage essay about my journey from elementary school subconscious subservient through today presenting this project, from the discovery of the stereotype through my current self-awareness evolving into Chapter One of my Honors Thesis.

The fourth part of this study is “Maid in Hollywood, A Rite of Passage.”

This is a culmination of this Honors Thesis journey of inquiry. “Maid in Hollywood” is a photo collage with commentary from progressive black media analysts, film performers and filmmakers about the history of representation of African-American women in the maid film role. “Maid in Hollywood” shows both the strength of the woman of color on the rise, the longevity of and the industrial insistence on the stereotype, the necessity of refuting stereotypes about women, and how black women actresses cope when presented with potentially demeaning roles.





BUT WHAT IF....

*I just wonder sometimes what if I
had not received the
encouragement from a woman
who had to fight too.*

Professor Mary Beth Haralovich encouraged me to conduct an inquiry of exactly what these media portrayals represent. She said to redirect my energy by researching and getting involved in internships that will assist my studies. She teaches television and film history and is the Director of the Film

& Television Internship Program in the School of Theatre, Film, and Television. She explained that I could explore my thoughts on location with experts who could help me place thoughts into research. Dr. Haralovich was my first introduction to media geo-politics of civil rights and *Imitation of Life*, a film with an African American housemaid in a key melodrama role. I will never forget the shock and awe I felt when I read her syllabus (Media Arts 100A) describing an analysis of Louise Beaver's role in the movie.

In another course, Dr. Haralovich brought a guest Professor from Australia, Helen Yeates, who introduced us to Australian Indigenous women's roles in film. Many of the students, including myself, were not aware of the radicalized stereotype occurring in that part of the world.



Photo by Mary Ann Warren

With momentous relief, my feeling inadequate from elementary school through higher education came to end. She made me feel deserving of a Right of Passage to explore the negative portrayal of 'colored' women in film. And with that, I was enrolled every summer in internships pertaining to race relations in the media.

CHAPTER THREE: Internships Summary, National Association of Black Journalists



**Left: Joy Reid, CEO Grio.com Center: Mary Ann Warren, Intern NABJ, U of A
Right: Melissa Harris-Perry, MSNBC MHP Show, Professor of Africana
Studies Princeton and Tulane University**

**Internship: *NALIP* Summer 2010
National Association of Latino Independent Producers
Santa Monica, California and Santa Fe, New Mexico**

**Internship: *NABJ* Summer 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013.
National Association of Black Journalists: Chicago, San Diego,
California, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, New Orleans, Louisiana,
Orlando, Florida**

The Internship assigned was qualitatively different in nature from university coursework as I was afforded the opportunity to work behind the scenes of production management. The work focused intensively on race relations and political topics through journalism and film.



Travon Martin's family and lawyers



Gregory Lee Jr., NABJ President, Vice President Biden



Rev Al Sharpton

I learned how to gather, process, and deliver the immediate topics of each day. The NABJ concentrated on the concerns of voter suppression, women's rights, LBGT inclusion, and media strategies.

- **Measurable criteria: How to research, evaluate, and present photographic presentations.** NABJ attendance and participation produced a benefit for me in terms of developing depth and breadth of knowledge. I took up front and center photos of events such as Vice President Joseph Biden’s plenary speech, Rev Al Sharpton’s discussion of Attorney General Eric Holder’s ‘Fast and Furious’ reviewing the Travon Martin’s family perspective for the National Association Black Journalists.



T.J. Holmes, CNN Anchor News, Mediator for opening plenary sessions

I invite the Honors Thesis reader to review the NABJ website for background history and the pertinence of the NABJ mission and goals. I had no idea of the magnitude, expansion and the strength of this organization.

The NABJ Mission: The National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ)

is an organization of journalists, students and media-related professionals that provides quality programs and services to and advocates on behalf of black journalists worldwide.



Spike Lee screening of *Red Hook*



Camille Edwards, Vice Present of News, NBC Universal

Founded by 44 men and women on December 12, 1975, in Washington, D.C., NABJ is the largest organization of journalists of color in the nation.

Many of NABJ's members also belong to one of the professional and student chapters that serve all journalists of color nationwide.

