

FOURTEEN

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Abstract

Fourteen

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Fourteen takes on difficult topics such as chattel slavery, sexual violence, racism and discrimination. I use music, tangents and a prejudicial preference for the number fourteen as tools to aid my telling. The telling of Fourteen is, consciously, a slice of United States history. It is a personal history; it is autobiography; it is biography and it is African American history. Fourteen is written as creative nonfiction and embraces a rich and poetic language that answer the questions, what does it mean to be part of a family? What does it mean to be a part of a lineage? How do we think about lineage and family in the context of African American history, where family and lineage have been contained, reshaped, or torn asunder through slavery and sexual violence?"

"There is but one way to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation. That is to make its declarations of freedom real; to reach back to the origins of our nation when our message of equality electrified an unfree world, and reaffirm democracy by deeds as bold and daring as the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation."

Martin Luther King Jr. Sept 12, 1962.

Fourteen

*What a wondrous love this is,
What a wondrous love this is, O my soul!
What a wondrous love this is,
that caused the Lord of bliss
to lay down his crown for my soul, for my soul,
to lay down his crown for my soul.*

Hymn 1811

When I was born my mother was sad. She was fourteen years and nine months old, or young in this case, when she delivered me. I think she wanted to be happy, but everyone around her was so disappointed that she was in the horrible situation of being an unwed teenage mother. Teenage pregnancy was a worldwide norm even in the developed countries until the 20th century when families started to choose education over marriage for their daughters. It seems to me, that people had forgotten and have forgotten still that the most famous teenage pregnancy in history was Mary, mother of Jesus, who gave birth at fourteen years young, but she was a virgin so maybe that's different. I don't know. My mother was situated in the complex ironies and debates over woman's chastity and race which have both been foundational and catalytic in this country. To truly understand the circumstances of my birth, one has to consider what it is like to be female and Black in the United States. Historically, none of us are the products of our parents alone; we are all products of the histories that have preceded our births and the moments that we are now creating will prescribe the circumstances for future births.

My mother's sadness was rebellious. One of her first decisions was, "Nobody is gonna tell me how to raise my kids." Chiefly, the proclamation was aimed at her mother, but it also included her aunt and uncles. In my family, the job of an aunt and uncle has significant responsibilities. Aunts and uncles are expected to be teachers, babysitters and disciplinarians as well as active participants in both small celebrations and milestones. Some cousins have the honorary role of aunt or uncle and are expected to fill these roles fully. "When you are fourteen and you have a child, everyone assumes that you know nothing about childrearing," my mother said. She described herself as "quite mature" and believed that she was mature because she had the big sister and big cousin responsibility of babysitting from time to time. Neither her mother nor her aunts and uncles were ready to see my mother as an adult.

I believe the proclamation was also intended for my teenage father. My father was one of fourteen children- twelve girls and two boys. He was a cute boy. He became a handsome man. He once told me, when I was already an adult with my own family, "You were my first love." Soon after he fell in love with me, he fell in love with heroin. He said in a letter written from jail, "Listen, The Last time i seen you, you was the same size as your daughters and liven on 12th Ave, At the time. At that time i began to get high And my hole world was About drugs. Talena, I love you, it wasn't you, it was me. I'm not a bad person, i Just made bad decisions... Love doesn't stop, even when things go wrong. No one said Love will always be smooth. Its easy to Love freely when things are going well, but it takes extra effort when things aren't so well. That's what you showed me by reaching out to me. Thank you. That letter is more that i did for you 30yrs, And it only took you ten minutes. I'm never going to let you down again.

Lena, About me being in Jail, i was fighting this guy and he got hurt so did i, but nothing serious.”

I read his letter as a daughter. I had a few tears when the letter was beautiful. I had a few tears when the letter was brutally honest. I thought of him as a brave man. I wondered who he would have been without addiction. I thought his handwriting was beautiful. I tried to find myself in his words. I wondered how he knew that I was Lena? Did he shorten my name to Lena? I wondered what of him is me?

I sent him the initiating letter to the jail house after his baby sister told me where he was. I imagined that he was going along in the usual daily jail activities- whatever that might be, I don't know. He might have thought that it was a mistake that he'd gotten a letter when the mail came. He must have been surprised. He was probably thinking about the fist fight that had landed him in jail and how he was going to get out when the mail interrupted his probably pacing and other anxious withdrawal symptom behaviors. He might have cried when he realized that someone thought of him as more than a junkie, and an inmate. He wrote, “So who's the lucky man? Are you married. Seattle HuH, why there? I heard it rains 8 month out the year there. I would love to come out there and see how it is. how's your mother doing? tell her i said hEllo, she may don't want to hear that. Anyway, Im going to end this letter not the communication. I have much much more to say, but my mind is racing with Joy. Thank Thank you for not being angry at me. I know this letter is just a step, but it's a step. how young people say it Feel Me ☺”

As a teacher, I tried to guess where his formal education stopped. Why didn't he know how to spell some words? Were some of the capitalizations in his letter a product of handwriting? I wondered why he varied the capitalization of the word “I.” Even with all of his nonconventional

habits of writing, the sentiment was not lost on me. As a writer, I noticed how smoothly, to me, his writing flowed. I wonder if he had written any poems. Is he a poet? Is poetry where we are the same?

There are no photographs of my father and me together. This letter is part of the small collection of memories that I have of him. I hardly ever saw him because during my upbringing he was not in the picture. I remained my whole life, despite the different marriages, common law and legal, that my mother had, acutely aware that I was the one with a lost father.

My father's youngest sister was the only one that hadn't develop a drug addiction. She was a faithful devotee of Christ and spent much of her time either in church or doing something related to church activities. My father's mother was a very fair skinned woman from Tennessee. She had seven children before she met her husband who fathered another fourteen.

Danielle McGuire, a white author, preserved the accounts of several slave descendant brutal rapes perpetrated by southern white men between the periods of Reconstruction and Civil Rights. Among the accounts of rape was that of Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer was a cotton- picking, hymn singing, activist and the youngest of twenty children born in Mississippi. Her work as an activist in the segregated south included the life threatening job of registering slave descendant Black people to vote. She, and all those in her company, knew that traveling by bus into the Deep South could easily become a one way trip. Hamer sang. She sang and the music kept her. The music kept them all. She was a mighty worker both physically and spiritually. McGuire writes, "Fannie Lou Hamer knew that rape and sexual violence was a common occurrence in the segregated South. Hamer's grandmother, Liza Bramlett, spoke often of the 'horrors of slavery,' including stories about 'how the white folks would do her.'" Bramlett's daughter remembered,

regarding her own mother that, "this man would keep her as long as he want to and then he would trade her off for a little heifer calf. Then the other man would get her and keep her as long as he want-she was steady having babies-and trade her off for a little sow pig..." Twenty of the twenty-three children Bramlett gave birth to were products of rape.

The rape of slave descendant women was a common occurrence and I would even venture that rape was recreation for some southern white men and a political device for some others. When chattel slavery became illegal, slave descendants tried to claim a freedom that must have been thought of as the divine gift from the God they'd been praying to for over 400 years, but the former slave owners and their sympathizers used terror and violence to reestablish control over the social, political, and economic agency of the former slave. Rape was used to dominate the bodies and minds of the slave descendent Black man and woman.

I suspect that the mysterious children that my father's mother gave births to were a product of rape, but I don't know. I met her. We visited a few times. I remember her smile and her wheel chair. When she died I felt the pain in my chest, but because we were estranged, I thought the pain was for my maternal grandmother. I called my grandmother and learned that she was fine. I was confused about the feeling in my chest. The next day, I learned that my *other* grandmother had gone home. I cried.

My father's father had a third grade education and spent much of his time working. He was a mechanic. He also built fences, poured concrete sidewalks and did handyman work. When he came home from work, he worked on something there. He smoked a pipe with cherry scented tobacco and he had a Baby Ruth chocolate bar after each dinner. I remember my grandfather's eyes. His smile carved creases around his mouth that lingered when his smile was gone. On one

sunny day, I saw him standing on the sidewalk. He was wearing blue jeans and a button-up shirt buttoned all the way to the top. He was dark skinned and slight in build. He rested his left hand on his hip. When as an adult I phoned him he didn't remember that I was born. I did an internet search for my father and found the phone number for my grandfather. I called. His familiar voice referred me to his youngest daughter who he felt, confidently, could tell me everything I wanted to know and would report back to him.

I never got to know the Bouie family. Bouie is a variant of the French surname Bouis from the Latin *buxus* meaning a box tree or boxwood. The topographic name was derived for someone who lived near a particular box tree or in an area of many boxwood trees. The name made it to the United States along with the land incentives given by France in the 1700's to create New France on the North American continent near Canada. In Europe, the struggle between Great Britain and France resulted in the Treaty of Utrecht in which France ceded parts of her claims in North America to Great Britain. Ten thousand French refused to take an oath of allegiance to England and were deported. Many of the deported French found refuge in Louisiana where they served as both master and father to their slaves, one of which was my ancestor.

*What a wondrous love this is
What a wondrous love this is
What a wondrous love
What a wondrous love*

Fourteen

*My country tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing.
Land where my fathers died!
Land of the Pilgrim's pride!
From every mountain side,
Let freedom ring!*

America, Samuel Frances Smith, 1831

The Treaty of Utrecht failed and eventually resulted in war. In 1763, France ceded her entire territory to the Kingdom of Great Britain after being defeated in the Seven Years' War or the French and Indian War depending on which account of history one reads. Fourteen years later, Vermont was founded as the Vermont Republic. The republic lasted for fourteen years. Vermont is one of only four states that was a sovereign country in its past. In 1791, Vermont joined the United States as the fourteenth state. It abolished slavery while still independent, and upon joining the Union became the first state to have done so.

The slaves that traveled by way of the Atlantic Slave Trade were descendants of kings and queens or traitors hungry for wealth. I don't know. Antão Gonçalves was a Portuguese explorer and slave trader. He was the first European to buy Africans as slaves from Black slave traders in 1441. He was actually hunting seals off the coast of West Africa when the purchase opportunity became available to him. He purchased two slaves. On a later trip, he purchased ten slaves which

included a chief. In 1442, he traded the chief for ten slaves, some gold dust and ostrich eggs. Though Gonçaves was the first European to purchase African slaves, his activity did not contribute to the Atlantic Slave Trade because his purchase was made much farther down the African west coast making his purchase almost an isolated event.

The Atlantic Slave Trade was responsible for the West African region's perpetual state of war until the abolishment of slavery after 400 years. During the Atlantic Slave Trade, Europeans rarely entered the interior of West Africa. The slaves were brought to the coast for trade along with other goods. Once the slaves were captives of war from neighboring tribes, but eventually the slaves became the reason for war and great wealth for African Empires. The empires fell when slavery was abolished. The kings and queens did not sell their own people, but the royals had no problem selling the people of a neighboring empire. Some African Empires fought against slavery. None were successful and some later joined the quest for wealth by capturing slaves, taking slaves to the coast and selling slaves to Europeans. The fight against slavery was difficult to win considering the European's introduction of guns to warfare.

Chattel slavery evolved into an enslavement of minds chained with ignorance. What the slave descendants do not know about themselves and their history hurts them, us. When I was in grade school, I learned what my mother learned, that my family's history began during slavery. We were taught that the slaves were docile, loved their masters and were treated well. We learned that acts of rebellion were rare because of the master's just and kind ways. We learned that Abraham Lincoln single handedly freed the slaves. We learned that white people in United States were smarter, richer, more talented and highly favored by God, more than any other

people in the world. We learned that there were a few black men that were the exception to the rule because they'd invented things that were useful.

There are no such people that agreed to be shipped as cargo in the belly of a crowded vessel from their homeland after having been engaged in war, tied and rolling in communal body eliminations of all kinds: vomit, urine, and feces, to a strange, faraway place with a different season, an unfamiliar landscape, an incomprehensible language and a foreign culture. Some of those captive or stolen people were warriors who fought fiercely against their captures. Some other captives bravely took their own lives rather than live in the conditions of chattel slavery.

We would have different ideas, stronger ideas, if our minds were not enslaved during grade school. Had we learned about the history of our homeland before the European colonization and the tragic events that followed, we'd understand that our people were capable of more than servitude sooner. Had we learned about uprisings, slaves revolts by way of withholding labor, sabotaging the crops by setting fires, running away, and captives taking their own lives and the lives of their children, we would have known that accepting the cast system of the United States was unacceptable and an abhorred situation far sooner. Had we learned the delicate way of negotiating that the slaves engaged to improve their daily lives and about their abolitionist allies, we would have seen ourselves as politicians responsible for governing our own civility sooner.

My family is descendant of slaves and the white rapist slave owners who admired our black beauty or hated our black skin so much that they'd do anything to degrade us, even if it meant entangling in our blood. Maybe it isn't rape if the person is your property. I don't know.

Frederick Douglas, born a slave, in his autobiography wrote about "the whisper" of his master being also his father. He wrote about the laws that were established for the children born

to slave women no matter their paternal lineage. Douglas wrote that the law provided for the administration of the slave master lusts and made “their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable; in cases not a few.” Douglas emphasized the double relation of master and father, and noted that the plight of the child born under these circumstances did not improve his life as a slave.

