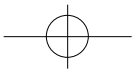
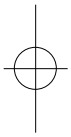
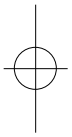
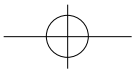
NATURE OF A SISTUH









NATURE OF A SISTUH

BLACK WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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Florence Elizabeth Jackson Ford
and our other foremothers who paved the way

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FOREWORD

Kim Marie Vaz

It is with great pleasure that I recommend to the readers of this anthology the scholarship contained within. How black women literally and figuratively carve out space for themselves in a multiplicity of settings that seek to limit, constrain, and impose notions of their correct "place" is amply addressed in these well-researched writings. Grounding their scholarship in the lived experiences of black women, the challenges faced by black women and the contradictions that must be negotiated around issues of home, school, work, culture, and individual aspiration, these contributors present clear and lucid explorations of black women's subjectivities. A major plus of *Nature of a Sistuh* rests in its accessibility and relevance to the real lives of women. While reading this work, I could not help but recall my own recent experiences returning to the classroom as a student after having been a professor for several years. I enrolled in a number of graduate level counseling courses at the southern university where I teach. In the group therapy course I took, our instructor required that as part of our class we enact group therapy sessions for the balance of the semester. A quarter of the class was male and the rest were female and a quarter of the class was black. The majority of the class was white and the professor was white and male. During one session as many were announcing that they had no race prejudice, a young white student said that, in fact, her family's maid was like "part of their family!" I chose not to let the remark go because I was tired of the way race seemed to be so absent from the consciousness of this set of students and so I challenged her on her assertion and she became visibly upset. The instructor came to her rescue and sought to dismiss my central concern

with the student whom I shall call Kate. In attempting to get a handle on what was going on, the instructor first explored the possibility that I might not be "hearing" what Kate was saying and perhaps through misunderstanding of her point or possibly through some ghost from my past, I was responding to her in ways that promoted her spiral into anger. I experienced this response as benevolent, yet condescending. When the instructor discovered that I did "hear" Kate he then explored the possibility that I was being didactic and philosophical (which is a no-no in group therapy as "feelings" are privileged over intellect). He also suggested that since others had shared personal information about race, I was not appropriately participating because I was not personally invested in the issue at hand and not responding in ways that matched the others.

The issue of relevance for me and the one that I contested was the notion that an African American woman who is employed by a family *is* more of a member of the family than she is an employee. First, this is such an "old south" way of thinking that among African Americans and those white Americans who have the courage to look at race critically there is no explanation needed. For many white students in the south, the uncritical, accepting reasoning that they can do away with real life power imbalances by calling it something else (i.e., family) is very, very typical. When I say that "proximity to power" is not "power," I mean that any employee can not take the checkbook of the employer and sign checks as the employee sees fit without the permission of the employer. Ultimately, the actions of the employee are always under the control of the employer. The job and perks of the employee, *always* depend on the largesse of the employer. Certainly, bonds of affection exist among workers and employers, but it is clearly disadvantageous for any employee to believe that bonds of affection automatically erase real power imbalances. While I know many African Americans who would never contradict a white employer's statement that the African American is like family; I don't know a single African American so unsophisticated as to believe this illusion. As the Rastifarians might say they are merely "rendering unto Babylon what is Babylon's" African Americans, because of segregation, etc. use a mask (Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the famous African American poet wrote a poem entitled "We Wear the Masks") and dissemblance to function in white work settings. These ideas are so basic. How was it that this instructor who purported to examine

"sexism in men's lives" did not extend the analysis to the interconnection with race?

In my defense of myself I told him that the way he *is* a white man is very different from being a black man. I was disappointed, but hardly surprised by his response. I wondered aloud "How he "treated" his African American clients—*did* he treat African American clients?"

If I appeared didactic, perhaps it is because he seemed so *oblivious*. Perhaps my didacticism was brought on by a fairly typical response of whites who do not think critically about race. The typical response is "the more I explain, the more *they* seem not to understand." The reason he did not understand is that it does require another way of looking at life. It meant realizing that other ways of looking at life exist and that as a white-skinned person he had privileges that *allowed him not to understand*. A few years ago, I attended a conference in India. When I got off the plane and met my party, polite as they were, they said that they were expecting "an American." American is a euphemism for white. Toni Morrison, the African-American Nobel Prize winner for literature, has pointed out that immigrants to the U.S. very quickly learn to increase their status and become "American" by absorbing the practice of looking down on African Americans. The point to be made here is that before they leave home, they have the idea that America means whiteness even as it means wealth.