NABJ is committed to the following:

- Solidifying the ties among black journalists;



**Political Analysts: Simon Jamal and Peter Bacon, MSNBC
Contributors**

- Sensitizing all media to the importance of fairness in the workplace for black journalists;
- Developing job opportunities and recruiting activities for veterans, and aspiring photographers, while providing continued professional development and training;
- Increasing the number of black journalists in management positions and encouraging black journalists to become entrepreneurs;
- Fostering a prototypical group of professionals that honors excellence and exceptional achievements by black screen writers, directors, and outstanding achievement in the media industry as a whole, particularly when it comes to providing equalized analysis of the black community and society at large;



Anthony Anderson and Tempest Bledsoe (Cosby Show) stars of *Guys With Kids*

- Working with high schools and colleges to identify and support black students to become journalists, and to expand faculties and related curriculum; and
- Providing informational and training services to the public.

NABJ presents an annual convention and career internship every summer with dozens of plenary sessions and workshops for professional development. The career internship invites recruiters that teach us the critical tools and means of finding a job in the industry. The annual Salute to Excellence awards and special recognition honors (Lifetime Achievement, Journalist of the Year, Community Service, etc.) are bestowed at each convention.

The NABJ Media Institute provides specialized progress and methodological training for black journalists at locations across the country.

NABJ is headquartered on the campus of the University of Maryland-College Park, 1100 Knight Hall, Suite 3100, College Park, Maryland 20742.

Every two years, the membership elects a president and national board of directors to govern NABJ. An executive director leads the national office staff.

For more information, see official website: <http://www.nabj.org>



Spike Lee, Director



Black Women Paving the Way



Oprah Winfrey



Gwen Eifel, PBS, News Anchor and 2008 Vice Presidential moderator

These women broke the tradition of working behind the scenes to coming out in front and being in charge of their own fate. During my internships, I learned that you couldn't sit back and wait for someone to give you your line of duty. You are the line of duty, plan it, feel it, and then create it.

Continuing in the same stride and vigor for all Summer Internships, I have completed several sessions with major news outlets on the east coast. I am extremely pleased that all events coincided with my Honors Thesis research in that I was free to ask questions pertaining to women of color in television and film.



Left to right: Trymaine Lee, Senior Reporter, *Huffington Post*, Tatsha Robertson, Senior Editor, *People Magazine*, Catherine McKenzie, Senior Producer, *ABC Good Morning America*, Bob Meadows, Deputy Managing Editor, *Essence Magazine*.

Young actors, middle-aged and senior CEO executives that actually experienced racial stereotypes helped to bring racism to reality and chart the road going forward. Yes, there is racism, so now what?

Working within the NABJ environment brought to life reality regarding the roles political and media participants experience. It was explained, that the struggle continues to rebuke marginalization from the corporate offices. To use Melissa Harris-Perry's quote from her father, "The struggle continues," meaning, those who went before you worked hard to create a path for you to succeed. Now you do the same for those who are coming behind you.



Gwen Eifel, PBS anchor and NABJ press corps.



Nia Malicka Henderson, MSNBC political analyst, NABJ participant, Ron Nabors, Deputy Chief of Staff to President Obama

After participating in several internships and interviewing men and women of color in

the film industry, I began to understand what motivated the actors, journalists, and media political activists. They strive for excellence, but they had to create it in their own way.



Perry Bacon, and Nia Malika Henderson, MSNBC Political Analysts

For instance, Perry Bacon and Nia Malika Henderson (photo above), both political analysts on MSNBC, voiced their passion for researching and thus speaking the truth. There is a constant notion of gratitude for those who fought the degradation that was bestowed upon people of color. This has made us stronger.

Yet, film director George Lucas discussed in depth the trials and tribulations of producing and obtaining funds for the making of *Red Tails*, a movie documentary on the bravery of Black Air Force pilots. In one sentence he stated that the financial backers complained the cast is all Black and it will not sell. Spike Lee chimed in with his famous controversial stance, “It is because they will not be acting as buffoons..” This particular session was a severe dose of revolting reality in the year 2012.

NABJ began to answer the questions raised by my collage of historical images of angry obese aggressive (yet submissive to their white employer) African

American women from the earliest days of “Mammy” roles through the supposedly post-racial entertainers of today. This collage was presented to performers, journalists and producers at NABJ. The photos were and remain a constant theme, a sort of banner to remind us that if we do not concentrate on what is important, what can move us forward, we will fall into negativity portrayal. I can now look at these photos with pride.

CHAPTER FOUR:
Maid in Hollywood
STILL ... A RITE OF PASSAGE?¹

Playing a maid seems to be a rite of passage for black actresses, from Hattie McDaniel to Whoopi to Oprah and now Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer.

After much research and conversation, I understand this representation of African American women differently now. I see the pride projected, the ownership possession, and the dignity of black actresses playing the only film roles available to them.