A slave woman had no claim to her body and a mother could not give her child anything except passage into horrible world and a name. A name is a serious and important gift. It is an important decision for a mother to decide if her child would have a biblical name or have the name of a local hero or have the name of some person in the family or if the child would have a name that is the combination of two or more other family names. My fourteen year old mother, when she gave birth to me, didn't have many more possessions than her slave ancestors.

At birth, my mother gave me the name Talena Lachelle. The hospital nurse told my rebellious mother to name me Salina or Selena or Salena or however the nurse pronounced it or spelled it. I don't know. The name that my mother chose for me has none of the traditional ceremonies about it. She simply gave me a name that she liked and she didn't allow anyone to change her mind. My mother empowered herself, even though she was sad, with motherhood. My birth was her first step toward sovereignty.

In my birth year, the Supreme Court overturned the state bans on abortion in the case Roe vs. Wade by using a section of the 14th Amendment called "Substantive Due Process." The authors of the amendment provided Substantive Due Process to be sure that the government never interfered with the fundamental rights of the people. The section gave the federal court the ability to intervene on the behalf of the people when both state and federal law infringed on the people's

basic human rights. In the case on abortion, the federal court returned the right to give birth, or not, to the woman noting that her right to her body may not be impeded except by due process of law. There may have been a chance for my mother to abort me or maybe the law was too new. I don't know.

The 14th amendment did a decent job, despite slave history in the United States, in defining what it means to be a US citizen. Before the 14th amendment, slave descendants could not become citizens. Section one of the 14th Amendment states, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." This descent amendment allowed slave descendants, Black men, to be citizens, but it did nothing for women or little girls who at the time of the amendment's writing were considered property.

Although the amendment gave Black men the right to have due process and a fair trial, it was a long time before any free Black man would realize this right. I suspect that before and after the 14th Amendment was passed into law, some of the slaves and slave descendants escaped from the cotton fields of Mississippi and walked the 1400 miles to Vermont where slavery was abolished. The 14th Amendment also guaranteed equal protection for the slave descendant Black man, but the law seldom protected the thousands of Black men who were forcibly removed from their homes and sometimes jail cells by mobs of white citizens and lynched.

On the 7th of August 1930, a mob of families: men, women and children walked to the Indiana jail, broke into the jail doors and pulled Abe Smith, James Cameron and Tom Shipp from their cells. The mob dragged the boys to the courthouse and hung two them from the tree like strange fruit. The bodies hung for hours and were professionally photographed. Maybe the mob left the third boy alive so that he could tell the story. I don't know.

James Cameron told it over and over again and published history in his autobiography, *Time of Terror*. W.E.B. DuBois, founder and president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), printed the photographs in *The Crisis*, a 'colored' newspaper with wide distribution. No one was ever prosecuted for the lynching of Abe Smith and Ton Shipp because the local authorities could not identify anyone as a mob leader. Every lynch mob had something in common, unity and power in numbers. Over and over again, the local authorities were unable to prevent mobs from breaking into jails. Over and over again the local authorities were unable to identify anyone to prosecute. Eventually, the 14th Amendment was used as it was intended and helped to end lynching, but racism, its ugly kin, has had a long and enduring life.

Abolitionists, which included whites as well as free Blacks and Native Americans throughout the colonies, worked together to abolish slavery using a variety of tactics. The Seminole Nation allowed escaped or freed Blacks to join the tribe and protected them as Seminole "property." The Seminoles were accused of having a negative impact on the slaves held by the other four civilized nations which included the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Creek. The Seminole "slaves" were actually freed men and women who carried weapons, rode on horseback, wore fine tribesman garments and intermarried with the tribe. The actual slaves witnessed and interacted

with the free Black Seminoles. The Black Seminole's freedom was considered a negative presence and poor example for those enslaved. My mother's family is an example of the mixing between the African American and the Native American

When President Andrew Jackson insisted that the Civilized Nations in Mississippi, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina all move to the west of the Mississippi River in order to make space for the progress of white settlers, the Native Nations took with them the well-established practice of chattel slavery. The movement to the west of the Mississippi was challenged by the Cherokee Nation using the white man's weapon, the law. The Cherokee case made it the Supreme Court and won, but President Andrew Jackson ignored the court's ruling and forced the Cherokees off the land by gun point. The Nation, who had been on the land for generations before the settlers arrived, were forced to walk thousands of miles. One in every four Cherokee died on the walk that became known as the "Trail of Tears."

To limit the influence that free Black Seminoles had on slaves, the Cherokee Nation passed a law that all free Blacks had to leave the Cherokee Nation by the first day of the year 1843. The law was inspired by a number of slave revolts including one in which more than twenty-five slaves, from the Joseph Vann plantation revolted. Execution of the plan included locking their masters and overseers in their homes and cabins while they slept. The slaves secured guns, horses, mules, ammunition, food and supplies. The group of men, women, and children, left with the rising sun headed toward Mexico, where slavery was illegal.

When the Cherokee slaves were joined by Creek slaves, the slave fugitives fought off and killed a couple of slave hunters, which further agitated slaveholders. The Cherokees blamed the

rebellion on free, armed Black Seminoles who lived in close proximity to the Cherokee slaves at Fort Gibson.

In addition to providing safe places for run-away slaves, abolitionist produced propaganda. The use of propaganda was very important because it allowed the abolitionists, who were risking their lives, to create sympathy for the abolitionist cause. Newspapers were critical in the national debate regarding slavery. One of the many newspapers was *The Liberator*. The newspaper was founded by a white New York based abolitionist named William Lloyd Garrison. In the first issue, Garrison stated his mission to “strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population.” He evoked the Declaration of Independence and apologized for his previous position on abolition which was to gradually free the slave population. His apology asserted an “unequivocal recantation,” and he publicly asked pardon of his God, of his country, and of his brethren the poor slaves, for having “uttered a sentiment so full of timidity, injustice and absurdity.” Garrison’s newspaper and others like it prepared the minds of the people for the possibility of a truly free nation of men at the risk of prosecution. Leaflets, images and music were also used to advance the abolitionist efforts. One such musical expression was the addition of abolitionist verses to the National Anthem.

America: Additional Abolitionist verses, A. G. Duncan, 1843

My country, 'tis of thee,
Stronghold of slavery, of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died,
Where men man’s rights deride,
From every mountainside thy deeds shall ring!

My native country, thee,
Where all men are born free, if white's their skin;
I love thy hills and dales,
Thy mounts and pleasant vales;
But hate thy Negro sales, as foulest sin.

Let wailing swell the breeze,
And ring from all the trees the black man's wrong;
Let every tongue awake;
Let bond and free partake;
Let rocks their silence break, the sound prolong.

Our father's God! to thee,
Author of Liberty, to thee we sing;
Soon may our land be bright,
With holy freedom's right,
Protect us by thy might, Great God, our King.

It comes, the joyful day,
When tyranny's proud sway, stern as the grave,
Shall to the ground be hurl'd,

And freedom's flag, unfurl'd,
Shall wave throughout the world, O'er every slave.

Trump of glad jubilee!
Echo o'er land and sea freedom for all.
Let the glad tidings fly,
And every tribe reply,
"Glory to God on high," at Slavery's fall.

This addition to the National Anthem comes after the added centennial verse and the two verses added by American author Henry Van Dyke extending the number of verses from the original four to thirteen. The Emancipation Proclamation would come twenty years after these abolitionist verses. Maybe if there were a 14th verse the song would have made a more memorable difference. Perhaps the voice of the enslaved would have been a welcomed addition. I offer this one:

*My homeland, 'tis of thee
Sweet distant memory, of thee I sing
Land of my mother's tribe!
Land of my father's pride!
From every child enslaved,
Our souls shall sing!*

The Star Spangled Banner, famous for the lines ‘home of the brave’ became the National Anthem in 1931. It was originally a poem called *The Defense of Fort McHenry* by Francis Scott Key. Key was a lawyer and an amateur poet. He was appointed to the United States District Court where he worked for about seven years. On more than one occasion he prosecuted abolitionist for “instigating enslaved people to rebel.” Maybe he thought the slaves would not rebel if abolitionist didn’t encourage them to do so. Maybe he thought that punishing the abolitionist would help. I don’t know.

Key was a founding member and active leader of the American Colonization Society which had the primary goal of sending free slaves and their descendants back to Africa. He was also a slave owner. Key wrote the poem after witnessing the Royal Navy’s battle at Fort McHenry on the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia. My favorite lines of his poem are "No refuge could save the hireling and slave/ From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave" which refers to the ex-slaves who were bravely fighting for freedom, understanding the risk of their lives, alongside the British attackers. They had been promised liberty and demanded to be placed in the battle line where they may have met their former masters. I don’t know. I imagined the look in the wartime eyes of the Southern soldiers, when they recognized a boy slave. Maybe a soldier remembered whipping the boy’s back apart or selling his siblings away to another plantation or raping his delicate, fair skinned sister. Maybe the warrior turned slave turned soldier wanted to flee from neither the terror nor the gloom, but welcomed the grave. I don’t know.

The former colony, Virginia, found herself again and again under attack from slave populations who were considered the most profound militant and sustained resistance of the enslaved since Europeans had invaded the continent hundreds of years earlier. When war was

pounding eagerly on the chests of Southern whites and inevitable for their European founders in 1812, Sir Alexander Cochrane pronounced with confidence that Virginia's slaves were "British in their hearts and might be made great use of if war should be prosecuted with vigor."

We, the majority of slave descendant children, didn't know that there was a resistance to slavery and oppression of this magnitude. My mother was taught to submit, but the strange feeling harboring in her bosom that prompted her to liberate; seek sovereignty by any means possible, was mistaken by her adolescent mind as a quality attributed to 'bad girls.' She was constantly being corrected by her well-meaning relatives who labeled her as fast and did everything they could to correct her missteps because they loved her and love her still. Her relatives didn't understand what she was fighting against and what she had to say was hard to say and hard to hear. In those days, black girls and women had few audiences for their voices.

Fourteen

*Trouble in my way,
I have to cry sometimes
But I know the Lord is gonna fix it
After while*

Hymn

There were several factors in the greater society that aimed to control the natural expression of women and girls and their ability to reproduce. The United States has always sought to control the births of Black people who were prized as agricultural merchandise. Births were encouraged when the benefactor was the slave master, but Emancipation brought the need to limit births and the perpetuation of “inferior genetic positions.” The common agreement among prominent thinkers was that mothers passed down to their offspring traits that marked them as inferior to white people. Along with this biological impairment, it was believed that Black mothers transferred a deviant lifestyle to their children that prescribed each succeeding generation to a life of poverty, delinquency, and despair.

A persistent objective of United States social policy was to monitor and restrain the corrupting tendency of Black motherhood. There are hundreds of cases per year throughout the United States of forced sterilization of Black women and girls sanctioned at the legislative level based on eugenic ideology claiming to improve the genetic features of humanity through selective breeding and sterilization. Part of the premise was to slow down the reproduction of any culture that was not part of the white Nordic culture, including races from European countries that were believed capable of tainting the white American genetic stock. American Eugenics, funded by corporations including Carnegie, Rockefeller, and the Kellogg cereal

company influenced public policy and in some cases made it illegal to marry or date interracially. Young women were forcibly sterilized especially those who were incarcerated or hospitalized.

My mother became pregnant in a social climate, hundreds of years in the making, which had no favorable place for young, reproducing Black girls. She was trying to free herself from the oppression of her mind and the objectification of her body. She thought that her skin was ugly, that her full figure was fat, that her curly hair was wrong and that nobody would ever love her correctly except God. And even in the case of a loving God, she was not sure about Him until she was many years beyond the experiences of her childhood.

It took a while, relatively, for my mother to be in charge of her own life. It began in her fourteenth year despite the fact that she had no legal rights as a minor because she was the property of her parents.

Even if my mother was an adult woman, her journey to sovereignty would not have been aided by the Equal Rights Amendment which strangely resembles *'error'* when it is abbreviated. When my mother was pregnant with me, the ERA was passed by congress and sent to the states for ratification with a seven year deadline. When the deadline arrived in 1982, my mother had four children and the ERA had only thirty-five of the needed thirty-eight states required for ratification.

The ERA was first introduced to Congress in 1923 by the National Woman's Party founder and suffragist leader Alice Paul. Paul believed as her mentor Susan B. Anthony did that "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God" and she, purposely, was a 'bad girl' on more than one occasion. Paul was arrested for obstructing traffic in front of Woodrow Wilson's White

House just after the United States joined World War I. She was jailed along with other suffragist when they refused to pay the fine.

Alice Paul and her suffragist friends suffered for their audacity to demand from the world, from the President of the United States, in front his house, the equal voting right for women. The suffragist were sent to a prison in Virginia called The Occoquan Workhouse. Paul's demands that she and the suffragist, some of whom were fragile elders, be treated as political prisoners were met with brutality. They were beaten, thrown into cold, unsanitary, and rat infested cells. Suffragist arrests continued and conditions at the prison deteriorated. For staging hunger strikes, Paul and several suffragists were forcibly fed with torturous techniques. Prison officials moved Paul to a sanitarium in hopes of getting her declared insane. Maybe the prison officials really thought her to be insane. Maybe they thought that she could be corrected through punishment. Maybe they wanted to use the effective tool of the insane asylum where she could be further brutalized without scrutiny. I don't know. After Paul was released, she returned to her home in NJ to recover and President Wilson announced his support for a suffrage amendment as a war measure. After both the Senate and House passed the 19th Amendment, Paul began working on the Equal Rights Amendment.