In the journals we had to keep in this class, I wrote there is never a time when whites say that their white maids "are like family." And if they do, the meaning would be completely different. The idea that blacks are "part of the family" stems from slave owners' justifications to Northern abolitionists that the Africans they enslaved were their "children." What made Kate's statement so naive and the implications for her continuing this naivete so problematic is that she was perpetuating racism. Warm loving bonds between the races are all fine and well, but notice, Kate said that the maid was part of *her* family. There is no indication of reciprocity. I have never heard white people say, that they are part of the *maid's* family! The imperialism implicit in the statement that the maid is part of the family, should be "critiqued" as sustaining white privilege. A delicious quote by Elizabeth Spelman, a white woman who does think critically about race, conveys the flavor in my point. In speaking of the one-way direction of integration, that is of whites inviting blacks to join "their" institu-

tions, she says, "How lovely: the many turn out to be one, and the one that they are is me." The narcissistic condition that characterizes white supremacy is that blacks are part of whites—not recognized as separate people with their own responses, desires, and concerns.

What was particularly appalling to me, was not the lack of awareness about white privilege—ignorance was not the problem. The problem was the class's *dis*interest in even examining how racism shapes their lives as whites—what being raced makes them think or not think about, and feel or not feel, but even the way one reacts is shaped in part by race. That those students were going to become guidance counselors in schools, where they will invariably come across African-American students, was alarming to me, because of this disinterest.

When the professor suggested that the issue was not "personal," for me, he overlooked the way I began the whole thread, on a personal note—relaying that I had been an employee at that institution and others and had personally witnessed institutionalized discrimination and further on, I disclosed that my grandmother had been a maid. It was from the position of the "family" of the maid that I spoke. While I did not believe that my position represented the whole of AfraAmerica, yet, it was a perspective not unique to myself. I was usually on my own in raising issues of race in these classes, but in this case, the one black male student supported me by saying to the class that he knew exactly what I was talking about—he needed no explanation—he *understood* implicitly. It is racism *and* sexism *and* classism that forces blacks to have this understanding. After my personal disclosures, I wondered why the professor had no questions for me, such as "what has it been like for me to be one of three African-American women in a predominately white group." "How did I feel after disclosing my experiences and asking people to look at things differently only to be met with defenses such as theirs?" Finally, there was the issue for me of "why" the professor asked me if *I* "heard" Kate and not vice versa. "Why" was he not just as concerned about whether Kate was "hearing" me? "Why" was he concerned about her feelings—how she was feeling right then and not how *I was* feeling. I concluded that if he could define me as being pedantic, then he can *assume* that I had no feelings, which he did. In his assuming such a thing, he could side-step the issue of race and "open" it up to the group to see how they were feeling (certainly a legitimate direction

for a leader to take, but then it also allows for hiking on more familiar paths). There is a metadiscourse about white womanhood in relationship to black womanhood—that one is valued more, that one is to be *protected* more, but that would be an issue for another discussion we would never have.

I missed one class session, hence group therapy practice and was informed (by a black student) later that one of the young white female group members discussed how comfortable they were without me there. When I returned the following week, the other group members felt I should be informed but they did not reveal who said it. It just so happened that I had to bring my ten-year-old daughter to class who then witnessed what became a session wherein I was to be "called" upon by a "confrontational" approach to dealing with racial issues.

Prior to that semester, I had taken classes with this cohort of young women and in each class, I did address the way race, gender, and class would inform the issues the professors raised. During one class break, one woman from this group whom I'll call Rose, approached me and said: "In my family we call everybody the police of this, the police of that; you then are the multicultural police. Tell me, do black babies have the same kind of belly buttons as do white babies?" I was not retiring (I was not outrageous either) in my response and she and her cohort left "red-faced." This same student was the one who decided I made the group unsafe for her.

When the group raised this issue, I told them I was not unfamiliar with the discomfort of young white women whose racism I had exposed and so it did not bother me that they felt that I was not approachable. The instructor and the white students thought I could "improve" my approachability by listening to what they had to say. One young woman said that she could learn a lot from me about race, but she had learned not to ask me any questions because of my response to Rose. She felt comfortable with the other black women in the class, but not me. I told her that I was perfectly okay with that and encouraged her to look where she was comfortable. Well my lack of concern with modifying my own behavior to accommodate white racism was unacceptable to them and then a scenario re-inscribing racial scripts unfolded.

The instructor suggested that I did *violence* to the question asker by my self-protective response and that my choice to protect myself

was none other than a rigid defense mechanism, hence pathological and in need of change. The instructor's handling of that group left me feeling re-victimized and violated by his characterization of my conscious decision to not engage with individuals who first clearly disrespect not only the work that I do, but second who raise a question that is tantamount to asking whether black people are human. I was appalled by the instructor's minimization of the significance of the belly-button question and his conscious inattention to the confrontational thus inherently violent manner in which the question was poised—"Kim, you are the multicultural police." He was clearly more comfortable and more practiced seeing me as being violent than to see and explore the attack itself and the racist institutions that allowed a young white woman to think it is perfectly okay to proceed in the way she did. That my reaction is a viable, and understandable one was recast by the professor as doing violence to a flippant person. How he decided that our encounter was "violent," I do not know, we did not physically touch each other, nor were voices raised.