The following photos are from a website created by members of the National Association of Black Journalists. The title is a play on the word 'Maid' because that was the only way a black woman could work in Hollywood, on screen or off screen. I have retitled the collage *Maid in Hollywood: Still A Rite of Passage?* When I was little, there was no Black President. There was not an option of seeing beautiful black women that people gaze at. When I was little, there were the the maids.

In this chapter, I am looking at these maids with new insight. It is because of this research that I can look at the maid differently. Yet, the maid role is still a rite of passage, for actresses like Viola and Octavia today. The difference today is they have ownership of the role, ownership of the residuals, ownership of the rights. Actresses of the past may have owned the role, but that was it.



Theresa Harris, Vintage Black Glamour

Even though this is a 1941 film showcasing a black woman running away from the life of a sharecropper in Louisiana, her character is that of an intelligent organized woman who maintained dignity throughout the movie. Unfortunately, despite her impressive 50-plus film credits, Harris is recognized for her role as a maid in *The Flame of New Orleans* (1941). You'll find similarities to Harris' life in a off-Broadway play, *By the Way, Meet Vera Starks*, (2011) starring Sanaa Lathan (Broadway.com Staff). Lathan is nominated for a Tony award for a role as a maid! With the current understanding of the Black servant confidant role, I can comfortably see these women were and still are working in a survival mode. And if you analyze Theresa Harris' maid character in *Baby Face* and other films, she was a respectable woman of status who worked in an ethical manner while the leading role of the employer was a woman that slept her way to the top.



Hattie McDaniel

Courtesy of Entertainment Realm

Hattie McDaniel, like my grandmother, is the child of a former slave and was the first black actress to win the Academy Award for best supporting actress for *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Yes, you can say she paved the way for other black actresses to work in the industry even though McDaniel's character typified the "mammy" stereotype, she took ownership of the role and imported her own technique with passion. In response to criticism from the NAACP for playing the role of a mammy maid, McDaniel responded, ***"I'd rather get paid \$700 a week for playing a maid than \$7 for being one."***



**Louise Beavers in promotional TV Party
Photo Courtesy of Entertainment Realm**

Louise Beavers' portrayal of Dalilah in *Imitation of Life* (1934) was the film Professor Haralovich used in her class that caused a breakthrough for me with American race in cinema.



Claudia McNeil, *A Raisin in the Sun*
Photo Courtesy of Entertainment Realm

McNeil in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961). Her role is the strong matriarch holding the family together simply because there is no black man/father around. The original caption of the photo states her role is 'implied' that she is a maid. I found that amusing because there did not have to be any specificity with black women's roles. A black woman was automatically 'implied' to be a maid. If a black woman auditioned for a role, it was 'implied' she would be a maid.



Diahann Carroll
Photo courtesy of The Oscar Nerd

Now, this was a separate but distinct proof that no matter how intelligent, smart, well bred a black woman was, she did not receive recognition from the Academy Award committee until she played the role of a Welfare Queen. Carroll had to work hard to act 'black' according to the film industry standards. I remember the Phil Donahue audience gasped when she admitted it was difficult for her. (Phil Donahue, AP Archive, 1985). She said she had to practice certain colloquisms to master the role of a stereotype: the "welfare queen."



Oprah Winfrey, *The Color Purple*
Photo courtesy of Chicago Now

I should have realized in the 1980's when Winfrey was nominated for an Oscar for her performance as the strong-willed Sofia in *The Color Purple* (1985) that black women knew where this unknown strength came from. Take it from the slave woman gone before us. Pay tribute to her. Winfrey wanted this role and she said she knew how to channel her energy to bring it forth. She wanted the 'stand your ground' moment of saying "Hell, no" after the mayor's wife asked her to be her maid. Winfrey said she wanted to speak for all the black women who only could play maids. And in one sentence she did, "Hell, No."



Whoopi Goldberg, *Corrina, Corrina*
Photo courtesy of Wordpress

Goldberg plays a leading role as a maid oddly enough, the love interest of her leading star. In the film *Corinna, Corrina* (1994), she plays a college-educated housekeeper who loves jazz and dreams of writing liner notes on record albums. But as she tells her boss, "They only let us play the music, not write about it."



Viola Davis, *The Help*
Photo courtesy of Collider

The Help tailored into a movie starring Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer roused up a bit of controversy both in the author's life and for the main characters. Kathryn Stockett grew up in the south with a black maid.

She had not heard the actors' stories of failed attempts at being cast for more prominent roles or how the repeated roles of playing maids affected them personally. After screening the film, the director, author, and actors were available for a question and answer session that lasted well into the night. I believe this was a pivotal point where we all learned that the historical depiction of black help was both foreign to the author and to others of her generation. Octavia Spencer (photo below) helped to lay out the pride of playing roles and taking power.