To date, 91 years later, the ERA has not been ratified in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah, and, Virginia. The Southern States gave birth to segregation, Jim Crow laws, Lynch parties, the Klu Klux Klan, and chattel slavery. Maybe it is a coincidence that unratified states are all Southern States. I don't know.

It might be a miracle for a teenaged girl, a slave descendant, Black girl, to muster the hope required to reach sovereignty in a country that still hasn't ratified the simple sentence, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." I imagine that the three additional states needed to ratify the Equal Right Amendment will be gained by the work of girls in those states who probably have the mistaken idea that the Constitution already includes equal rights for women.

When she was sixteen, my mother looked and finally found that legal emancipation from her mother and her living situation meant getting married. I don't think she knew that she was going to be the legal property of her husband. She just wanted to get away. The man she married, not my heroin addict father, was in love with my mother. That's why her newlywed alcoholic husband punished her when she did something wrong. Friar Cherubino of Siena in the late 1400's solidified a long standing history, from a time before Christ, of husbands beating their wives in his *Rules of Marriage* by defining the man's duty to govern and control his wife. He wrote, "When you see your wife commit an offense, don't rush at her with insults and violent blows. . . . Scold her sharply, bully and terrify her. And if this doesn't work . . . take up a stick and beat her soundly, for it is better to punish the body and correct the soul than to damage the soul and spare the body. . . . Then readily beat her, not in rage, but out of charity and concern for her soul, so that the beating will rebound to her merit and your good." Maybe my mother's husband learned from his good Christian family that love means you punish people when they do something wrong.

My mother's husband and his fraternal twin brother were adopted. Their adoptive mother was old when I met her. She had a small amount of thin gray hair and long breast that swung

freely under her house dress. I remember her standing in the kitchen. She just stared most times. I don't recall ever having a conversation with her, but I think she was the kind of woman who cared for children above all else. Her sons loved her fiercely and that must be a testament to her influence on their lives.

When my mother got married to find independence which she did find, she left me, her mother, her younger sister, her niece, and her rapist stepfather. Maybe it is called domestic violence or molestation or incest if the person is your family, I don't know. I went to live with my mother and her husband when my sister was about six months old. I missed my cousin who was like a sister to me. I missed my grandmother so much that it made me sick. I was about three years old and cried all through the night and ran a fever. My grandmother finally came to see me and I stopped crying. She came most nights after that and she left her slip in bed with me so that I could be soothed by the smell of her. It was her scent that I inhaled during my infancy. Her songs filled up my dreams. Her bouncing knee rocked me to Dreamland. It was her Gospel hum that vibrated in my chest.

My mother's brother-in-law and my twelve year old aunt had a daughter together. We have often joked that the offspring of the siblings' match up were double cousins. It is confusing. The daughter was named after her father and was my "cousin-sister" and my first friend. If she got hurt, I cried. If I cried, she got mad. We didn't know that we were separate beings for the first few years of our lives. When we figured out that the name our relationship was cousin, we replaced our names with the title, we'd say "Hey cousin," "Goodnight cousin," "Where you going cousin?" We created several ceremonies that celebrated our love like the January birthday call when we are the same age for the next four months of the year and the Christmas Eve call

when we share our wish for snow. We were constantly trying to get back to the time, in small ways, when I didn't know that she wasn't me and she didn't know that we were *WE*.

My mother and her husband had two children together, my sister and my brother. I remember that whenever my mother's husband introduced me, he insisted that I say both my first and middle name, Talena Lachelle, and then he'd say, every time, "isn't that beautiful?" to whomever I was being introduced. My mother honored him by naming his daughter, my sister, after him. When she was old enough, her father would say her first and middle name together like a beautiful song or a life giving mantra. When she was older, her teacher and school friends changed the pronunciation of her name, the spelling too, but I remembered the way her father would sing her name like the most beautiful sounds of Sanskrit and I refused to conform to the remix.

Once, my brother was leaning over the back porch banister and his father saved him. He saved the baby, but fell down to the unforgiving ground. My brother's father gave him life and then saved his life. The deed was so great and the fall was so hard that he was no longer available to support his son's life. He was home more often after that fall and then he walked with a limp and a cane. He still does. His natural instinct to save his son disabled him and made it very difficult, if not impossible, to support a wife and three children. Being a capable father and husband was very important to him and alcoholism was his way of self-medicating both the pain and the shame of not being able to provide. This is the man my young mother chose for a husband, a strong, proud Black man.

The Black man's body was his source of income in most cases. There were certainly strides in upward social mobility, equal housing, economic progress, and education, but the majority of

Black men earned a living with the strength of their body. In the increasingly populated cities, a Black man could work in a factory of some sort. Factories had race based challenges. Black men were paid less and had to endure severe discriminatory behaviors. He could work in the few service jobs like delivery man or shoe shiner. He could work as the coveted Pullman. He could do odd jobs if he was handy and day labor jobs if he was able. He could do trade work as mechanic or barber.

The decade between the 60's-70's only further complicated the Black man's ability to find work since other races were favored. The United States has a long history of using Black men as laborers only as a last resort. During Reconstruction, companies in the North sent representatives to the South to recruit workers. The recruiters were met with hostility by Southern whites. The local authorities posted officers at popular train stops to prevent Black men from leaving. When Black men arrived in the North, the poor and working class white men, mostly immigrants, felt threatened for their job security. Factory companies hired Black men to keep production going while white workers were on strike. Many of the Black workers who did not understand the concept of striking were seriously hurt or killed for crossing the picket line. "Colored Need Not Apply" went up on almost every place that advertised job openings, until white men were deployed. Black men, even those who obtained occupational advancements, could not find jobs in the 1970's. During the Vietnam War, Black men could be soldiers, but not factory workers.

Another change that occurred around this time was the number of Black men in the prison population. Soon after the Civil Rights Act became law, the prison population spiked with slave descendant Black men being the greatest number of new inmates. In the late 1960's, the United States began to expand the powers of law enforcement agencies around the country, generating

by the 1970's an unprecedented increase in incarceration. The problem with imprisoning a population is the lack of resources and civil rights available to them upon re-entry.

At first, when Black men were jailed, justly or not, mobs would break in to the jail, forcibly remove the inmate and lynch him. During the Civil Rights movement, Black men, women and children intentionally got themselves arrested to bring attention to the cause. Most of them were released. Martin Luther King's letter from the Birmingham, Alabama jail cell discussed the pain of telling his children that they could not enjoy the same citizenship rights as the white children in their community and rightly characterized the times during which he wrote. Naturally, there were concerns from his family and supporters that he may be forcibly removed from his jail cell.

The post-Civil Rights incarcerations were different, are different. The period after Civil Rights considered new acts crimes, and the severity of sentencing increased, causing a "prison boom." Steep minimum sentences for nonviolent crimes resulted in one million incarcerated slave descendants. The sentencing was stricter for Blacks than whites when similar crimes had been committed.. Forty percent of the prison population is derived from a community that is only fourteen percent of the total population in the United States. There is hardly a black family in the United States that hasn't been affected by these numbers.

The incarceration of so many black men essentially abolishes, for them, the 14th and 15th Amendments. Expungement is not an option for poor and undereducated people who cannot afford a lawyer, leaving them forever disenfranchised. When one considers the most formidable weapon in the United States, the law, it is no surprise that the answer to the question first posed during Reconstruction, "What to do with the former slaves?" might be answered by the creation of laws that tuck the former slaves neatly away in rows of prison cells. The suffrage of the newly

emancipated population and his descendants was, and continues to be, a deeply regretted consequence of Civil War by those white men who regarded Emancipation as a crime and its practical nullification as a duty. Maybe it is a coincidence that the Prison Boom and the Civil Rights Act happened nearly simultaneously, I don't know

Post-Civil Rights laws stripped people of their right to vote. Poll laws and poll taxes passed after Civil Rights targeted and disenfranchised slave descendants, as well as Native Americans and poor whites. When a slave descendant arrived at the poll, he was often met by aggressive white citizens who forced him to answer an impossible question. Sometimes he was asked to pay a poll tax that prohibited him from participated in the election process.

When one considers the disproportionate number of Black men in prisons, it is not a far leap to consider that maybe his imprisonment is yet another attempt to render his vote impotent. Upon re-entry citizens are without some civil rights. It spits in the face of civil rights leaders like Ida B. Wells Barnett who wrote in *From a Red Record* about the very short period when the slave descendent vote was an important factor in state and national politics. She wrote that the Southern white men would not even consider giving respect to any black man or woman and that the Southern white man was contemptuous.

The south used slogans like "This is white man's government" and "No negro domination" during campaigns. Feelings of contempt from the Southern white proved to be life threatening for Black men who were likely to be killed for any reason. Countless Black men were massacred as punishment for attempting to vote. Ida B. Wells wrote, "He believed that in that small white ballot there was a subtle something which stood for manhood as well as citizenship, and thousands of brave Black men went to their graves, exemplifying the one by dying for the other."

Mrs. Lee rose with the morning sun, cooked breakfast for her husband, Harper, as usual and kissed him for the last time. It was Monday. The sky was clear. It was already hot. Her husband and the father of her nine children was a short and stocky man of five feet and four inches. He weighed 150 pounds. Harper Lee was one of the founding members of the local NAACP and the only person brave enough to register slave descendant Black people to vote. The couple lived on a farm where they raised cotton in Mississippi. On this Monday morning he left in his truck to deliver a load of cotton to the gin in Liberty, Mississippi.

When Harper Lee arrived at the gin, he was approached by his neighbor, E.H. Hurst, who had followed him. Hurst was an elected State Assemblyman who felt threatened by Harper Lee's voter registration activities. Hurst held a gun. He walked to the truck. He took long strides as his 6'3" frame demanded. Maybe Hurst brought the gun along to make sure that Harper Lee understood that he really did "mean it this time." Maybe Hurst only intended to scare Harper Lee. I don't know. Either way, Mrs. Lee's husband, her provider, the father of her nine children, was shot and fell dead in broad day light on September 25, 1961 in front of a dozen witnesses. E. H. Hurst never answered for the murder of Harper Lee. The local authorities could not find anyone to serve as the court's witness. One man who was suspected of talking with the FBI was lynched.

My mother was proud of me when I registered to vote in 1991. She drove me to the location. The process was effortless. I filled out the form without resistance from anyone. I was not tested. I did not pay a tax. The white woman who took my form at the Department of Motor Vehicle in NJ smiled at me and answered, "That's it" when I asked, "That's it?" In 1992, I helped to elect Bill Clinton as President of the United States.

*Trouble in my way,
I have to cry sometimes
But I know the Lord is gonna fix it*

Fourteen

*In this walk we face many battles
but they're not yours, they belong to the Lord
put on armor of God
Delight yourself in his word*

*Don't give up the fight
It's too late to give up now
Don't give up the fight*

Fight On, Kevin Davidson & The Voices

My grandmother used to tuck her money into her bra and that is where she reached to get it when she made a purchase though she carried a purse that was full of something. The other place that she kept money was under the mattress. When I asked her about her stash places, she said that she “don’t truss no bank.” I noticed that she was not the only Black woman who held the practice of stashing instead of saving though; admittedly, all the women that I had intimate access to were some beautiful shade of brown.

The practice of stashing may have stemmed from the betrayal of the Freedman’s Bank. The bank naturally fit into the jurisdiction of the Freedman’s Bureau. The Freedman’s Bureau was a military effort to ensure, for the newly emancipated, his life, his liberty and his rights as a citizen. His happiness, arguably, would come much later, if ever. Frederick Douglass was the bank’s first president. The bank had a branch in almost every place where there was a Black population. Freedmen who had the idea of finally owning property saved what they could in the only institution that would accept their business. When the history was still fresh and in the memories of freedmen, historian and scholar W.E.B. Dubois recorded this account of the savings

banks' betrayal, "Then in one sad day came the crash, -- all the hard-earned dollars of the freedmen disappeared; but that was the least of the loss,-- all the faith in savings went too, and much of the faith in men; and that was a loss that a Nation which today sneers at Negro shiftlessness has never made good." Depositors were never compensated for their losses. So the trend for Black people has been, since that time, for the most part, to trade their dollars for stuff, and to stash their money in places inaccessible to those who might betray them.

My mother kept money in places that seem to hide from her as well as any potential thief. Many days we looked in coffee cans, in old shoes, in the refrigerator, in the pockets of clothes and all types of odd places. After a while she kept her money in plain sight on the mantel. Her wad of money was attractive to my little brother. The five years old saw the wad of rent money as a lifetime supply of Bubble Yum brand bubble gum. He never did get his gum. My mother got her rent money back and she never again kept it on the mantle. We still tell the funny story about the time my baby brother 'stole' the rent money.

