

Reliving My Mother's Struggle

From *Liberating Memory: Our Work and Our Working-Class Consciousness*, edited by Janet Zandy, Rutgers University Press, 1994, New Brunswick, NJ, "Reliving My Mother's Struggle," pp. 249-264.

I grew up in Halls Hill, a former slave enclave just outside of Washington, D.C. As a child, I would listen to the grownups talk about how everybody was kin to everybody else. They never exactly said if Mr. Hall had been the white man who had owned everybody. They had a way of leaving out parts of the story that they did not want to remember. I wanted to, but I never asked anybody more questions about Mr. Hall. I figured that it was probably one of those questions that the answer was "children should be seen and not heard." That's what grownups said to us if they didn't know the answer to something or when they didn't want to hear our mouths. But, I loved to hang around and listen to them talk and laugh about this one and that one. It was one of the few times they relaxed and enjoyed themselves.

The most valuable property and the store and restaurant on the highway were owned by people who had been closely related to the former white slave-owner. They were about as white as anybody could look, but my momma said that it didn't mean anything—that there were plenty of colored folks who looked like that all over the South. Since they owned so much, they didn't have to "work like a dog" like everybody else did. But, the men often got into fights over women. And the only time I saw the women was when they were sitting on their wide porches in their rocking chairs.

To this area my grandfather, Thomas Thompson, came looking for work. He had grown up the favorite child and only son of parents in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He had studied carpentry at Joseph K. Bricks, a small boarding school in Enfield, North Carolina. In what was considered the peanut farm belt, it was set up by a white organization, the American Missionary Association. Except for picking cotton and peanuts, there was little other work to be had where he came from.

By way of the grapevine, he had heard that a lot of building was going on in the Washington, D.C. area. He came with his clothes folded neatly in a cardboard suitcase and went from construction site to construction site, until he got a job carrying bricks. During that time, the most respectful thing that whites could think of to call us was "Negro." Most of the Negro men were employed to dig the ditches, carry the concrete and bricks, and do any other heavy or dirty work that needed to be done. After a few months, he went back to Goldsboro, got married, and brought my grandma, Lillian, back to live with him. They rented a room in one of the Halls Hill homes where people took in boarders.

Grandma Lillian began to let people know that she was a midwife and healer. No one else was doing it, so most of the people in the neighborhood began coming to her. She listened to their stories, bandaged them up, and delivered their babies. She and Thomas frugally saved every spare penny they got. Soon, he was able to buy a plot of land in the neighborhood. He got help to clear it and began to build their house. As he worked in the evenings and on

weekends, people in the neighborhood came by and talked to him. They saw how good he was. Eventually, he set up his own business and began to build houses for them. Over time, they had three babies, two girls, Naomi, Dorothy, and one boy, Clarence, who would later become my father.

Two generations later, when I was born, my parents brought me home to live in that house which my grandfather had built. I was the first granddaughter after three grandsons. My grandmother was delighted to have me around. I did not know it, but times were hard. No one knew where my grandpa was. He had disappeared. Most of his money and property had been lost in failed banks or to back taxes.

As I grew up, my grandmother would always say to me, "Spend your time getting an education. No one can take that away from you."

I did not realize what she meant for a long time. When I was little, no one ever mentioned Grandpa or spoke his name. I was not to meet him until after I was four years old.

When my grandpa came back, it looked like he and my grandma resumed living together like nothing had ever happened. By this time, my father was a grown man with four children. He and Grandpa didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things. Grandpa always reminded him that he had to follow his rules when he was in his house. That meant my father could not drink any alcohol or smoke his cigars or pipes. Although I was only four, it was clear to me that my father did not like it that his own father had returned. For us grandchildren, however, he always had a very soft touch and twinkle in his eye.

He told us stories and recited poems. He sang us songs, which he accompanied on simple musical instruments like a harmonica or string piano. He easily found work using his building skills as a handyman. He earned enough to take care of my grandmother and to help my father make ends meet. I did not understand why, but my father and Aunt Naomi continued to say behind his back that he was trifling. After I grew up, I asked my grandfather what had happened during the years when he had disappeared and no one knew where he was. He told me he was on the road following an itinerant evangelist gospel preacher.