Our discussion continued and surprisingly there was much agreement with Hattie McDaniel's straightforward reply to the NAACP, "I'd rather

be paid \$700 a week for playing a maid instead of \$7 a week for being one.” Octavia Spencer agreed. She replied, ‘Hey sista was in charge, and if that was all that was being offered in terms of working, why not? Own it with pride.’”



Left to right: Viola Davis, Oscar Nominee Actor, Tamara Hall, MSNBC Anchor



Left to right: Kathryn Stockett, author of the book *The Help*, Oscar winner, Octavia Spencer, plays the role of Minny, and Viola Davis Plays the role of Aibileen Clark

As an intern, I was allowed to present my questions to the performers

and producers to understand the views of African Americans working within the entertainment and news media. The session on the movie *The Help* created the atmosphere for me in that the intensity voiced by the audience and actors provoked a spark of anger that black women are still chosen for parts based on the tone of their color. I was not aware this action was still going on, but Tamara Hall, MSNBC anchor, stated that she went for an interview and was told she was too dark.



Tamara Hall

Viola Davis followed with, the only roles she is offered are that of a 'strong aggressive' black woman that is either powerfully angry or powerfully subdued. No doubt the role of Aibileen was subdued; however her power was projected onto the screen from within.



Viola Davis

Maid in Hollywood was and still is a good foundation to root out my research. As noted earlier, Louise Beavers' portrayal of Delilah in *Imitation of Life*, the film that Professor Haralovich screened in her class, caused a breakthrough for me regarding Black American race in cinema. I believe I was the only black student that was a senior citizen, rather a 'non-traditional' student, in her class at the time. Observing the emotion this film evoked from young white students revealed that there was yet another level of race relations that has not been discovered. I cried because they were crying and when they saw me crying they cried even harder. This sorrowful, yet new race awareness experience freed my past

shame and prejudgement of stereotyping black women in these roles. If these young students could understand the black woman's stereotyped plight, why couldn't I? During and even after class, this film generated a conversation that I could finally participate in with pride. There was no feeling of disdain or embarrassment.

After discussing the various options of black actresses, the only avenue left was the accuracy of the professional acting. We all assumed black women did not attend acting classes like their white counterparts. So their acting came from within, from their mother's pain. Their acting was not acting, it was life. These black women perfected this craft. The thought of playing any other role was not an option.

I heard a statement from a black actress in an HBO documentary called *Scandalize My Name: Stories From the Blacklist* (2000), narrated by none other than Morgan Freeman. The black actress, Hazel Scott (born 1920), stated she wanted to audition for a role as a secretary. Hazel said she was excited and studied for the role only to be told by the director that the day he casts a colored woman in his film as anything but a maid is the day he dies. As Morgan Freeman describes Hazel, he sighs as he takes in a breath and says, "Hazel was stunning, so stunning that she soon learned that she had to change her image of natural beauty into something more homely and in mammie attire to be more acceptable for casting."

In this documentary, I also learned that the studios force fed Louise Beavers to keep her obese for the ‘mammification of the black woman.’ There was a definite intent to maintain a ‘mammification’ order. But the black women incorporated their own intelligence into the roles with no help from the directors or screenwriters. No, these women were in charge of their own character development.

The Help helped me to realized their plight. In quoting Professor Haralovich, *The Help* offers a social critique of the African American maid while earlier films accepted the racial segregation and inferiority as a natural part of the social order (Haralovich, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Decisive Assessment

At the core of my research is the assumption that entertainment and new media employ portrayals of black women that became intricate and subtle racial patterns in the media. Repeated and powerful images play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of Whites toward Blacks and how Blacks view themselves. I was surprised to hear the director of the film, *The Help* elaborate on why he did not put Black men in the film. He said there is too much negative portrayal of Black men, so he left them out because the nature of being a 'man' and being in charge of your own household was too difficult to explain in film. When your wife has to be a subservient servant, how can you explain why you as the head of household would allow that? He chose not to have black male characters in order to focus primarily on the relationship between the white woman employer and the black woman servant. This was an important decision as it dealt with decades of this same relationship in race films. Only this time, the director and the book author wanted the concentration to be from the black perspective.