The financial immaturity that has characterized the Black community since the time of Reconstruction was also the saving grace for Black people when the stock market crashed in 1929. The community had, for so long, lived meagerly making their survival during the Depression business as usual. The Black community changed for the better during the Depression years. The Library of Congress wrote, regarding African Americans during the period 1929-1945, "Although there were many inequities in the New Deal, housing, agricultural and economic programs, Blacks had opportunities to obtain employment, some in areas previously closed to them. Black writers, for example, participated in the New Deal's writing projects, while other Black Americans interviewed former slaves for the Works Project

Administration (WPA). Black-owned newspapers protested segregation, mistreatment, and discrimination.” The Library of Congress has a vast collection of changes that occurred during the Depression Era. One thing that did not change is the overall way that Black people handled money because there were no mentors in the Black family to inherit financial literacy from. The principles of finances and wealth are not taught in school or church. The principle of wealth and finance are taught at home, but one cannot teach what one does not know.

My mother and her husband had no knowledge of and no means of saving any money. Her husband’s family had no resources to lend to the young family. My mother’s family had none either. Black families, generally, didn’t inherit vehicles, or homes, or lands, or memberships, or monies, or stocks, or vacation properties, or bonds, or antiques, or fine arts, or jewelry or status, or privilege, or companies. My mother started her family with no material possessions like her mother and grandmother and her grandmother’s mother. So, she worked and her extended family gave what they had to give: support with childcare and food. The extended family offered abundant love and was wealthy in areas of nurture and culture, but eventually the couple separated and much later, divorced.

My youngest brother, the Bubble Yum lover, had a father who gave us a father’s love. He gave us his family who took us in as if we were born into their family. We gained a few more aunts and uncles and cousins. When our ‘uncle’ bought a new house, he let us live in his old house. The house had an upstairs and a downstairs. I liked to slide down the green carpet steps. It had a front yard that set the house way back from the street and a small back yard. The walls of the house were decorated with photographs of us in frames. The metallic gold toned frames filled

the living room wall. We called it the front room. It was the room that had the television and was the place that we gathered most often as a family.

We had neighbors that we played tag football with on the asphalt. We used to turn on the fire hydrant during summer. The fire department always came to turn it off. When they left, my brother's father turned it back on. Every kid in the neighborhood cheered for him like he'd just kicked the ball into the goal. We played games with our neighbors. I was very good at hopscotch. I was terrible at double dutch, but the neighbors would still let me play.

My brother's father gave us structure and discipline. He made sure that we did our chores and homework. He made sure that we had fun and he played with us. He spent a good amount of time in the kitchen cooking things that celebrated his southern heritage. He liked the foul smelling chitlins. I think that the name came from 'SHIT LINKS' and the words were smashed together by the thick lips of the African slaves who often created new pronunciations for words spoken in English. I don't know. He liked ox tails and pig feet. He liked pork ribs, pork sausages and just about everything that can be made from a pig including hog's head cheese.

We lost him in the late 80's when a new party drug came to the inner city and stole fathers. Crack ripped young men out from under their mothers and made prostitutes out of good girls. Some people lost their mothers to Crack. Our communities of good neighbors that watched out for each other's children became lawless. We were no longer allowed to stay out until the street lights came on. We had to stay in the yard or have an adult nearby when we played. People would steal food from the refrigerator of young mothers in order to sell it for crack. Theft, armed robbery, breaking and entering, and things that never were a part of our lives became the norm. The police hired children as drug dealers, bought and sold drugs and then arrested the people

who didn't sell for the police. Teachers bought Crack from their students. I once saw a school bus driver pull over and buy Crack. Nobody could be trusted. A few church buildings were taken over as Crack houses. Quick-walking zombies shared the sidewalk with children playing freeze tag. Crack addicts were fast. The new "Crack Heads" still believed that they were beautiful. Their clothes were too big. Their eyes shifted often to things around them. They were like chickens on a lake. If they'd been smoking Crack a long time, their limbs were jittery. They talked fast and always needed a buck or had something to sell. The front teeth on a seasoned "Crack Head" were dark yellow, spotted with decay and sometimes a few front teeth were missing. Their mouths produced excessive amounts of saliva. The area around their mouths was white like volcanic ash. Crack Heads were different from the puffy-hand heroin addicts that we were accustomed to or the "P-dope" addicts that walked slowly, sat for long periods and nodded. Mostly, the Crack Heads were younger and there were so many of them. The traffic in our neighborhood increased so much due to drug sells that we could no longer play in the street. The stair wells in the public housing tenements also known as "The Projects," became dark, foul caves for addicts. My brother's father never reached the late stages of crack addiction. He recovered from his addiction and relapsed, recovered and relapsed.

He let me stay up all night to watch the actor, Ronald Reagan, become President of the United States. Soon after, the first lady told us, Americans, to "Just Say No" and her husband launched a war on drugs. The war targeted young Black men in the inner cities who had seized the opportunity to become wealthy from drug sales. The drug dealers in my neighborhood were selective about who they would sell drugs to, hosted community events, invested in businesses, supported athletes and helped the masses of new single mothers make the rent. The drug dealers

gained the support of the greater community who watched out for them, warned about police approaching, helped to stash drugs, and provided hiding places when the narcotic officer pursued them. The community did this because they were accustomed to taking care of each other's children and because the drug dealers, in addition to being financial subsidizers were also the children.

Ronald Reagan's war on drugs mistook the inner city for the battle ground. Zero drugs were grown in the inner city. The majority of the drug customers were white people from the suburbs who created the demand for the supply. The drug dealers were mostly trying to transcend poverty. They bought fast cars, fancy jewelry, fashionable clothes, expensive shoes and all the things that they could not otherwise afford. The war on drugs changed the supply and demand business of crack sales into a violent and deadly war between drug dealers and cops. The casualties were children and families. The casualties were tag football on the asphalt, freeze tag and hopscotch on the sidewalks. The casualties were family homes that became Crack houses.

*In this walk we face many battles
but they're not yours, they belong to the Lord
put on armor of God
Delight yourself in his word*

*Don't give up the fight
It's too late to give up now
Don't give up the fight*

Fourteen

*I was born by the river
in a little tent
and just like that river
I've been running ever since*

A Change is Gonna Come, Sam Cook, 1963

My mother wanted to be a medical doctor. Her teacher at the school for pregnant girls told my mother that she would never be a doctor. She believed him. Teachers have a lot of power over their students and what the students believe. Maybe the teacher thought that a girl would never be a doctor or maybe a mother would never be a doctor or maybe a slave descendent would never be a doctor. Maybe he had insight about the devastating effects of Jim Crow laws on segregated medical schools, places of higher education in general, and the cost of education. Maybe he had an idea about the certain poverty that a young mother without a higher education would experience. Maybe he knew that, one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, that neither my mother nor anyone of her race was actually free in the United States. I don't know.

My mother's teacher had an expectation that a Black girl needed to fit in a certain paradigm and he was not alone in his expectations. The vast majority of the country expected very little of Black girls, - Black people, and the playing out of those expectations manifested in segregated everything. The sky was not the limit for Black children. For Black children, the limit was the

neighborhood and those who dared to breach the invisible wall of their neighborhood often paid for the transgression with their lives.

On Tuesday August 11, 1964, just a few days after my mother's sixth birthday race riots consumed the City of Paterson's Fourth ward for three days. When she was nine years old, the next door City of Newark, experienced five full days of race rioting. During the summer when she was eleven, she watched race riots on television in both New York City and the City of Passaic, places she frequented with her family. Every year, usually during the summer months, my mother watched the unfolding of raced-based civil unrest in her community.

Black people were enslaved during the formidable years of mother's life. It took a re-emanicipation called Civil Rights and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, popularly known as Affirmative Action, to begin the narrowing of the great disparities between the races. Maybe my mother's teacher was against the race-based caste system and inequalities and did what he could by teaching and delivering to her his version of honesty and truth. I don't know.

Some Black people said, "What is the point of peaceful protest when it has been more than a hundred years and nothing has changed?" Some others said, "I don't see the point of voting when my vote doesn't matter anyway." Some others said, "I am willing to do the work, take the walk, fight the fight and die for what is right." They, those Black men, women and children, did work and walk and fight and die because they knew that a change was needed. A change did come.

On the centennial anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation after many meetings with Civil Rights leaders prompting the president of the United States to pass a civil rights bill to

coincide with the historically important anniversary, President Kennedy, in a speech, said “One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression.” He went on to say that the United States would not be free until all of its citizens were free. A week later, just before Thanksgiving Day, he introduced the Civil Rights Bill, but he didn’t live to see it pass.

The year 2014 is the 50th anniversary of Kennedy’s assassination. The shooter perpetuated a renewed commitment for social change in the United States. The most immediate, though opportunist was the act of Sarah Hughes, a Federal Judge who was the first and, to date, the only woman in the history of the United States to swear in a president. She did so aboard Air Force One hours after the assassination of President Kennedy, making the former school teacher, Vice - President Lyndon Johnson, president of the United States.

President Johnson built on the foundation of those that came before him. He finished Kennedy’s work by signing the Civil Rights Act into law. He added *freedom from ignorance*: that every man, everywhere, should be free to develop his talents to their full potential— unhampered by arbitrary barriers of race or birth or income to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Essential Human Freedoms” for which the United States stands: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Johnson is also responsible for Medicare, Medicaid and the Older Americans Act which are all part of his idea of a Great Society. Between the years 1963- 1968 he signed into law fourteen new education acts making it more possible for Black girls to be doctors or whatever else an education would allow them to be.

It took another enactment of law before some of the citizens of the United States would honor the emancipation and the re-emancipation of Black people still fighting, still dying for the constitutional right to vote already granted to them. Some citizens still hadn't accepted the Black man's vote and worked on creating laws to nullify the right. Black men were being sent to the ongoing war in Vietnam, but before their deployment and upon their return were restricted from the polls. Peaceful protestors in Selma, Alabama, with hopes of changing their social conditions, staged a march. The protestors were met by violence from officers who made mass arrests and in a few cases killed protestors. The King Center wrote this account of one incident, "On the night of 18 February, Alabama state troopers joined local police breaking up an evening march in Marion. In the ensuing melee, a state trooper shot Jimmie Lee Jackson, a 26-year-old church deacon from Marion, as he attempted to protect his mother from the trooper's nightstick. Jackson died eight days later in a Selma hospital."

On March 7th the nation was outraged on what became known as "Bloody Sunday" when, in response to Jackson's death, protestors in Selma and Marion marched from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery led by John Lewis a local leader. The marchers made their way through Selma and across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where they faced a blockade of state troopers and local lawmen commanded by Major John Cloud who ordered the protestors to disperse. When the protestors did not, Cloud ordered his men, in war like engagement, to advance. Cheered on by white onlookers, the troopers attacked the crowd with clubs and tear gas. Mounted police chased fleeing protestors and beat them. Lewis was severely beaten. In an interview he said "I don't see how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam—I don't see how he can send

troops to the Congo—I don't see how he can send troops to Africa and can't send troops to Selma.''

A week later, President Johnson signed The Voting Rights Act and again cited the proclamation in a speech at a joint session of Congress on Monday, March 15, 1965. "It's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome. As a man whose roots go deeply into Southern soil, I know how agonizing racial feelings are. I know how difficult it is to reshape the attitudes and the structure of our society. But a century has passed—more than 100 years—since the Negro was freed. And he is not fully free tonight. It was more than 100 years ago that Abraham Lincoln—a great President of another party—signed the Emancipation Proclamation. But emancipation is a proclamation and not a fact. A century has passed—more than 100 years—since equality was promised, and yet the Negro is not equal. A century has passed since the day of promise, and the promise is unkept. The time of justice has now come...and when it does, I think that day will brighten the lives of every American."

The radio was the first place where the United States experienced desegregation. The increased popularity of the radio allowed white people to listen to slave descendant Black music in their homes and more importantly the Black music on the radio gave young white consumers the exploitive tool they needed to express their own rebelliousness against segregation and race based discrimination. The Motown sound brought to the forefront the foundation of the Spirituals that had, since the time of slavery, soothed so many souls. The music revolutionized the ideas about what was possible musically. People from all over the world flocked to the Motor Town

(Detroit) where the label was first located and derived its name, to experience the music for themselves.

There were a great number of successful singers, song writers and musicians that used music to transcend the harsh realities of being Black in the United States. My mother absolutely loved Smokey Robinson, who said, “People would listen to it, and they'd say, 'Aha, they use more bass. Or they use more drums.... When we were first successful with it, people were coming from Germany, France, Italy, Mobile, Alabama from New York, Chicago, California, from everywhere. Just to record in Detroit. They figured it was in the air, that if they came to Detroit and recorded on the freeway, they'd get the Motown sound. Listen, the Motown sound to me is not an audible sound. It's spiritual, and it comes from the people that make it happen.” The spiritual that made Motown was the same spiritual that made it possible to survive the moments beginning with chattel slavery.

