BEYOND HISTORY

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Not too long ago, I sat at a table with a group of black women in a literacy program and told them that my ancestors had been slave traders. I am 32 years old and had been spending time with these women for close to a year as a tutor and women's group participant. Yet this was the first time I mentioned this fact about me to them. It took me a full week to gather the nerve and when I spoke my stomach heaved and my voice shook. How did I come to be here? What events led up to this exchange? What happened next? What does it mean? This is the story I will tell here.

I am a doctoral student specializing in adult literacy at a university in Chicago. When I became a full time student two years ago, I was looking for a place to make myself useful. I approached a friend of mine, Ophelia Rogers, who was the teacher at a local literacy program. I had always been impressed with Ophelia's spirit and her interest in addressing the social and political context of literacy. All of the students who attended the program were women, all African-American, all residents of public housing. Ophelia believed that these students had unique needs and capabilities. She tried to tailor the learning environment to them rather than forcing them to fit into someone else's plan.

I was especially intrigued by a weekly consciousness-raising group called the Women Empowerment Hour that Ophelia had started for the women. When I asked her about the evolution of the group she explained that she had set aside time for the weekly meeting because her students had told her there were not a lot of places where black women could talk about issues that were important to them. "Sometimes," she told me, "if no one gives you a space, you

got to take it." She gave me permission to attend the group and arranged for me to tutor a couple of the women.

In the fall of 1994, I began to talk to Ophelia about the possibility of co-teaching a women's studies mini-course for the women at the literacy program. We were inspired by the commitment that the consciousness-raising group seemed to excite in the women and wanted to expand the women-centered learning opportunities. As a graduate student, I was also hoping to make some progress in sorting out some theoretical issues in teaching. In particular, I was trying to reconcile my idealized notions of the liberatory potential of literacy for oppressed groups (Freire, 1972, Weiler, 1991) with the critiques of progressive African-American educators. Specifically, scholars like Delpit (1988) and Walker (1992) argue that many liberal or radical white teachers abdicate their responsibility to teach poor and minority students the rules of the "culture of power" necessary for success in American society. I proposed to Ophelia a curriculum that attempted to integrate these two strains (on paper at least) through a course that would convene for two hours weekly over a span of seven weeks. Ophelia agreed to support my efforts, to help lead activities in the group and to keep a written journal on how the class was going. We planned to meet once a week to share notes and reflect on any tensions or themes we saw emerging in the group.

Despite my professed interest in examining the political dimensions of literacy and classroom relations, my ruminations on these topics had always been to a certain degree strictly academic. Though I had always noticed the distrust that my whiteness engendered in folks who were darker and poorer than me, I preferred to look at this as their problem given that I thought I had such obvious good intentions. Besides, I had been spending time with these women for almost a year. I was convinced that I had built up the trust necessary to move beyond those issues in this particular context.

The curriculum that I developed was carefully considered: Afrocentric, women-centered and with a specific plan

for teaching the rules of the language of power. The core activity was reading the book *Gather Together in My Name* by Maya Angelou, the second in her autobiographical series. As our group of seven women worked through the book, I assigned writing activities designed to bring out certain themes that I hoped would inspire the women. One of the strong themes in Angelou's book is the cruelty that exists between women, both within and across races. Curiously enough, this tension was something that Ophelia and I were seeing played out within the group itself. Specifically, there had been some persistent verbal clashes between two of the women. I had noticed this conflict before the class had started and found it interesting. At that time, Ophelia and I had speculated about what could possibly be the causes behind this specific animosity, but we had come to no hard conclusions.

Once the conflict spilled over into the seven-week class, my immediate reaction was avoidance and denial. It made me uncomfortable. I wanted to sweep their anger under the rug so we could move forward with what I thought was the real work of the class. It was after a particularly contentious class session that Ophelia gave me her journal entries with this warning: "I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I think you want me to be honest with you...." In her entries she zeroed in on the impact that my whiteness could be having on the women. She suggested that their hostility towards each other might be deflected anger. She wrote, "My neighbor is blinding me to the real problem: Kate and the other white women who I'd really like to zip my lips to and lash out at. I wonder if (they) are angry, like Maya, at white women, but not bold enough to challenge it or mention it." Continuing, Ophelia urged me to abandon my distance and my denial: "Seize the buried points of contact... Let's take it a step further. Strong women get angry at white women who are blessed just because they are born white. Strong women stand up and boldly speak about their pain."

I first read her journal entries with mixed emotions. I began to see more clearly how I was neutralizing the hidden

content of the course. I was avoiding the chance to confront the theme that I had written down on a piece of paper, but was blind to in the embodied interactions of the women in the class. It was not that I had never considered the power relationships that I represent in the context of the literacy program or as the teacher of this particular class. It was not that I did not know that the liberatory teacher is supposed to use the themes generated by the students to shape the curriculum. It was just that I had always managed in some bizarre way to keep myself detached from this particular issue, to intellectualize.