He said, "I was sick and nobody knew what was wrong with me. The doctors gave me up for dead. That man was a faith healer. I swore to him that if I was healed that I would never go to a doctor again and that I would serve the Lord the rest of my life. He saved my life."

One day my Aunt Naomi was fussing bitterly about my grandpa being the cause of them losing everything they had had when she was a young woman. How she and my father had to save their homestead from being lost to back taxes and how they had had to take care of their mother. I could see how bad it made her feel. She talked about how her parents had helped to feed half of the neighborhood while she was growing up. She was an exceptionally smart and proud woman. I told her the story that Grandpa had told me. She became furious and said she didn't believe a word of it.

She said, "During the time Papa left Momma, he was on the road running after women. Women were his biggest weakness. He could never get enough of them."

When he died much later, at the age of eighty-six, she and my father threw all his poems in the trash.

I didn't care what she said; my grandpa always had a smile, a joke, a song, or a story for me and my brothers and sisters. He was a bright star in my life in our small blue-collar neighborhood. No Negro teachers or doctors lived there. Our preacher rented a room in an elderly widow's house. Many of the men and women had completed high school, but still held the low end of the pay scale federal government jobs. My father was a mailroom clerk. Others worked as day laborers and domestic workers, which is what my mother did. In terms of getting work, it didn't matter much if you had an education or not. You made more money and could be "your own man" if you had a skill. Except on weekends, life seemed grim. Like my father, most of the men wanted to wear a white shirt, suit, and tie to work. Unlike him, most of those men moonlighted to make ends meet.

With six children, we didn't have much money – but we were surrounded by clear blue skies, clean water and streams, clean grass and fruit trees. My grandmother had planted cherry, apple, peach, and pear trees while the house was being built. We had enough food most of the time. For fun we pitched horseshoes, climbed trees, shot marbles, and played other games. We grew most of our fruit and vegetables. In winter, we ate a lot of bean and potato stews. The vegetables and fruit my mother had canned during the summer brightened up those winter meals. Along with my brothers, I helped to chop wood in order to start the fires in our coal-burning furnace. The coal bin was empty many times. My father had to go and pay cash for the coal before it was delivered. The man who sold it lived up the street. During the summer he sold blocks of ice which my grandma used in her icebox and which we chipped up to make ice cream. Up until I went to junior high school, we drew well water for drinking and bathing and went to the toilet in our outhouse. Many people in our neighborhood did. This was a normal life for us.

My first memory of my family's lack of money, of having to do without because we could not afford it, probably came when I was around eight or nine. That was when my Mom had the fifth and sixth babies. The seventh baby died when she was one year old. The three were born only one year apart. I remember being told, "I know you will understand." Over time, they became the words which my mother used to gain my agreement to remain silent about wanting something which most of the other neighborhood children seemed to have – like shoes during the summer.

Not long after, I began to notice that people who had more than us felt that because we had to scrape to get by, that they were better than us. I began to believe it too. Momma said they worked harder, had more than one job, and handled money better than us. She tried to push my father to get a second job. He refused to budge. After work, he went to his cousin's house and spent his time drinking and hanging out with his friends. It made my Momma furious, and, she would take it out on me and my youngest brother.

Besides doing my home chores, I worked to make money any kind of way I could think of. I ran errands for people in the neighborhood. Most of the time,

they would give me a nickel, but if they felt rich on paydays, I got a quarter. I collected soda bottles for deposit refunds. After I became thirteen, I began doing domestic work and any other low-paying odd job I could get. After all we had learned how to work real hard.

I grew up between brothers. Despite being beaten up by them when I was young, I felt very close to them. As a younger sibling, I would do anything to be around them. During the same time, I saw clearly the man/ woman dominant/ subordinate struggle that went on between my parents. Although I never said the words, "I do not want to be like my mother or marry a man like my father," they went through my mind a lot. Despite the fact that my mom went to work every day, my dad would never lift a hand to help her with us kids or the housework. When she complained about it, he would say that it wasn't a man's job, that he did not want his boys doing housework, and that she did not make me help her enough.

He'd say, "How is she going to keep a husband if she does not know how to cook and clean a house?"

My mother did not argue with him. But, she quietly resisted his opinion. She was the one who saw to it that things got done. She made sure that all the work was divided between all of us, and saw to it that my brothers learned to cook, clean house, and take care of the babies too.