In my own effort of attempting to bring awareness to this plight, of visibility and invisibility on screen, I am at least doing something about it rather than sit back and complain. Portrayals can be hurtful, insulting, and disrespectful. My research will continue to question assumptions and perceptions of African Americans working in entertainment and news media today. The movie *The Help* validated my assumption that this stereotype sells but at the same time tried to analyze and understand the historic context of the stereotype.

What I learned from the author, Kathryn Stockett, was that through her own self-admission, she was ignorant of the racism, fear, and hatred in her black and white environment. She had no idea that her maid(s) were unhappy. So when she wrote the book, she wrote it from the perspective of her black maid.



Kathryn Stockett

Stockett wrote about the foundation of the problem. She asked her maid, 'did you know you were going to be a maid, did you ever want to be anything else?' We hear the answer in the film from Abileen, "Yes, my mama was a maid, her mama was a house slave. Yeah, I had dreams of being something else, but you learn quickly to get rid of those dreams and face facts." I asked Octavia Spencer (Minnie), do you think this fact has anything to do with our roles in the media? The roles we have seen for us as black females have been majority maids. Do you think our vision goes as far as being only a maid- no matter how we dress the role up? Example, Whoopi Goldberg in *Corrina, Corrina*. She is the love interest of her employer. Whoopi has been the love interest of all of her white co-stars, but never nominated for an Oscar. Only as a maid is she nominated and she won an Oscar for being a con artist in *Ghost*, 1990.



Octavia Spencer

Octavia, in full 'Maid' character rolled her eyes and said,

I understand the frustration we are going through. But a lot of it we are putting on ourselves. I mean yes, I know a lot of you hate the Tyler Perry, 'Madea' image, but if it was not for the Tyler Perrys, then I would not be able to get a job. We have to support all black avenues so that we can get a foothold in the door and create our own roles. "What are you guys doing to create roles for us?"

This was a question Octavia asked and answered. She reprimanded the executives and writers, *"when you write good roles for us, then we can talk."* I will never forget that and I am so excited to attempt this feat. Viola Davis was asked how did you feel when you were portraying this image as an unassuming yet defiant maid? In a deep voice, she replied,

it was a humbling experience. It was real, especially the scene where I had to use the outdoor restroom because my white employer did not want me using her toilet. I actually cried. The sweat you see in the scene was real. But here is the difference in just playing the part of a maid, and taking 'ownership' of the role. I took ownership. I let the world know, yes, I am a maid, but an upright honorable one. I am a maid because this white world will only allow me to be- so I will be the best, and the same goes for acting roles. I will do what I have to make it the best role I can.



Author Kathryn Stockett and Octavia Spencer, Oscar Winner for *The Help*

Spencer emphasized, if those are the roles we are going to be offered, and then we should take ownership and make it into something with a black voice. Not an ignorant stereotype.

Yeah, not an ignorant stereotype... But there has to be something more to this premise. The fact is, Hollywood has the freedom to put women in other than maid roles, providing people buy it.

What I discovered in participation with the National Association of Black Journalists is an education revolution, there is an earnest vigorous stride to infiltrate the film media industry and inject racial pride. The election of a Black President proves that the world is now knowledgeable that intelligence is born within all colors. I don't understand the fear of allowing the gate to be open for all to enter. Remember the term 'Affirmative Action'? Every time it is mentioned, one automatically thinks of an unqualified person of color getting a

pass on something that is only fitting for a Caucasian. Examples are a free *pass* to promotion or free entrance to a university while blocking a 'more well deserving' white student out, being picked for employment over a white person.

I never could understand the concept when applied to races of color. Especially when the obvious is so plain. There is no such thing as 'Affirmative Action' on the behalf of people of color. If one thinks of a horse race where the starter gun pops, and all the horses are let out of the gate at the same time, then one can see where 'Affirmative Action' is not needed. All the horses, all the different colors of horses, male and female, are let out of the stall at the same time. All have an equal chance to win. But if we use this analogy with the human race, it is difficult to fathom equal chance for equal success. For too long the word 'Affirmative' has been linked with the Caucasian race.



Spike Lee, Director

It is because they will not be acting as coons and buffoons...(NABJ interview, New Orleans, 2012).

This session was a dose a revolting reality in the year 2012.



Cuba Gooding Jr., and Terrance Howard, Actors in *Red Tails*

It bothers me that in one single sentence, director Spike Lee summed up the reason why, the answer being because they do not act like a Tracy Morgan or Tyler Perry character. Is this Affirmative Action if we are only affirmed if we are portraying something Caucasians are comfortable with? So the struggle

continues and will continue while we educate and write for ourselves.