I mulled over Ophelia's points in the week between classes, but arrived the following week with no clear idea of how to bring whiteness and blackness into the dialogue in a meaningful way. That day, I convened our usual activity called 'author's chair.' During the author's chair each of the participants in the class would read from pieces based on the assignments I had developed around the themes from *Gather Together in My Name*. The topic for that day was 'names.' As the women shared their pieces I discovered that they often reflected on the legacy that their names represented. One student with an old time Southern-sounding name of Celia wrote that, "When I hear the popular names my name sounds like a slave name. Sometimes when someone calls me Celia it sounds like a voice is calling me from the past. At other times when someone calls my name, I pretend I don't hear them."

More than one student spoke of her ambivalence about last names that had been imposed by white slave owners. I was feeling excited about this author's chair because we were finally addressing some of the deeper issues that Ophelia had been pushing. I was about to bring the discussion to a close when Ophelia tapped me on the shoulder and whispered that a student who was visiting the class that day had asked for the opportunity to talk about her name as well. The student, Nancy Shepherd, sat down in the author's chair and also began to reflect on her feelings of anger and loss that she did

not know her real name.

As Nancy spoke it dawned on me slowly. My heart filled with blood and thudded sickly in my chest. Nancy's last name -- Shepherd -- was the same as my ancestral name, one that my mother had selected for me as a middle name. She did so against the wishes of her own grandmother who had also carried that name. The Shepherd family, you see, were slave traders. I am not sure about the exact objections to my being named after the Shepherd clan. My impression had always been that for white women of my great-grandmother's generation this particular line of business was not so much considered offensive on moral grounds, but was deemed a little declasse, disreputable.

I sat there listening and realizing once again that I was distancing myself from the kind of personal relationship I might have to the themes of the course I was trying to teach or the assignments I required of the students. The women were honoring me and each other with an honest discussion of their history and I did not reciprocate. I was overcome with a certainty that to hide this fact would be a supreme act of cowardice. Yet, at that exact moment I was frozen; I was mute. I was afraid to speak.

It took me a week to muster up the courage to bring it back to the group. This time I requested a special author's chair to tell my story. The piece I wrote to share was based on an assignment I had given all of the women, but that they were not due to complete until the following week. I read aloud a letter I had written revealing my family history and the way that fear had prevented me from talking about it the week before. I closed the letter by asking: "Is it possible for black women to trust white women? As I ask you this, I believe that this is the first time that I have shared this part of my history with black women. I am sorry that I was too scared to share it with you last week. I hope that in breaking my silence we can discuss the issue of relationships between women with more openness and honesty."

So.... how did they react? This is what most people

ask when I recount this story. As I drafted the letter, I imagined two possible responses, neither of which seemed satisfactory. One was that the women would respond with anger and would no longer wish to talk to me. The other was that they would interpret my letter as a cry for absolution and they would rally around to show their support of me. The actual response was mixed. Ophelia was excited. This was what she had had in mind. She rose immediately to embrace me and some of the women followed suit. Some of the women did feel they wanted to reassure me: "It's not your fault," a few of them cried. "You can't be held responsible for that." Ophelia said that, "For the longest time when I thought about white people, I thought about stealing. I thought about taking. I thought about exploitation. I never really trusted white people. Some people will help you out of guilt. And I was afraid at one time when people wanted to come over here to work with us that they either wanted to do this out of guilt or to exploit us. So when you see a white person who is nice, you think why? What is their motive?"

A few of the women retreated into silence. I cannot be sure what they thought. I am not comfortable making claims of causal connections between the reading of my letter and the things that followed in the class. I do know that the tensions that had existed between the two women subsided (in part because one of them stopped coming quite so often). I also know that when the women wrote their pieces about relationships between black and white women, their writing continued to be honest. One of the women who had been silent after my reading wrote that when she was around white women "I feel uncomfortable because I believe white women do not like black women. But as black women we are one." She gave me this paper privately before the class began. She said she was afraid it would make me angry. Another student wrote hopefully, "The women of the nineties are strong black and white women who pull together. We are strong women!"

Our class ended in December of 1994. At this point I started to write about this story and share it with my colleagues. Since then I have incorporated this experience into a couple of unpublished papers and have spoken about it in some of my classes and at two professional conferences. One thing that is depressing about academic life is the degree to which you are expected to dine out on the same stories until you've milked them for all of their significance and the actual experience has receded into your distant memory. Still, it has been illuminating for me to categorize the responses of other white people when I tell this tale. Usually there are two distinct responses. One is extreme excitement. "You're doing important work," people say. This is usually followed by an invitation to tell the story again, to an audience or on paper. The other reaction is distaste. I have been told that I am wallowing in white guilt, a state that many white people consider to be unseemly or a waste of time. They might agree with the reactions of some of the women. Why should I be expected to take responsibility for things that occurred long before I was ever born? And, really now, hasn't there been ample time to heal the wounds of the past? As one of my classmates gently suggested, "You know, Kate, some stories are better left untold."