I pointed out to the group that when there was slavery, the medical community described the enslaved people who ran away from their masters as suffering from a psychopathology called drapetomania. Drapetomania was defined by S. A. Cartwright, a southern physician in the mid-1800s as "the insane desire to run away—because sane Negroes were like children whose biology compelled them to love those in authority over them." The legacy of drapetomania could be seen in the group therapy interaction. That I did not feel compelled to interact with people who disrespect me was seen as problematic—the message was that "I" must change, not society. I maintained that such so-called rigid defenses are necessary coping devices that African Americans use because we live in a racist society. It is those in power (such as teachers and psychologists) who define our learned reactions to racism as pathology.

The whole evening, upon reflection, felt like a severe violation that had no real meaning for me in terms of learning—it felt purely gratuitous. The only redeeming value in the evening was that it provided an opportunity for my daughter to witness and learn a lesson that she would never gain simply by my telling her about racism. Her observations and conclusions about the entire evening went like this:

> You know that lady who kept telling you you were closing the door to communication, well she is the only one who controls her door. She has the key. While we were coming home, I thought about this song: "Can't nobody take my pride. Can't nobody hold me back." That lady locked the door to communication and she is the only one who can open it. They were trying to blame you but sometimes people blame others because they feel weak. Today at school there was a boy who stole candy and then tried to blame another boy. He was blaming that other boy because he was too weak to take responsibility for what he did. I don't want to be mean, mom, but your teacher missed the point.

Perhaps I seemed overly strident to those who would have liked me to appear or act "approachable" and to be *really concerned* about why I am seen as intimidating and making group trust difficult for them. But real communication for me can not proceed on the basis of my being seen as engaging in mutual violence and where I am characterized as in need of change and the system and those acting out the system's mind set are allowed to get off the hook. What I learned in that class is that in multi-racial group settings, group therapists ideally should have some knowledge about issues of race and gender. Without such an awareness these future therapists merely reinforce and re-enact society's racial scripts and actually harm the very individuals they are charged with assisting.

If one does not know what the racial and gender scripts are that shape and mold how multi-racial groups work, the real issue underlying the whole issue of my absence could be missed. What happened when I was out that week had little to do with whether I personally "attacked" Kate (they brought this up again), that was the symptom, it was not the cause. The real issue was Rose's inability to deal with and face her own racist attitudes. (She never uttered a word during that whole evening.) That the matter was brought up in my absence was significant, because the issue really was not about me. There is a parallel of what happened in class around this issue and how history has dictated the race relationships in this country. The incident in Rosewood, Florida began when a married white woman who had affairs with white men while her husband was at work, cried rape and that it was a black man who did it. Now, all the white men knew that this woman was unfaithful to her husband, but the white men formed themselves into a lynch mob and proceeded to find the black man

who supposedly raped her. The white husband knew on some level that his wife was unfaithful, but could never bring himself to accept this until many black people had been lynched, shot, or run out of town. Rosewood literally ceased to be listed on the map for over 50 years. The student, Rose had re-enacted this type of psychodynamic by her assertion and then retreat into silence, for she let the lynch mob loose.

I told them that I felt like there was a public lynching afoot and I was to be the one hung because certain people could not deal with their own issues and it seemed easier to try and silence me and bring my behavior in line with what made them comfortable than to "own" the real issue of white racism. I told them that they had a great challenge ahead of them and the potential to do much damage. I e-mailed my colleague[1] who had already discussed some of these issues. I told her I had just completed my final for this course and asked her what grade was lower than an "F." She responded that "I'm not sure. Perhaps being arrested for belligerent student attitude in the face of a hostile climate? How would one indicate that on a transcript?"

Nature of a Sistuh explores the manner in which black women widen the imposed interstices not only in the academy but also in the spheres of the media, religion, and corporations. The editors and contributors have used their scholarly voices to, in Priya Kapoor's words, "question the whole kit and caboodle." I am certain that any reader will be able to add her or his own story to their tapestry and gain some new tools for continuing the much needed womanist activism in his or her own personal and political arena.

1. Many thanks to my colleague, Carolyn DiPalma for processing this class experience with me and for the Elizabeth Spelman reference.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are extremely pleased that after much careful thought and planning *Nature of a Sistuh* is finally a completed project which can now be shared with many. We would first like to congratulate each contributor and thank her for her patience, dedication, commitment and passion to this anthology. We would also like to thank Kathy Kay at Carolina Academic Press for her continued patience and support.

Trevy A. McDonald would like to thank her colleagues at North Carolina Central University for their support and encouragement as well as Erik Turner for proofreading. She would additionally like to thank her mentors Dr. Anne M. Johnston at UNC-Chapel Hill and Dr. Wendell Beane at UW Oshkosh for their guidance in her development as a scholar.

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Most of all, the editors wish to thank those women who shared their lived experiences with each of the contributors. For it is through the sharing of these lived experiences that other Black women in academia, corporate America, religious institutions, mass media and other walks of life may be uplifted, inspired, and empowered.

Trevy A. McDonald and T. Ford-Ahmed
Spring 1998