The young white people of that time were in line to inherit the country as part of their socio-political birth right and were really rebels without a cause. Maybe they were rebellious because they wanted to live in a country that embraced cultural diversity, a country that was truly the land of the free and so, they were brave. Reflecting on the legacy of Motown, Smokey Robinson said, “Into the '60s, I was still not of a frame of mind that we were not only making music, we were making history. But I did recognize the impact because acts were going all over the world at that time. I recognized the bridges that we crossed, the racial problems and the barriers that we broke down with music. I recognized that because I lived it. I would come to the South in the early days of Motown and the audiences would be segregated. Then they started to

get the Motown music and we would go back and the audiences were integrated and the kids were dancing together and holding hands.”

I remember a Sam Cook song that my mother turned up whenever it played on the radio:

I was born by the river
in a little tent
Oh and just like that river
I've been running, ever since
it's been a long
a long time coming
but I know
a change gon' come
Oh yes it will

It's been too hard livin
but I'm afraid to die
cause I don't know what's up there
beyond the sky

...I go to the movie
and I go downtown
Somebody keep tellin me

don't hang around...

then I go
to my brother
and I say brother help me please
but he winds up
knocking me
back down on my knees
oh there's been times that I thought
I couldn't last for long
but now I think I able to
carry on
its been a long
a long time coming
but I know
a change gon come

It is a sad song. The river reminds me of the river Jordan, the one that leads to heaven and is so frequently referred to in 'Spirituals.' The song makes me think that the artist really believed that heaven was within reach here on earth, but running away like he has had to do 'ever since' he was born or maybe he thought that the earth would be heavenly if the discriminatory acts that he refers to in the lines, "I go to the movies and I go downtown, but somebody keeps tellin me

don't hang around" were changed. It seems to me that he really was afraid of heaven or maybe he thought things were already on earth as they were in heaven. It is a beautiful song. My sister says that she likes this song so much, but she isn't sure why. The song penetrates her heart like joy in the morning. I like it so much that I dream it sometimes.

Fourteen

When you wake up early in the morning
Feeling sad like so many of us do
Hold a little soul
And make life your goal
And surely something's gotta come to you

It's Alright, Curtis Mayfield, 1961

I always wanted an older brother. I think that I had one. Maybe he is not in heaven. Maybe he is still alive. My mother, when she was twelve, was pregnant. When she felt the pain she walked two miles to the hospital, went into the bathroom and delivered a baby on the floor. I imagined the route she must have taken. From 14 Belle Avenue, she probably walked down East Main Street to Presidential Boulevard before crossing the fastest river in the world, the Passaic River, clocked at 314 mph. The river feeds Paterson's Great Falls. The Falls was the reason that early settlers came to Paterson, NJ. They wanted to harvest the hydro power. The native people of the local Hackensack tribe once harvested fish from this river, but when I was a little girl, it was a filthy river and people weren't allowed to eat from it. The river was poisoned by the Agent Orange byproduct dioxin. Agent Orange was generated by the Diamond Shamrock Chemical Plant in Newark, NJ as a defoliation chemical used during the Vietnam War. I saw cars, shopping carts, tires and everything that was unwanted floating in that river. It used to make me so sad. It was probably the same moment in 1972 when my mother crossed the filthy, poisoned, rushing river when the Clean Water Act was passed to improve the health of the waterway. She

probably took Straight Street and walked up 12th Ave where my bootlegger great-grandparents built their home after they migrated to the *Silk City* as Paterson is known. My mother passed the bootleggers' house and had to walk all the way up to East 30th Street where she would have passed the people doing their city living before eventually reaching far enough up Broadway where there were tree lined streets, big beautiful homes and Barnett Memorial Hospital. My mother walked into the hospital delivery room, a scared and confused little girl in great pain, delivered somebody on the bathroom floor and then she walked home. She says that she didn't even check to see if "it" was a boy or a girl. I think he was my brother. I think that I might recognize him if we ever meet. I don't know.

She probably took the same route back home. Maybe she stopped to rest on her grandparents' front porch. Sitting on that porch is like sitting in the audience. The corner of 12th Ave and Straight Street provided mostly traffic as entertainment. We used to play, "That's My Car." To play, you had to be the first to point the car you liked and sing out the words, "That's my car!" When the train passed on its pedestaled path, we'd jump up and down while cheering, "Yay, Yay, Choo-choo train!" until the train was out of sight. The view from the porch included the buildings directly across the street. The buildings were multi-family dwellings and a drama would play out every day. There was always something going on. North of the buildings was an empty dirt lot, an asphalt parking lot and Gene's Liquor Store. The people would buy their drinks and hang out in the lot. I saw my aunt's husband get shot on that asphalt lot. He was there to discuss with his wife's ex-boyfriend the space that his wife needed. I was sitting in the back seat of my aunt's car when the sound of the shot filled the air. My aunt screamed into her hands. The

sky was clear on that horrible night when my aunt became a widow. She was pregnant with her daughter who grew up knowing only the stories of her father.

My great-grandparents first settled in Atlantic City, which was infested with bootleggers during Prohibition thanks to the port city's ability to receive international shipments of alcohol. From Atlantic City, they moved to Paterson. My great-grandfather's sisters, who had faces with the same number of moles as the number of stars in the clear, night sky, remained in Atlantic City. Grandfather bootlegged from the front first floor window while we slept from the time Gene's liquor store closed until it opened again in the morning. People would tap, tap; tap on the window to make their purchases from the man behind the curtain.

Grandfather was almost all white by the time I met him. His skin was splotchy and he was bald. I never saw him outside of the house. Maybe it was because his melanin had changed him from a handsome, dark skinned, Black man to a balding white man. I don't know. I remember that he loved ice cream and used to give us quarters to buy those little cups of ice cream with the tiny bit of fudge on top. We'd peel back the paper lid and eat it slowly with a wooden spoon. He enjoyed watching us eat it, but his lactose intolerance prohibited his consumption.

The year that my great-grandmother was born, the world was at war. In that same year, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson addressed the Gentlemen of Congress (There was no such person as a congress woman in those days) and delivered his speech called The Fourteen Points. The speech outlined precisely what should be done in order to create world peace. President Wilson believed so passionately in his plan for world peace that he issued The Fourteen Points worldwide, paid lip service and air dropped pamphlets over Germany.

Meanwhile, millions of people were dying from Influenza or Spanish Flu depending on which propaganda one wants to believe. No matter the name, an estimated one hundred million people died worldwide. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania nearly five thousand people died during the week ending October 16th. The newspapers reported the deaths due to virus alongside the deaths due to war. The world was in mourning. Perhaps my grandmother's grandmother was in mourning too, I don't know. I do know that she named her daughter, my great grandmother, "Life Goddess" which translates to Eva Mae. The first part of her name combination, Eva, is translated from almost every language as Life and her second name Mae is the Gaelic/ Celtic word for Goddess.

Maybe she intended to name her daughter after the granddaughter of John Edwin, a free Black man. His granddaughter, the popular actress Mae West, was born Mary Jane West. She began performing professionally in Vaudeville in the Hal Clarendon Stock Company in 1907 at the age of fourteen. Mae West claimed to be a spiritualist and thought of herself as the reincarnation of Catherine the Great. She was bold, sexy and ahead of her time. She entertained audiences for several decades until her death in 1947. Her career lasted more than 40 years. When Life Goddess was born, Mae West was a 25-year-old Brooklyn actress who did an exciting new step called "The Shimmy." She introduced the Shimmy to audiences in New York City and sang a song: "Ev'rybody Shimmies Now." She became known as the 1918 Shimmy Queen. She also starred in "Sometime," a theatre production on Broadway. Her performance made the phrase, "Come up and see me sometime" iconic. Zora Neale Hurston, a writer, was among the critics who accused Mae West of being one of the many white entertainers who performed Black music, but Mae West only passed for white.

By whichever means her mother chose the name, my great- grandmother, Life Goddess, daughter of a woman with the royal name Catherine, gave her own daughter, my grandmother, the royal name Catherine too. My grandmother gave her daughter, my mother, the royal name Marie Antoinette and so from this long line of powerful women with powerful names, I was born Talena Lachelle and renamed myself Talena Lachelle Queen. My name is both homage to my maternal ancestry and a rebellion to patriarchal and marital last names.

In his Fourteen Points speech, President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, concluded his address to the “Gentlemen of Congress” with words so beautiful that my eyes watered when I read them:

We have spoken now, surely, in terms too concrete to admit of any further doubt or question. An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak. Unless this principle be made its foundation no part of the structure of international justice can stand. The people of the United States could act upon no other principle; and to the vindication of this principle they are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything that they possess. The moral climax of this the culminating and final war for human liberty has come, and they are ready to put their own strength, their own highest purpose, their own integrity and devotion to the test.

– January 8, 1918

Maybe “the people of the United States” included Native American people forced to reservations. The Ute people were forced to a “Consolidated Indian Reservation” in 1918. Maybe “the people of the United States” included Chinese people who had worked on the railroads system, but were part of the Asiatic Barred Zone in 1918. Maybe disenfranchised slave descendants Black people like Catherine who gave birth to her daughter Life Goddess in 1918 were “the people of the United States.” Maybe immigrants like Irving Berlin of Jewish descent who wrote God Bless America on the U.S. Army base at Camp Upton in Yamphank, NY in 1918 and homosexuals like those who helped to cultivate Mae West’s life long career during the years that included 1918 were “the people of the United States.” Maybe the falsely imprisoned people who were arrested using the Sedition Act signed by the eloquent President Wilson in 1918 were “the people of the United States” as well as the white citizens. I don’t know.

I do know that people were busy dying, people were busy mourning, people were busy working, people were busy dancing the Shimmeys and there is a fair chance that many people didn’t even hear The Fourteen Points speech and that’s a shame because if President Wilson was right, we’d be in the mist world peace.

The speech became the foundation for the League of Nations which was created to prevent any further wars after the World War, later known as World War I to distinguish it from World War II. The League of Nations failed and then reestablished as the United Nations. The words of the Fourteen Points speech are beautiful, but I don’t know if they are true.

say its alright...
say it alright
its alright, have a good time
cause its alright
whoa its alright...

Fourteen

*I feel mighty fine, y'all
I've got music on my radio
Feel mighty fine, girl
I've got music on my radio, oh, oh, oh
I feel like I'm gonna kiss you
Standing beneath that mistletoe*

Merry Christmas, Baby BB King, 2001

Guion Bluford, Ronald McNair, Frederick D. Gregory, Charles F. Bolden Jr., Mae Jemison, Bernard A. Harrison Jr., Winston E. Scott, Robert Curbeam, Michael P. Anderson, Stephanie Wilson, Joan Higginbotham, B. Alvin Drew, Leland D. Melvin, and Robert Satcher, these are the names of the fourteen African American astronauts who have gone to space since the United States' space program began in 1959. They have gotten closer to heaven than any other slave descendant. There have been over three hundred white American astronauts since 1959. When I was six years old, Dr. Guion Bluford became the first slave descendant astronaut for NASA – he was 37 years old at the time. I had just learned to make a five point star without lifting my pencil. I added stars to everything. I drew houses under night skies with lots of stars- a break from my usual smiley face sun over a house with a single tree next to it. In the tree I'd place a bird and a nest. Sometimes the tree was a happy, nurturing apple tree. I put leaves and stems on every apple. Whenever I drew a night sky though, I drew a Weeping Willow tree next to the house. I thought it was amazing- the idea of a tree weeping. When I was 9, Dr. Bluford finally went to space and on September 5th, he was among the crew of the first ever night landing. I wonder how close Dr. Bluford got to the North Star.

At Christmas, all the children looked for the North Star. My grandmother told us about how three wise men used the North Star to find baby Jesus. She said that we get presents at Christmas because the Wise Men brought presents to baby Jesus on the day that he was born in a manger. It is an interesting thing that we are not visited by three dark skinned men arriving by ordinary means with impractical gifts at Christmas. Instead, we are visited by one jolly man on a magical, deer-powered sleigh that is practically a rocket ship streaking across the stars carrying impractical gifts. If there were three dark skinned wise men coming to the house on Christmas Eve, I would not have been afraid and angry the time when, at night, my mother had a fight with my brother's father. During the fight, my mother got a big patch of her hair ripped out. Her hair was ripped out.

My great grandmother would take my braids down gently. She'd nourish my hair with food like mayonnaise and eggs. She would brush my hair and put big plaits, one on each side, and tie a bow of red yarn on the ends. My family's reverence for hair goes back for generations. My great grandmother's mother was a cosmetologist. She had one of the few jobs that a slave descendant woman could have which included, 'fixin' hair', 'keepin' house,' and 'sittin' kids.' I don't know how my grandmother felt about her daughter having a bald spot the size of a man's hand. I didn't ask her. She was probably mad, maybe even moved to violence. I imagine that my great-grandmother and her mother would have cried if they saw it. I use to stand on things when my mother was seated so that I could look at her bald spot. It was there all day, every day for a lot of days. I asked her, "Does it hurt?" she said, "No," but I didn't believe her. The fight was loud and spilled out into the street. The kids and I got up from our Christmas Eve fake sleep and tried to help my mother fight a man. We sat on the bunk bed and I tried to soothe my brothers'

crying when the fight was over. When morning came, my mother was smiling and she gave me the Thriller album.