Let me be clear. My understanding of this experience is that my revelations about my ancestry were not an expression of guilt but of joy, of truth. This is not to say that I don't feel ashamed of being white sometimes or I'm not embarrassed by my family history. But to me, what is more important is what I do and say today and whether I choose to live my life in denial or in a state of consciousness of my own complicity in white supremacy. We cannot be separated from our past, nor should we try to be. We live every day in relation to the people and events that have passed before us. As one of the students at the literacy program said subsequently, "You know, most white people don't want to tell the truth about what they did to us." The question is, how can we use the events of the past to help us

understand what we must do today? In my view, there is no underestimating the healing power of truth, especially when it comes from people you can usually count on to lie. This is especially important for white teachers who are exploring the liberatory potential of literacy learning. Teachers and students must co-construct a space of trust, through a continuous and unpredictable generative process.

As I have said, the reactions of my white colleagues have been easy to categorize. I have experienced different reactions when I have shared this story with black people, reactions that, like those of the students, are difficult to define. To be honest, some of my deepest relationships with black people exist through books. I have only a handful of black friends and exist, like most white people, in a white world. When I read my books I guess I feel somewhat encouraged. Writers like bell hooks (1994) urge white women to take the responsibility for addressing the issue of race in their relationships with black women and to speak honestly about their shared, but different, histories. Paule Marshall (1992) and Sherley Anne Williams (1987) both describe fictional models of white and black relationships that are possible when they are founded on honesty, love and resistance to white supremacy. But they also write about how difficult it will be to form these relationships given our common and material legacy of betrayal and hatred.

When I tell this story to groups that contain black women, I usually scan the crowd, both seeking and avoiding their reactions. When I presented a paper at a conference, the only two black women in the audience who responded to my presentation made some cautious and charitable, but undeniably corrective comments. One woman wished that I had worded some parts of my letter differently. The other wondered if my discussion about the conflicts between the two women in the class might give readers a skewed understanding of relationships between black women. I sensed there was something missing; I sensed they were holding back. I wondered if they felt as I do sometimes when I hear men,

even well-intentioned ones, try to come to grips with maleness: impatient, suspicious, immediately defensive. I know that they are weary of trying to explain things to white women who are enamored of their own oppressions.

What is troubling about the process of interrogating whiteness, or maleness, or any position of strength and dominance, is how easy it is to subvert this process and create a new class of victims. Perhaps what some people hear when I tell this story is something like, "Oh woe is me, my family were slave traders, and I am saddled with the burden of this horrible truth for the rest of my life." I recognize the dangers of allowing our stories to be transformed into myths.

Let me be clear again. My experiences of oppression are not equal to those of black women or men. All I am saying is that I believe there is some benefit to creating a space for an honest and open dialogue about the differences and similarities of experience within and across race, class and gender lines. But these kinds of suspicions are well founded. It is important to be honest about these things. What I have been somewhat disingenuous about up until this point are the exact motives for my involvement with the women in this literacy program. Yes, I am interested in attempting to overthrow oppression. I believe that literacy can be a powerful liberatory vehicle for women, for the poor and for people of color. But I am also a graduate student with a need to carve out my niche in the academic community. And any research, especially the kind based on the anthropological model, is inextricably linked to its colonial roots.

After the initial excitement following the reading of my letter died down, I attempted to open up a discussion about the degree to which white people, including myself, continue to benefit from the past. How, I wondered aloud, are privileges that I enjoy today won at the expense of others? How do I reap every day what my ancestors sowed? What I did not fully explicate for them is the way that my personal aspirations are founded simultaneously on my desire to stand

in solidarity with them and my need to use their experiences to justify my work. But my attempts were unsuccessful. The women did not pick up on my questions. They continued for the most part to reassure me that I did not have any responsibility for what my ancestors had done.

I recently read an article in the paper about some professors who organized groups of descendants of former slaves and slave owners as well as descendants of Holocaust survivors and Nazis to come together for weekend workshops. Although these situations are contrived, I think I have a glimmer of insight into how powerful this experience might be for the participants. But I wonder how they felt and what they did after the weekend was over. Did they push themselves to consider what their histories mean for them today? I have not made much progress in that area. Since the class I taught at the literacy program, my friend Ophelia has moved out of state. Most of the students have also moved on to other things. I've continued to teach a small literacy class and attend the women's group, but it is not the same.

Since that time, this story has become a fossil, an artifact, a corpse that I occasionally resuscitate for a new audience. I know that it is useful to continue to tell it. I know that it can function as a symbol and a model. I know it stands for something. I hope I never let myself lose touch with the things I have learned in the past. But the most important questions about how we reproduce these relationships in the present were never addressed. So I find myself looking at the here and now. I find myself still searching for strategies to exist in an active anti-racist position, a way to have relationships that move beyond guilt, beyond exploitation, beyond the pages of a book or a journal, beyond history.

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