I hated my mother's life. She had been very pretty. If we "got on her nerves," she broke switches off young trees, and yelled and screamed while beating me and my younger brother with them. She was afraid of the other women in the neighborhood. She would tell me about all the things my father should be doing, things she had stopped telling him about because he would not hear it anymore. She would not leave, even though she constantly complained about things being very hard.

So even though I did not know it, part of my goal was not to live my mother's life.

As the first girl and third child of six children, I had not competition being the keeper of our family photograph album. Snapshots were tucked in drawers all over the house. I collected and put them together. I found, in somebody's trash, a big heavy book that had been used to Christmas card samples. Before pasting the photographs down, I spent weeks arranging and rearranging the pictures to compose a story about my family life. I wanted others to know who we were, how we saw ourselves. I fantasized that it would become a permanent artifact testifying to our real history. I felt that it would counter the news media's accounts of who we were. Except for one or two so-called "exceptions" – our black spokesmen, who were usually selected and approved by "the establishment" – the Washington daily newspapers usually portrayed us as criminals or on welfare.

So, the words still scrawled on the pictures and pages are mostly mine. They had expressed my personal need and desire to display pride in my family and to create for myself a sense of identity and security.

As an adult, I still carry the image of my own mother's struggle to try to make ends meet, of her humiliation and self-sacrifice, of the dresses that she

made becoming overly faded, of her underwear full of holes, of her one winter coat continuing to come apart despite her repairs, of her despair over my father hanging out at his cousin's house to drink, of her walking up the hill to catch the bus which took her to her domestic "days" work at a different white woman's house each day, of her endless agony to make sure that us six kids lived in what she called "some kind of civilized manner."

Her dream was that I would go to school – go to college, since she had not been able to figure out how to get there herself – so I would not have to live like her. I don't remember when I knew it, but it was a concept I alternately rejected and embraced. Rejected, because even though things were hard, we kids were close, we had developed a self-reliance and way of thinking independently about things that I could see that "being better off" did not seem to perpetuate. Embraced, because I saw that my Negro schoolteachers and classmates favored those who dressed better, and with more money you could do that and not have to live what my mom called "from hand to mouth".

When I got my first full-time professional employment as a computer programmer after five years of college, I felt very proud of myself. I had earned the distinction of being the first in my family to get that far.

About two years later, I was one half of a young Black American couple. Our friends thought we had it made. We were both employed professionally. We had two cars and a new baby. We remodeled our house, which had been in a formerly all-white neighborhood in northwest Washington, D.C. To be young and Black in America in the mid-1960s was to be in a world that promised to open up to endless possibilities and change. That did not turn out to be the case, but my generation, while still too young to vote, had been major participants and leaders during the Civil Rights Movement. We put our bodies on the line to bring down the walls of racial segregation. We wanted to change, to revolutionize America. And we did. Dense walls of Jim Crow laws designed to keep us second-class citizens began to crack. They had been kept in place by law-abiding Christian white Americans through legal and violent means. As more and more people made the decision to put their bodies on the line of fire, the walls of Jim Crow laws began crumbling down.

Within the first two months of our marriage, however, we discovered that our ideas about the roles each of us would play within the relationship were from jarringly different and opposing perspectives. The man who, before marriage, seemed so different from my father was in reality almost a replica of him. Why hadn't I seen that? I, on the other hand, had no intention of reliving my mother's life. After a few pitched battles, I escaped the marriage and left him in the house.

In less than three years after getting married, I was a divorced single mother, working long hours, living in a high-rent district, spending more than I earned, and partying with my new single friends. One morning I woke up with a terrible hangover. I drank in order to act like I was having a good time. I hated the "small talk," the pretense at friendliness, the waiting to be asked to dance, and the constant jockeying to avoid being raped. I could not understand my very intelligent Black women friends. They wanted husbands. I did not. I knew I did not like this kind of life.

With my head feeling like a bruised watermelon and my stomach like an army had marched through it, I asked myself, "What do you really want that would just be for you?" Going within myself for answers had been a way I had learned to survive when I couldn't figure things out.

No one could have been more surprised than me when a clear image of me painting with watercolors flashed into my mind. I had enjoyed it only briefly as a preteen. Making art was something I had given up in junior high school. I felt I had to make an economic choice. Wasn't that the reason we had to go to school? I picked the college curriculum. That meant art classes were out. I consoled myself with, "Besides, you aren't good enough."