My mother had a vast collection of records and albums. I played the Jackson Five albums over and over again on her record player. On this Christmas she was smiling because she'd gotten me my own record player and a Michael Jackson album. My mother and the 'King of Pop' were born on the same day of the same year. Michael was able to, with the strict encouragement of his father, visit outside of the oppression and hardship of being Black in the United States, but first he had to play to segregated audiences, enter through the back doors of establishments and sleep in the vehicle on the side of the roads between performances because he was Black. Over the years, his costumes became more and more elaborate. Michael Jackson created a style that was uniquely his, not stereotypically Black. He earned enough money to eventually change his appearance, but he was never able to transcend the color-line. He lightened his skin. He chemically processed his hair. He altered the Afrocentric features of his nose and lips. His chin, I think that was different too. He bought himself a new body. The alterations required surgery and medication, lots of it. His purchased phenotype resembled no known earthly race. When all of his surgeries were done, he was about thirty seven years old. In the same year, 1995, he wrote and performed, "They Don't Really Care About Us." The lyrics depict a social climate very much like the Jim Crow South:

...Don't you black or white me

All I wanna say is that

They don't really care about us

Tell me what has become of my life
I have a wife and two children who love me
I am the victim of police brutality, now
I'm tired of bein' the victim of hate
You're rapin' me of my pride
Oh, for God's sake
I look to heaven to fulfill its prophecy...
Set me free...

Michael Jackson, 1995

The song is an angry song. It discusses the likely disapproval of Martin Luther King, if he were alive to witness the oppression of the Black people in the United States. Jackson asks important questions like, “What has become of my rights?” and “Am I invisible because you ignore me?” He addressed the United States government and reminded the nation of the Emancipation Proclamation when he sang, “Your proclamation promised me free liberty.” The drum is used to create a sound that can only be described as protest. There are two versions of the music video. In one version, Michael Jackson appears to be in a poor African country. He is wearing blue jeans, an African dashiki and he is surrounded by thousands of people with Afrocentric phenotypes. In the other version of the music video, Michael Jackson is in prison surrounded by thousands of people with Afrocentric phenotypes. The song, *They Don't Really Care About Us*, did not gain the popularity that *Thriller* did.

When I was sophomore in college, Mae Jemison of Alabama, a physician, became the first slave descendant, woman, astronaut to go to space. Dr. Jemison, the daughter of a slave state, accomplished without a ratified Equal Rights Amendment, what no other slave descendant woman had done before her. My mother's teacher at the school for pregnant girls would have been surprised. If he thought that a slave descendant couldn't be a doctor or that a woman couldn't be a doctor, what would he think about a slave descendant, woman, doctor, astronaut in space? Mae Jemison got closer to heaven than any of us.

My daughter saw my mother crying one day. It was Christmas time and we were listening to the Motown Christmas station with the Pandora app on my iPad. My husband had finally returned with a fresh cut tree and we were singing and decorating. My three year old son stood on the dining room chair so that he could be tall enough to dance with me. His little hands grasped mine and he moved my arms up and down as if we were in a Waltz. That's when it happened. My mother started crying while she watched us. These were not tears of joy. My baby girl pointed at the tears. She pointed. Pointing is not allowed at our house. I just don't like pointing; it reminds me of all the auction block slaves that were pointed to and sold. Pointing reminds me of all the falsely accused men and women in the segregated south, in the segregated United States, "Please point to the person..." It seems to me that a pointing index finger is step one of something bad about to happen. Pointing is like sorcery, powerfully bad.

She was horrified when she called to me, "Momma! Grandma is crying. Look!" My daughters have never seen me cry when I wasn't laughing. The inner city requires a tough exterior. I never learned to cry. In fact, I was actively discouraged from crying. We don't cry at my house. Maybe I have created a space where my children do not have full freedom of

expression. Maybe they don't have any reasons to cry. I don't know. I looked. I asked my mother right then and there what was happening. She replied, "I have never had a fresh cut tree, my mother never did these kinds of things with me, I don't have any good childhood memories, every kind-of-good memory is associated with something bad." We all stood still. Pandora radio continued to play Motown. My mother apologized and then said that she was glad that I intentionally created positive memories for my children.

My mother and I talked some years before that crying day about intentionally creating positive memories for children. Intentional happiness is why we put up trees, hang stockings, bake cookies and play games. We know that Jesus the Christ didn't expect us to select the just right star for the top of the tree. We do it for the love of each other and for the memories.

I remember that my mother had an artificial tree with color coordinated branches that coincided with the wooden pole that also had colors. It was like coloring by the numbers. I really looked forward to the annual assembly. We had colorful ornaments, some were handmade, and various sized bulbs. She let us string popcorn and put it on our tree. The tree, in ancient Egyptian tradition, symbolizes triumph over death. The tradition of stringing popcorn is a German-American tradition that maybe my mother got from one of her very good friends who was a German woman. When the German brought their Christmas traditions to the United States governor, William Bradford, passed laws prohibiting making any observance of December 25 (other than a church service) a penal offense. People in Massachusetts were fined for hanging decorations.

Maybe my mother can still have a positive Christmas memory with her mother. Maybe as an adult she has decided that Christmas is not about mothers and daughters; it is about Christians

and Jesus the Christ, son of Mary or maybe it is about anybody who loves. I wonder if she knows.

*Merry Christmas baby
Sure do treat me nice
Bought me a diamond ring for Christmas
I feel like I'm in paradise*

Fourteen

*Hush little baby
Don't say a word
Momma's gonna buy you a mocking bird*

Hush Little Baby, Mother Goose, 1697

My mother says that when she told her mother that she was being touched by Charles Powell my grandmother did not believe her. I think that my grandmother did believe her. I think that my grandmother didn't have an alternative place to live. I think that my grandmother was afraid of her jealous and abusive husband. My grandmother told me about how Charles Powell would smack her if she took too long to come from the store. Charles Powell would say that she must have been there dealing with some man. Charles Powell would curse her and degrade her. My grandmother stopped going to the store.

Charles Powell was significantly older than my grandmother when he married the sixteen year old. Charles Powell's bride looked young for a long time. Charles Powell would never get from over top of her until she got older and then Charles Powell beat her all the time. She left Charles Powell.

A belle is a beautiful girl or woman, especially the most beautiful at a particular event or in a particular group. Two such beings lived at 14 Belle Avenue when Charles Powell molested raped my mother, repeatedly. I think that my aunt was raped too. I think that my aunt was afraid to tell the truth because my mother's bravery did not save her. My mother said that she thinks Charles Powell chose her because she looked the most like her biological father. She thought that Charles Powell was jealous of her father. I think that Charles Powell made each stepdaughter keep his secret. Maybe it was part of Charles Powell's strategy. I don't know.

*Shhh, little baby
don't say a word*

Fourteen

*We shall overcome, we shall overcome,
We shall overcome someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.*

*The Lord will see us through,
We're on to victory
We'll walk hand in hand
We are not afraid
The truth shall make us free
We shall live in peace,*

We Shall Overcome, Pete Seeger, 1963

President Nixon, the slave descendant President Edgar Daniel Nixon of the NAACP not the President Richard Nixon who embarrassed the United States, bailed out Rosa Parks and propelled the Civil Rights movement for \$14. The first \$10 was to satisfy the court fines imposed after the hour and half trial where she was found guilty of all charges. The other \$4 dollars was to satisfy court fees.

By the time I met Rosa Parks she was already an elder. She came to my high school which was named for her, the first one in the nation: Rosa Parks School of Fine and Performing Arts. She was photographed with the building's name, her name, above her head. It is a memorable picture. A black and white cropped version is included in my high school yearbook. The staff and I really wanted to include the photograph in a way that was respectful to her and her legacy. We settled on a mixed media framed version on the very last page. She is wearing a hat, glasses and a smile. I believe it was late fall because she was wearing a nice coat.

I had never seen a photograph of Rosa Parks before meeting her. I'd seen drawings, but the drawing did not prepare me for the meeting. I expected her to be as big as her legend; tall like Maya Angelou. I expected her to be strong voiced like my aunt. I thought her words would dart to the back of the room and bounce off the walls. I was not prepared at all for her palm sized presence.

On the day of Her Home-Going, I was teaching at a girls' middle school in Seattle, Washington and had the honor of recounting the story of her small stature, small voice, small hand on my shoulder and the grandeur of her legacy. I found it fitting to tell my students that Rosa Parks also attended an all girls' school. I didn't tell them that her school was burned down twice by the racist arsonist who ostracized the school and resented the white Northerners who built the school for Black children. For girls. For slave descendant Black girls.

Being a slave descendant Black girl in the United States is hard, but Rosa Parks who never became a mother (maybe she couldn't have any children or maybe she and her husband had grown weary of the plight of Black children in the United States. I don't know) made more opportunities possible for women like Secretary of State Condeleezza Rice who spoke at Rosa Parks' Home-Going Celebration and my mother who, like Rosa Parks, was willing to fight for what she believed.

Where will the sun set? Where will the sun rise? Some things you just know. The Civil Right organizers knew that the local authorities would, at least, arrest any slave descendant man, woman, or child who did not comply with the long list of Jim Crow laws. Months of planning culminated with the decision to have a young, honors student refuse to move from her seat, but

the unwed eighteen year old became pregnant. The organizers decided that the mother-to-be was unfit as the symbol of Civil Rights because her moral character would be judged. Rosa Parks was the NAACP secretary, humble and married when she was chosen. The organizers knew that her moral character would withstand the scrutiny of national inspection. Rosa Parks boarded the bus as planned. She refused to give up her seat as planned. And sure as the sun rises in the east, she was arrested.

Rosa Parks lived in Michigan when she returned to the essence. Her remains were flown to Alabama where she was born. Maybe the fourteen hour drive was too long. I don't know. After the Alabama Home Going celebration her remains were boarded on a city bus much like the one that began her legacy in 1955. In this instance she was the only passenger. The city bus carrying the remains of Rosa Parks dressed as a church deaconess in a finely appointed coffin drove over roads where there used to be homes on her way to the Rotunda of the United States Capital. She was the first slave descendant Black woman, first Black person ever and only the second woman in the history of the United States to have the honor of lying in State.

A reported fifty thousand people gathered at the rotunda to pay their respects. The celebration was televised worldwide. When the ceremony was done her remains were again boarded onto the city bus. The driver took a dozen of the interstate roads on the Pershing Map that President Eisenhower made possible with the Federal Highway Act of 1956. The Federal Highway Act, in addition to completing the goal of creating a transcontinental highway system, displaced a disproportionate number of slave descendent Black families. In 1960, the displacement prompted the artist Sam Abbot to create a poster which read, "White man's road thru black man's home." Sometimes the Federal Highway opponents succeeded in altering the

path of the interstate, but many times the road went straight thru the property owned and/or occupied by slave descendant Black families who, once again, were forced to sacrifice for the good of the country. Folks who used to be able to cut through the yard to visit with their kin were forced to cross an increasingly busy highway.

Rosa Parks finished her journey to Michigan where she was placed for her final rest at Woodlawn Cemetery in the chapel's mausoleum. The mausoleum was renamed the Rosa L. Parks Freedom Chapel. The tombstone that her predeceased husband, Raymond Parks, prepared for her described her as "wife."

The Civil Rights Protest song 'We Shall Overcome' played during many parts of Rosa Parks Home Going Celebration from Michigan to Alabama and back and for audiences around the world. The song was the official protest song during the Civil Rights Movement that began in the 1950's and the lyrics were spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as other leaders, but the song did not become a legitimate protest song until the British Army's Parachute Regiment raised their rifles, shot and murdered (maybe it isn't called murder if the shooter is a soldier, I don't know) thirteen people and injured fourteen others on January 30, 1972 or Bloody Sunday depending on how one wants to remember a date. Twenty years passed before 'We Shall Overcome' was considered a legitimate protest song even though it was the official protest song for the unofficial war against slave descendants since near the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.

The song was originally called "I'll Overcome Someday." It was written by the 'Prince of Preachers', Charles Albert Tindley in 1948. Tindley's father was a slave, but his mother was a free woman. He was raised among slaves, but was considered free because his mother was free.

Sometimes husbands would find paid work and eventually buy their family's freedom. Maybe Tindley's father managed to earn enough money to buy his wife's freedom. I don't know.

Tindley earned his education by employing hard work, perseverance and tutors. He did not attend school. He was able to learn Hebrew, and Greek and when it was time, he passed the written test for his ordainment. He was given an honorary doctorate degree from two different Universities. He was very active in social justice issues. When the film, "Birth of a Nation" was released, Tindley lead a peaceful protest. He and the protestors were attacked by whites. Tindley was severely injured and treated at home.

Seeger and Caraway, the writers credited with the official protest song, changed the song words from "I'll Overcome Someday" to "We Shall Overcome" and altered the meter with Tindley's consent. Maybe a measure of whether or not we (slave descendants) have overcome will be when there is no need to celebrate instances of bravery. Deep in my heart this I do believe, but I don't know.

We shall overcome
We shall overcome someday.