I really do not want the conclusion of my thesis to be a cliché. Really. Some fifty years later from my elementary school revelation that I will be a future ‘Welfare Queen’, I met a person who encouraged me to explore the feeling of frustration, childhood embarrassments, self-loathing, dig deep. She picked up where my Ma and Pa’s mantra left off. Thank You, Professor Haralovich, for helping me to put media matters into a welcomed perspective.



Professor Mary Beth Haralovich

The University of Arizona news organization covered this project and my journey of inquiry.

<http://uanews.org/node/44863><http://uanews.org/node/44863>

Published February 24, 2012 By BRITTNY MEJIA

Professor Haralovich continues to lessen the pain of Mama transitioning by exposing me to a different aspect of Black women in the media. She taught me how to examine the root analysis of typecasts rather than just being incensed and repulsed by media stereotypes.

The Spirit of Inquiry supported my research and the Veterans Administration Vocation supporting my reintegration into civilian being.

I am truly appreciative.



Mama transition at 93 years of age on June 3rd, 2009
University of Arizona classes started June 8th, 2009

Is it what we think we know that keeps us from learning?

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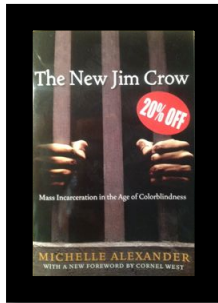
“Maid in Hollywood: A Rite of Passage,” captions by Abdul Ali
<http://www.theroot.com/multimedia/maid-hollywood>. Web.

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The first three books validate my thought process on how the struggle continues. From the 1950's through today, race in film and media has reshaped itself however the perception is the same. People of color in the media are portrayed as fearful, subservient, and limited in scope of character roles.



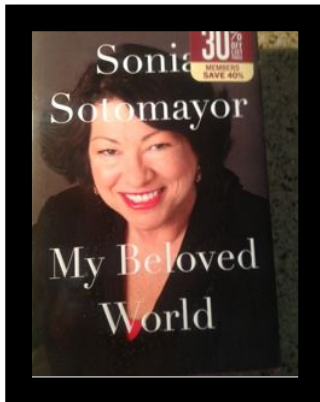
Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press

The diminishing Black Man was the topic of discussion at the 2011 National Association of Black Journalists. Alexander was passionate in describing the plight of the Black man's disappearance from American families. I was able to connect this discussion to the director, Tate Donovan's remarks of why he intentional eliminated any black male role in his movie. He was making a statement relating to reality. Both Alexander and Tate agreed there is a serious problem with the incarceration, new awareness of the gay black man, black men that prefer non-black women.



Harris-Perry, Melissa V. 2011. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America. For Colored Girls Who've Considered Politics When Being Strong Isn't Enough*. New Haven; Yale University Press.

Melissa spoke at the National Association of Black Journalists (2012) where she gave me an autographed copy of her book. On the inside cover she wrote a personalized note her father taught her as a little girl, "The Struggle Continues." She said the meaning behind the statement inspired her to chronicle the black woman's portrayal narrative as a Jezebel sexual erotic perception, Mammy's devoutness, and Sapphire's blunt defiance. It was if all strategic forums for my research linked together in written form and consolidated with the film, 'The Help.'



Sotomayor, Sonia. 2013. *My Beloved World*. New York; Knopf. Justice Sotomayor acknowledged during recent television interviews and wrote in her book that her only role models came from television. She did not see any Latinas or women of color being portrayed in roles she wanted to be, so white men became the source of reference. I included this book because Latinas were also portrayed as sexual subservient characters.

The lists of texts utilized throughout my Inter-Disciplinary Studies are not all listed below. Materials noted below served as visual techniques on how to arrange a photographic collage and create a wider range of creative writing.

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Maid in Hollywood: A Rite of Passage?

<http://www.theroot.com/multimedia/maid-hollywood>. Web.

During my NABJ internships it was suggested by my supervisor to review this website images and was given the charge to update the site with my research. I am in the process of requesting authorization to submit my photos of the movie cast, 'The Help.'

Mandela, Nelson. 2009. "Long Walk to Freedom." New York; Macmillan.

McGuire, Danielle L. 2010. "At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power." New York; Knopf.

Morales, Yuyi. 2011. "Ladder to the Moon." Massachusetts; Candlewick Press.

Niemeyer, Lucian and Richardson, Bill. 2009. "Darfur." University of New Mexico Press.

Obama, Barack. 2004. "Dreams from My Father." New York; Three Rivers Press.

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"Scandalize My Name: Stories from the Blacklist." HBO DOCUMENTARY (2000).