But now while I worked as a computer programmer, I attended painting classes at the Corcoran School every weekend I could. For about one year, I spent most of my spare time learning to see and how to mix paints. Like most working-class people, I liked art but I did not understand how anyone did it other than as a hobby if they were not rich.

During that time period, I saw a performance of the Guinea Ballet. I was twenty-eight. It was my first time to see a lot of Black people on stage who had feet, hips, and hair like mine. I saw that they were not Black people who looked or acted like they were white or seemed to know anything about the need to do it. The Black men saw the Black women as beautiful. They were proud and seemed to like and enjoy who they were. That night, I decided that I would go to Africa and see for myself what it was like to be in a predominantly Black culture.

In order to do it, I moved to a cheaper apartment, got a second job, paid off my bills, and began to save money. I said nothing to my family about it. I knew they saw Africa as the "savage dark" continent. That was what we were taught in school. My friends were puzzled. They could not understand why anyone would want to go there. I could not explain it myself.

Rather than talk about it to people, I simply focused on the task at hand. Getting the money together was a lot easier than I expected. I was ready to go in one year. I took my four-year-old daughter, Tammy. Much to the distress of my family and her father, we spent the next year traveling across the African continent.

While there, I began to understand what it meant to grow up in a culture where you learn to see who you are through the eyes of people who are not only different from you, but who consider you inferior to them and themselves superior to you. I saw that it had made me different from other Africans. Although their countries had been colonized, they did not carry my kind of anxiety and terror. They did not have to act cool in order to hide their fear. They did not always have to check out the scene to see if it was OK or safe to be where they were. Children were a natural part of community life and women kept them close. No one seemed to be embarrassed or ashamed of the way women's bodies looked and functioned. They could breast-feed their babies or enjoy braiding their hair in public or in friendly company.

I began to see that growing up an American Black, I learned to hate the blood of Africa that I carried in my veins. The psychological and physical control and abuse that was passed on to me through my family had stamped on my

mind that I was inferior, that blackness was something bad, that whiteness was beauty and power, that to survive I had to merge my interests with the master, that I had to destroy who I was. I had learned to feel ashamed of our blackness, our kinky hair, our spirits, and our drums.

Africans, who did not have much, insisted that they shared their time, homes, and meals with us. It was the first time that I was among people where having a lot of material things was not a requirement for you to be worth your human life. Even though my hosts insisted that I share in their life, I often felt bad taking what was being offered. One old man told me, "You are a stranger in a strange land. One day I may be also." I knew my family would not relate to strangers in that way. I wondered if it would ever be possible to repay these kindnesses.

When I returned to the United States, I suddenly knew that my life of trying to "get ahead" was no life at all. I could not force myself to spend the rest of it poring over computer printouts from the time I woke up in the morning until the time I went to bed at night. For the next three years, I moonlighted as a consultant while working my way through an undergraduate art program at Howard University. I learned to draw. I studied African, the beginnings of European, and African-American art history. I changed my lifestyle in order to do it. I purchased an old Volkswagen and moved into a room in my parents' house. Except for one or two of the young professional partygoers that I knew, all of my friends completely avoided me. It was as if I had an exotic disease and they did not want to catch it.

I completed my art studies when I was thirty-three. Before finishing, I searched for work hoping to use my new skills, even though it would pay less than computer programming. I ran into an old friend, a civil engineer, who was in graduate business school. He convinced me that I should apply. He talked about how job opportunities were opening up for Blacks in big business. I thought about my nine-year-old daughter, Tammy. We were not destitute, but we were just getting by.

Some of our neighbors refused to let their children play with her because they saw my painting of a nude model that I had done for a classroom assignment. By this time, schools in Arlington had become integrated, which meant that Black children now went to the white schools. Whenever she tried to tell her teachers about her experiences in Africa, they would tell me that my daughter was highly imaginative. They let me know that Tammy's father had their sympathy because I was a weird artist.

I could have gotten a full-time job as a computer programmer—but I did not have the stomach for it. I applied to business school. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I still carried my mother's dreams for me. Again, I found myself making an economic decision to use academic studies to get a job. Late that summer, I received a letter from the Wharton School notifying me that I had been admitted on one of those loan-scholarship packages. I was delighted but scared. The price of admission was very high, but I had no idea of how high until quite a few years later.