Fourteen

*O courage my soul, and let us journey on,
For the night is dark and I am far from home.
O thanks be to God, the morning light appears,
And the storm is passing over, Hallelujah!*

The Storm is Passing Over, Charles A. Tindley, 1905

I never understood why we hid from God. Doesn't God know exactly where we are at all times? I'd been taught that God knew my thoughts and that I needed to think righteously. I'd been taught that God knew my heart and every cell of my body, that my body was God's temple, that he knew me better than I knew myself and that he had a plan for my life. He knew every trial. He knew every tribulation. I'd been taught that God watched over the sparrow and that he watched over me. God healed the sick. God never gave anyone more than they could bear. The Sunday school teacher said that God lived within me; that Jesus was always beside me and such being the case, I was never alone. I was told that God was Love, that God was angry, and that God was preparing us for the Judgment Day. My grandmother told me that God could strike a person down right where they stood if He wanted and, from time to time, He did.

About a quarter of a century before the Emancipation Proclamation on a Thursday at around 1:00pm on May 7, 1840, God's thunderous voice spoke. The nearly four thousand slaves that were working in the fields under a clear sky on what was an otherwise normal day of misery found each other in the mist of one of the worst storm in the history of the United States. The Natchez Tornado touched down and followed the Mississippi River which bordered the Concordia Plantations. Hundreds of slaves were killed within the half hour. Afterwards, the sky

was calm, the land destroyed and the living devastated. The official report detailed 20 miles of destruction, 317 white people dead and 109 white people injured. The slaves were not counted.

Referring to the same storm, William Tiler Johnson a freedman and businessman wrote in his diary about the storm and the aftermath. He recorded that there were still bodies trapped under buildings after days had passed. Ten days later, he wrote that the river was still high and running over. I imagine that this storm took years to recover from. Maybe it is the inspiration for the taught and learned fear of storms in my family.

William Tiler Johnson was born a slave in 1809. His master was likely his father who had earlier freed Johnson's mother and sister. Johnson became an apprentice to a barber in Natchez, Mississippi and in 1830 took ownership of his brother-in-law's barbershop. He was married to a free black woman with whom he fathered eleven children in 1835. In the same year he started a diary where he recorded his activities and financial transactions.

Regarding the storm, the Free Trader reported, "Twas the voice of the Almighty that spoke, and prudence should dictate reverence rather than execration. All have suffered, and all should display the feelings of humanity and the benevolence of religion!"

References to storms in gospel hymns include Life Storms which are worldly troubles that disrupt the ordinary. A storm can be long or short in duration. An example of a Life storm includes, addiction, foreclosure, illness, unemployment, and anything that is undesirable. The expected response to a Life Storm is prayer.

*Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
The storm is passing over,
Hallelujah!*

Fourteen

*Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck;
And yet methinks I have Astronomy,
But not to tell of good or evil luck,
Of plagues, of dearths, or seasons' quality;
Nor can I fortune to brief minutes tell,
Pointing to each his thunder, rain and wind,
Or say with princes if it shall go well
By oft predict that I in heaven find:
But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,
And, constant stars, in them I read such art
As truth and beauty shall together thrive,
If from thyself, to store thou wouldst convert;
Or else of thee this I prognosticate:
Thy end is truth's and beauty's doom and date.*

14th Sonnet, William Shakespeare, 1609

My grandmother, while she was estranged from Charles Powell, her husband, fell in love with my grandfather. I don't know why my grandmother never divorced her husband. Maybe she didn't believe in divorce? Maybe getting a marriage license was cheaper than cost of divorce? Maybe she just never got around to it? I don't know.

My grandfather was a tall man who played a mean saxophone. He knew his way around a flute too. My grandmother watched him play down at the club and before long he wooed her with his poetry. He sketched pictures of her from memory and his tenderness thrilled her. He was a proud man who once angrily went to my grandmother's job and told her boss, "My wife don't work." That was her last day of employment at the establishment. She was legally married to someone else, but generations of common law marriages and broom jumping ceremonies had set

the stage for what constituted a marriage. My grandparents separated when my mother was eleven and my aunt was nine because my grandfather was arrested.

It was 1969 and the arrest of Black men was common. Some of those arrested were because he was falsely accused or was simply Black. In the case of my extremely brilliant and talented grandfather, he was justly arrested for theft. The action went against everything that he reportedly stood for, but he had an addiction to heroin that led him far from his healthy habits, far from his family and far from his principles. When he came home from jail, he lived with my mother for a while at our house with the green carpet steps.

My grandfather used Magic Shave in the mornings. He'd mix the powder solution and smooth it over his red-haired head, cheeks, chin and neck. Then he'd use a straight razor to scrape it off. I loved to watch. I really wanted to be the one to hold the blade and gently glide it over his cheek and the rest. I wanted my hand to be the delicate touch on his face. I loved his voice. I loved his height. I loved his poetry. I love his saxophone. I loved his flute. I loved his books. I loved his walk. I loved to watch him read the newspaper. I loved how he ate his food. I loved how he smiled. I loved his sarcasm. I love his etchings. I wanted to love how he used his ice skates that hung in the back hallway, but I never got to see him wear them. This man was my first love. I was forty years old and twice divorced before any other love ever came close.

They had a Shakespearian love for each other, my grandparents did, but not much else if he could not provide and she could not work. The circumstances forced my grandmother to accept Charles Powell's, her legal husband, invitation to please come home with her daughters. Maybe she thought herself lucky to have a place to go with her children who were her greatest gift from

her loving God. She had thought of herself as barren and grieved over unborn children before my grandfather proved her wrong.

It is nice to think of my mother as a product of a Shakespearian love. I imagine that my grandfather thought of my mother as one of his greatest accomplishments. He loved my grandmother more than he loved his two creative hands. I imagine that he thought as Shakespeare did that truth and beauty would live together in harmony if my grandmother would only turn her focus from herself to creating a child or else truth and beauty would all end when she died. My grandmother birthed two stunning daughters. She had eleven grandchildren, more than thirty-five great grandchildren and a handful of great- great grandchildren. My grandmother is still counting.

When I told my grandmother that I was going to college she replied, “If you graduate from high school.” It never occurred to me that I might not graduate from high school. The comment caused me to pause for a long time and I thought about it for months before I realized that my mother and her sister hadn’t graduated from high school. I actually didn’t know anyone who went to college except my teachers. Further reflection revealed that my neighborhood had zero college graduates. My godmother told me that she went to college, but didn’t finish. I saw people in June, strangers, walking down the street with the congratulation balloons for the high school graduates, but I had no idea what became of them. There was no culture of respect for higher education in my immediate family or neighborhood. The truth is that I was teased for being smart, for talking white, and for being soft spoken. My mother yelled at me for having a quiet voice. The phrases ‘college boy’ and ‘school girl’ were insults in my neighborhood. I

frustrated my mother when I did my homework before my chores. The rule was that the chores needed to be done by the time my mother got home from work. She couldn't help me with my homework, but she always wanted to see my grades. The totality of our family discussion about education was the results on the report card which started the early polarization between the children. Those who achieved the desired results were rewarded and those who didn't were punished, sometimes severely, but never supported or encouraged. I remember the implied message as, "Do ~~well~~ good or else." I was self-motivated.

I remember wearing my black tassel, black cap, black gown, and red and white hood and stepping out of the car in Downtown Paterson. I stepped in front of a little girl who stared at me in disbelief. Her mother touched her on the shoulder and said, "I know. That's nice right?" I wish that I would have gotten to know her or thought to talk to her to tell her that she could graduate from college as well. I think that my mother started working on her GED at the community college around that time. My grandmother did not attend my high school or college graduation ceremonies, but she is proud of me. Proud enough to hold me like I am "still her baby."

*Not from the stars do I my judgement pluck;
...But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,*

Fourteen Artist Statement

Fourteen began as a two page document with a single song that I had no intention of developing further. My initial goal in writing *Fourteen* was to share a simple creative story triggered by a memory with my cohort. Their writing and more importantly, their perspectives about my writing were very useful because the inquiries pushed my writing in ways that I would not have considered. The feedback for *Fourteen* included an appreciation for the matter-of-fact journalistic way that I tell difficult stories. I wanted to keep the journalistic aspects for difficult stories, especially when the subject matter included my immediate family.

The decision to expand *Fourteen* was encouraged by Dr. Joe Milutis and the twenty two page document was turned in to him as a class assignment. I thought that was the end of *Fourteen*, but I shared it with two other people who encouraged me to continue this piece, my thesis advisor Dr. Jeanne Heuving and my mother Marie Antoinette Harris. It was my intention to ignore them until my thesis work was complete.

Fourteen is influenced by the writers, singers, musicians, artists, people of my African American culture who have left an imprint on my spiritual being. This imprint is always operating whether I chose to access my connection with my forbears or not. I did not know what I was going to write when I sat down to write *Fourteen*. I did not know which historical figures, which incidents, which dates, or anecdotal stories would arrive on the page. Sometimes, I didn't recognize the imprints that showed themselves in my writing, mostly because I had the foolish

idea that I could write as an individual about a history that proves none of us are individuals; that we are the sum of our histories.

Fourteen takes on difficult topics such as chattel slavery, sexual violence, racism and discrimination. I use music, tangents and a prejudicial preference for the number *Fourteen* as tools to aid my telling. The telling of *Fourteen* is, consciously, a slice of United States history. It is a personal history; it is autobiography; it is biography and it is African American history. *Fourteen* is written as creative nonfiction and embraces a rich and poetic language that answer the questions, what does it mean to be part of a family? What does it mean to be a part of a lineage? How do we think about lineage and family in the context of African American history, where family and lineage have been contained, reshaped, or torn asunder through slavery and sexual violence?”

I wrote the first line of *Fourteen* after a phone call with my mother who was wearing her tired voice when we spoke. Her Facebook post, the reason I called, said, “I could complain, but I’m blessed.” Our conversation was short, but I was reminded, in those few minutes, of all the stories that she’d shared with me over the years. I could not include all of my mother’s stories because there simply isn’t enough space or time to tell a lifetime in my thesis. I do have her permission and her insistence to tell these stories. Listening to the song, “A Change is Gonna Come,” reminded me of my mother who, like the rest of my family, really enjoys music. That particular song by Sam Cook was one of the songs that made an impression on me during my formative years. Of all the songs included in *Fourteen*, this one is the anchor because it incorporates my mother’s affection for music, the influence that music has had on my life, the

gospel influence on the evolution of African American music and a history of the social climate for Black people in the United States.

I chose to emphasize the number *Fourteen* because it was my mother's age at the time of my birth. My choice was inspired by Lyn Hejinian's *MY LIFE* in which she used the constraint thirty-eight. Each of Hejinian's thirty-eight prose poems are thirty-eight lines each, her age at the time. Instead of using my number as a constraint, I used my number as a meditation. I focused on how the stories I tell related to the number *Fourteen*. The story was always more important than the number. The meditation allowed me to include histories that were only serendipitously related to my number rather than histories that focused my number.

I use the repetitious phrase, "I don't know" throughout the *Fourteen*. I use it in places that have opposing histories and opposing ideas; where interpretation is critically important. For example, I use the phrase "I don't know" to ask the reader to ponder if there is a difference between incest and rape. My intent was to draw attention to the inherent biases in descriptive language especially as they pertain to important experiences and records of history.

Dr. Joe Milutis, who was my professor when I began this writing, gave me the advice to separate the emotionally difficult themes, to make them more tolerable for the reader, by using Sebald like tangents. I took his advice. I needed to go through the document, which was quite short at the time, to find places where I could compose some historically relevant tangents. I picked places that I thought would be unexpected and attempted the kind of tangent that I considered common knowledge. For example, I considered taking a tangent about my grandfather's saxophone. I thought about the number of keys it has, which year it was invented, who invented it, and which famous people played saxophone. I did not recall and did not find in

my research anything that interested me and helped to tell the story I was trying to tell. In another instance, I wanted to talk about heaven, heavenly bodies and African American astronauts. I knew the names of a few, but learned that there were *Fourteen* African American astronauts only after looking for the possible connection to the story I was telling.

In most cases, the process was as a described, but sometimes I had a dream about a person or a particular historical event that I knew needed to be included. Each time I awoke with the event on my mind, I hurried to write the event down because I understand the fleeting nature of dreams. One such case was a dream about Rosa Parks. I learned through my research that Rosa Park's bail was \$14 and decided to include her historical contribution to *Fourteen*.

My inspiration for modeling the tangent came from the *Rings of Saturn* by W.G. Sebald. Sebald makes something simple as taking a walk, historically significant and he points out how walking is something that is often taken for granted. His writing is both intriguing and beautiful in its simplicity. Each of his sections is told in one breath, without even an indent for the reader to take a break. I like it. Sebald presents the history as common knowledge. He never states where the information comes from and it is presumed that what he tells is nonfiction. In Chapter VIII he writes about a conversation regarding sugar, Boulge Park, The Fitzgerald family, The Bredfield nursery, Edward FitzGerald's literary ventures, A Magic Shadow Show, the loss of a friend, a game of dominoes and *Fourteen* other subjects.