Director: Alexander Isles.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0X0uw9RzUo>

I reviewed the documentary as an exploratory research addendum and comparison to the "Red Scare" politics used to thwart the civil right's movement. This was an awareness that explained many questions regarding the degrading roles given to black actors. Many of the actors in the documentary gave their heart felt pain of what they experienced during the years of McCarthyism and being blacklisted during the post-war activism by black actors seeking better roles. Initiating the revolution in Harlem with Paul Robeson at the helm, J. Edgar Hoover set out to destroy the work of progressive black actors. The documentary solidified that very little has changed since the 1940's regarding racist political antics.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mama and Daddy, you are the best and the very essence of The Shema. My sisters, Virginia, Bessie, and Theresa, I thank you for getting up early in the morning, feeding and dressing me, and taking me to San Francisco State to attend classes with you because our parents worked. You did more than just babysat me; I grew up watching you all go to school and obtain your degrees. Because of you, I knew I was *not* going to be a Mammy, a 'ho', or a 'Welfare Queen.' Thank you for being a beautiful black woman role model of pride and perseverance. And Brother Lincoln, *Lawd today*, you taught me that God is always in charge, no matter how things look in the present, your life today is living proof of survival and success if you stay steadfast during trials and tribulations.

Bravo to the Veteran's Administration and to my Inter-Disciplinary Studies University of Arizona Committee members who met with me repeatedly through long agonizing hours and shared with me pertinent information that led to my success. The background information and coordination for supplies to complete my research were gathered from 2009 all the way through 2012.

So thank you everyone who encouraged me. When I felt as though I was a failure, you helped me to press through. Thank you for being blunt when my work was not acceptable and making me go back to the photo darkroom, labs, and writing table to do over till I got it right.

Thank you

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Kenneth Shorr, Thesis Committee and Professor of Photography
Lisanne Skyler, Professor of Film Production
National Association Black Photo Journalists (NABJ)
Internship Visual Task Force
Tim Walker, Photography Equipment Manager
Veteran Administration Vocation Rehabilitation

All of you would have loved my parents.
How I wish they were here to meet you.



Mama's Artwork, I just have to share with you...

None of my family members (including me) knew of Mama's artistic talents. My sister Bessie remembers Mama helping her with an art project, but had no idea she could express herself the way she has in her Glory years.

Oh how I wish I could show Mama's work to my elementary school classmates...the ones that asked me if my Mama was a Mammy or a 'Welfare Queen'.

Since I am blessed with the opportunity to submit my project to the University of Arizona Honors College Library website, I wanted to include Mama's artwork.

She started painting in her late 80's and continued till the Lord took her home.