Before me, other writers have used the tangent as an imperative tool. Nathaniel Mackey, for example, discussed the tangent in his *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. Mackey dispels the notion that a piece of something should gather rather than disperse its component parts. I am happy for this argument because *Fourteen* is like the music Mackey's

character N is addressing in his letter to Angel of Dust. *Fourteen* is uncomfortable. It is mostly not what the reader is expecting and it does move often away from what the reader might consider the center of the writing, but one cannot find the center of something without moving away from the center. Tangent allows the center to be in view.

In *Fourteen*, I use two voices. When I talk about my family, I allow myself to use instances of alliteration, allusion, personification, imagery and repetition. Enriching the language was necessary to tell the story in a way that truly captured the history as people lived it verses the history as people record it.

The reader learns about the devastation that crack cocaine had on the inner-cities by experiencing a rich language rather than getting a list of facts, dates and deaths. “We lost him in the late 80’s when a new party drug came to the inner city and stole fathers. Crack ripped young men out from under their mothers and made prostitutes out of good girls.” In this excerpt, I tell the true history of the impact that crack cocaine had on my neighborhood, my city and cities like it. I personify crack and characterized it as a thief with the ability to take away something as mighty as a father. I give the personified crack strength by using words like “ripped” and “stole.” I use repetition of the word crack to demonstrate how intruding the drug was in my neighborhood and city. I try to balance the history and the poetry to paint a clear picture that cannot be told properly without embracing a rich poetic language.

On the other hand, I use a factual language especially when I write about a distant and broad history. For example, “Bouie is a variant of the French surname Bouis from the Latin buxus meaning a box tree or boxwood.” This except is most like an encyclopedia entry. It is intended as a tangent that moves the reader away from the emotional content before and after the passage.

Entries like this one are also intended to frame the thinking of the reader. The reader is situated in the history that the colonist had on these United States and is able to make connections between all the different components that work together to tell *Fourteen*. Later in the same passage, I tell the reader that the French relocate to Louisiana, but I never discuss the influence that the French had on the region. I make the assumption that the reader will automatically think about New Orleans, The French Quarter, The Louisiana Compromise, and the Creole language. The two voices both work together and in tension.

It is important to note that I chose to use the description ‘slave descendant’ to differentiate between Africans born on the African continent who have chosen, for whatever reason, to be in the United States from those who were brought from the African continent to the United States via the Atlantic Slave Trade and their descendants because the histories of the separate populations are different. Africans and their descendants, African Americans, who arrived via the Atlantic Slave Trade, were intentionally separated from their history and legacy. They are a culture of people who created their own culture biased in the triumph over pain and suffering. They are, we are, people who fought to be recognized as human. We fought for freedom and equality over and over again. We died for freedom. We lost blood for equality. The Africans in America and the African-Americans do not have common socio-political struggles, we do not share a common bonding history, but we all benefit the victories of the slaves and their descendants. I am African American.

I use the phrase Home Going Celebration instead of funeral. In my family, we used the term Home Going and we try to celebrate the glorious reunion of our loved one with God.

Sometimes I use the dialect of the people in my family. I do this because I love the sounds of their voices and I believe that the person can better characterize themselves when the option is available. In one instance I write my grandmother's words, "I don't truss no bank." It is not my intention to commit an act of "othering" or to place a judgment on the dialect. In my presentation, it is simply an accurate account of the authentic voices in my family.

In *Fourteen*, the standard assumption that a man's wife is the mother of his children and the nucleus of the family is not present. When reading *Fourteen*, the reader should divorce himself from the idea of the traditional nuclear family structure. If the reader does not make this divorce, he will be confused.

Furthermore, when talking about my family, I have chosen not to use names. Instead the reader encounters people based on their relationship to me for example, "my mother," "my uncle" and "my aunt." I have given reverence to the word 'my' and I've used it with great deliberation. The reader will encounter the less personal, "my grandmother's husband" instead of "my step- grandfather" because I wanted to give the intimacy to whom I lovingly claim. In this case: "my grandmother's husband," the affection is attributed to my grandmother, not her husband. In another instance, I say, "my brother" because I love him, he belongs to me, we have a relationship and he is undisputedly mine versus "my father's sister" who is accurately my aunt, but I do not have a relationship with her, I haven't had the opportunity to love her and I cannot claim her with both my heart and mind. The unintentional benefit of using relations instead of names is relief from certain confusion when more than one person in the family has the same name. I use names for historical figures without hesitation and I give the figure's name the same treatment as any other fact or date.

My research included many hours of phone calls with my relatives who were very gracious when confirming my memories and when sharing their memories. I was aware that memory can be flawed and it was important to me to make sure that I was not creating details that did not exist. Sometimes, when I was confirming one of my mother's memories that I received through her telling, I learned perspectives that I did not expect. There was not always a place to include the various perspectives in this version of *Fourteen*. For instance, children were not allowed at my mother's wedding when she was sixteen. When I spoke with my mother's cousins, they remembered being upset because they were not invited. One cousin exclaimed, "Why I can't go to her wedding, she came to my birthday party!" The conversations helped me to gain a larger perspective to write from. Sometimes those conversations were summed in just a few lines in *Fourteen*, but I think the lines point to a larger context. In *Fourteen*, the reader encounters the story of my sixteen year old mother's wedding in the lines, "When my mother got married to find independence which she did find, she left me, her mother, her younger sister, her niece, and her rapist stepfather..." In this case, when I refer to my mother's independence, I am acknowledging the truth that her cousins presented. The adults in our family had recognized the child bride, my mother, as an adult and denied access to children.

I had several group meetings with my maternal cousins in Paterson, NJ. We called them "Cousin Dates." The dates included my first cousins as well as my mother's first cousins. During cousin dates at local restaurants, we shared our memories, caught up on each other's lives, laughed and yelled, drank and ate.

Sometimes I crossed checked the nuances in my family with my friends' families. I wanted to know if my family's traditions were unique to my family or if the traditions were part of the

larger African American culture. For example, my family had a ritual around storms. We shut off everything electrical and remained quiet until the storm passed. I checked with other families and learned that they'd similar experiences regarding storms. Cross checking helped me to avoid making all inclusive statements in error.

I went to Paterson, NJ for three months followed by one week per month as part of my thesis research. I want to saturate myself in the sounds and behaviors of the city. I wanted to sit at my grandmother's house with the mural of family photographs and piles of photo albums that were dependable for generating stories. I wanted to walk around the city and smell the various cultures' foods wafting on the breeze. I went to the historic district looking for questions to ask. I spent some time at community meeting to hear what the Patersonians were thinking. I immersed myself in the ways that Patersonians spoke and behaved.

I interviewed my elders including those that I met by chance, if there is such a thing, in stores, farmer's markets and community meetings. I needed to hear their stories about desegregating schools, race riots, child rearing, sexuality, marriage and everything that they graciously and willing shared.

I also followed my curiosities using internet searches, especially when I wanted to confirm some nugget of history that I'd previously learned or when I wanted to deepen my knowledge on a particular fact. I tried, because I want the information in *Fourteen* to be part of the common knowledge, to use sources that were in the public domain like the NASA website for the names of astronauts and Metro Lyrics for the complete words to songs.

While composing *Fourteen*, I read a stack of African American Literature the size of a tall man unrelated to the research that I pursued for *Fourteen*. I suspect that *Fourteen* was influenced

by my reading; minimally, my immergence in the subject gave me ideas to further research. A partial list includes: Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristic of Negro Expression," Richard Wright's "Blueprint of Negro Expression," W.E.B DuBois' *Souls of Black Folk, Criteria of Negro Art, and Damnation of Women*, Maulana Karenga's *Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function*, Danielle McGuire's "It Was Like All of Us Had Been Raped," Carter G. Woodson's *The MisEducation of the Negro* and Julia Cooper's *Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race*. Other authors included Nathaniel Mackey, Toni Morrison, Henry Louis Gates, Harriet Jacobs and a long list of literary critics and poets.

I was influenced in the way a person is nudged to do or not do something. For example, I talk about what slave descendant children are taught in school regarding their history, a nudging factor was Dr. Carter G. Woodson. His text speaks directly to my points regarding the outcome of withholding African history from African children. He makes his points much differently than I do. I do not quote him in the text, but his influence is there.

Zora Neale Hurston represented a few points of serendipity in my writing. I use the language of my family and sometimes I compose sentences in the tradition of the African American speech pattern outside of dialog. I read Hurston on more than one occasion and I believe that her permission to embrace my native dialect is present in my writing. I wrote about Mae West in *Fourteen* and when I later reviewed Hurston writing I found a reference to West that I did not remember reading. I wondered if I got the idea to include Mae West from Hurston or if my memory of my mother saying, "Come up and see me sometime," was truly the inspiration for including the iconic Mae West.

Reading slave narratives is there somewhere. I read Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown and Sojourner Truth. In *Fourteen*, I discuss Fredrick Douglass by name more than once. The examples that these authors have set allowed me to record history in a way that is plain and honest, lest we forget.

Historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. says, very eloquently, “And the church songs involve – along with the yearning for heaven’s peace- confrontation with the real troubles of the world and the will to do something about them.” I chose to use music in this work because I believe that music tells a kind of story that is not capable of being articulated with words or lyrics alone.

It is no coincidence that gospel music plays a principle role in *Fourteen*. The gospel music was, more often than other kinds of music, able to accompany my story telling and felt better in my chest. The gospel music, for me, is transcending. The music is the imprint that my ancestors left generation after generation.

My inclusion of music, beyond my own affection, can be traced to Jean Toomer’s inclusion of music in *Cane*. I was better able to read Toomer’s work because I knew the music. The reader’s encounter with music in *Fourteen* most closely resembles the *Songs of Sorrow* that W.E.B Du Bois uses in *Souls of Black Folk* because the music is an epigraph at each beginning and part of the same song at the end of the section. In placing the songs, I wanted the reader to experience a tone setting. When music shows up within a section, it is part of the story that is being told.

LETTER FROM MY FATHER, JOHN BOUIE JR.

7-16-03

Talena,

I hope by the time you receive this brief, but meaningful notation it finds you as well as you as well as your Loved one in the best of health Physically As Well As Mentally.

I have gotten several letters from jail; they always start

How can i start such a letter? where do i begin? first and for most I want to Say, im very Proud of you and your achievement in your 30 yrs with out a father. This is something i always wanted for you. I may haven't reached for you physically, but mentally And spiritually i pray for your happiness.

I don't know should i say Sorry or would that sound like a talk show. I never meant to hurt you nor did I get up one mourning and Say i don't want to be a part of Talena Life. If it means anything, I do Love You!!

Listen, The Last time i seen you, you was the same size as your daughters and liven on 12th Ave, At the time.

At that time i began to get high And my hole world was About drugs.

Talena, I love you, it wasn't you, it was me. I'm not a bad person, i Just made bad decisions.

yes it has been 30yrs and why haven't i tried to get in touch with you. Again my world was still is about drugs. I'm sorry for being so weak.

Its funny, im 47 yrs old And honestly don't know how to be a Man. Nor A father as you already know. I wanted help for the longest, but no one heard my cry's.

Lena, its Something i need to tell you., Another Reason i Ran Away And didn't face my Problems, is because i didn't know how to handle my Present situation. In getting high And not worryen About my health i became Sick, yes its true im H.i.v Positive. I can't believe i Just told you this. I'm sorry for me doing this to you, not what happened to me, god is going to See me through this, just like he seen you through your times. That's why you're the woman/Lady your today.

Love doesn't stop, even when things go wrong. No one said Love will always be smooth. Its easy to Love freely when things are going well, but it takes extra effort when things aren't so well.

That's what you showed me by reaching out to me. Thank you. That letter is more that i did for you 30yrs, And it only took you ten minutes. I'm never going to let you down again.

Lena, About me being in Jail, i was fighting this guy and he got hurt so did i, but nothing serious. he pressed charges on me. Im trying to make bail. i have the money, but i can't get it get out of the bank. Right now it's hard to get someone to help me that i trust.

So, you have three girls, thay look like you. how are thay in school? what are there birthdays. I see you have your own preschool, that must have took time and effort. Im happy for you.

So who's the lucky man? Are you married. Seattle HuH, why there? I heard it rains 8 month out the year there. I would love to come out there and see how it is. how's your mother doing? tell her i said hEllo, she may don't want to hear that.

Anyway, Im going to end this letter not the communication. I have much much more to say, but my mind is racing with Joy. Thank Thank you for not being angry at me. I know this letter is just a step, but it's a step. how young people say it Feel Me 😊

So until next time, And
it's gonna be A Next time
Stay Stronge And Always Put
god first, every one else will
fail you, he won't!!!

Love

dAd

P.S. can you send me
more pictures, even
if you have one of
you when you was young.

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FAMILY SOURCES

Bryan Lollis, Sr.	Carla Harris
Cheryl Burke	Garnetta Nelson
Joetta Robinson	John "Yusuf" Harris
John Bouie	John Kelley
John Lee Coley	Kathleen Gertrude Powell
Khadijah Abdullah	Kim Kelley Thaxton
Maisha Christine Coley	Marie Antoinette Harris
Mary Ann Bouie	Muhammad Sharif Abdullah
Rasheed Abdullah	Rasheem Bernard Coley
Reggie Turner	Roland "Bully" Harris
Saleemah Brown	Sana Aziz
Shavonne Eleby Young	Lois Dais-Kelley

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