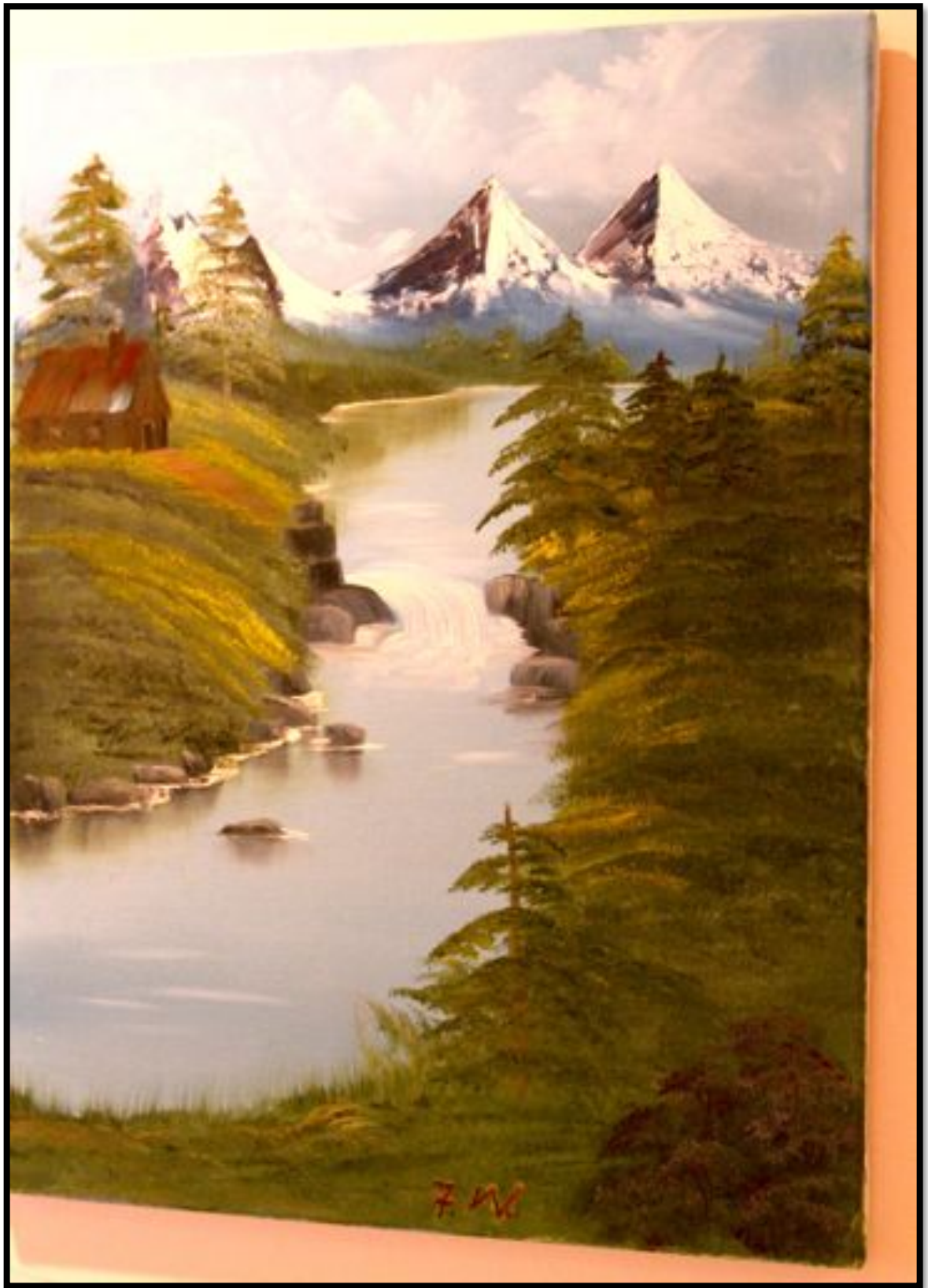
Enjoy





Mama's first drawing of an Arizona adobe home
9.03.2003 at Fort Bliss, Texas





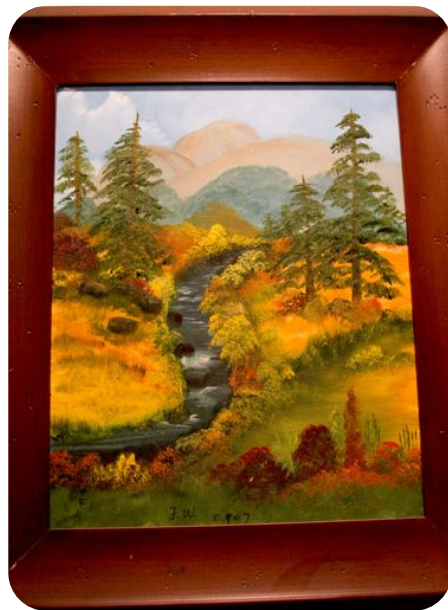


Mama's memory of our visit to the Hawaiian Islands

























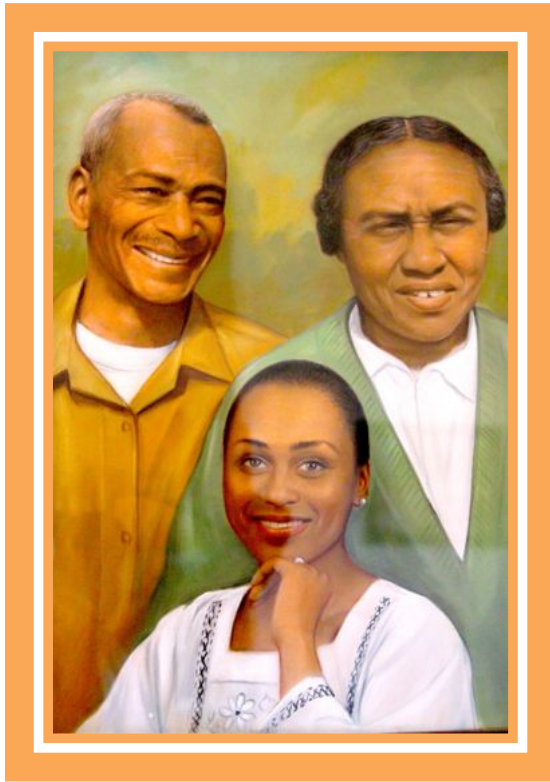








Mama's last painting titled *'Mama's Crossing'*



Till we meet again