After business school, I moved to New York with my daughter and began working as a financial analyst. Almost immediately, I began to feel lost and disconnected in the regimentation of the corporate world. I could not wear blue pinstripe suits and imitate the men the way a lot of women could. The idea of making art gnawed at me. I tried my hand at it when I got home from work. I found that I had lost my skills, and at the end of the day, I had no creative energy left. I gave up trying. I kept telling myself, "In a year from now I will be living in another place."

After about six years, I finally put an ad in the personal column of the *Village Voice*. That was how I began to meet some artists. I worked on a few of their projects. Not long after that, I began to make super 8 films and slide narratives of my own. I was interested in the narrative, cartoons, and film – in time changing in space. I didn't know it then, but I felt I had totally lost contact with my own voice.

Working in the traditional white male bastion of Wall Street was exciting, but I saw how abusive class-ism was. The obvious dislike of women was worse than I had ever seen. Anybody who was different in any way was treated like a leper. Having come from the South, for the first time I could see prejudice in action against white people. Most complained bitterly and would turn around and pass the abuse to someone they felt would not give it back. Sometimes it was directed toward whoever was in the next lower position. Sometimes they got on the telephone and directed it toward their wives and children or whoever would answer. No matter how it was passed on, it made me feel pretty sick. No matter how hard I worked, I was expected to work even harder. I felt that my being a "token" was an excuse to keep out all other people who were "like me." After all, the firm's "Equal Employment Opportunities" requirements had been filled.

Two years later, I began a diary of self-portrait sketches. My goal was to make one a night for one year and to allow the gestalt of each day's experience to emerge. I began to see that my life was little more than a continual rehashing of my worst fears and anxieties. After nine months, I tried to include my mother in the drawings. This act raised heavy walls of fog in my mind. I did not understand what was happening. In an effort to work through it, I pulled out the big book of my old family snapshots. Looking at them, I asked myself, "How did you get me to this place?"

My mind reeled through scene after scene of me trying to belong wherever I went – to work, to shop, to live. I could look a certain way, but I always felt like an outsider. Most of the Blacks I met were middle and upper-middle class. It was okay, but there seemed to be no place where my working-class experience fit in. In trying to express something about it, I began combining words with some of the photographs. My goal was to briefly work through these vague and uneasy feelings by writing down memories while constructing snapshot collages.

As I looked at the old family pictures, I remembered myself as a young person sitting on the floor, pasting them into the book. The images reminded me of how my bonds of affection with family members had been laced with barbs of conflict and violence. My stomach, my shoulders, and my face tightened up as I looked at our smiling faces. I remembered how I had cut out people I did not like.

Now these cuts penetrated my adult memories like a sharp knife. Shadows of terror, anger, confusion, and guilt felt like a solid steel trap door.

As I reshot and reprinted the pictures, forgotten childhood experiences—many of which were taboo – began to re-emerge. I wrote the stories on yellow pads. I was transported back to another place, another time. Each evening after my job, I worked in the corner of my friend's studio. It made me feel wiped out, bent out of shape, or just real bad. I could not escape. I felt like I was wrestling with something that I couldn't see or touch. I knew it was a matter of life or death. I desperately wanted to live.

I exhibited the collages a year later. They were printed on a heavy etching paper coated with brown light-sensitive chemicals. I thought of them as newly framed memory pictures from my distant past. Although it was clear that they were reconstructions, I felt guarded about showing them. Embarrassment and guilt about “betraying family secrets” made me feel like I was being disloyal.

Could the viewers be non judgmental? Would they think my experiences had been tough only because I had been poor and Black? Would the work be dismissed as being too personal? I knew it moved beyond what was then acceptable to speak out about. It put me and the viewer facing each other over my chasm of shame.

Some people thought the work was naïve because I used the voice of “the child.” However, some people were able to talk about it and let me know that they “got it.” The work was different from anything I had seen. I struggled to create a visual language that had meaning for me. Even though I felt very vulnerable and tentative about it, I knew I had to continue. At that time, other artists were not yet openly personal in their work in that way. It was hard for me to consider it a valid statement. I moved around in circles while trying to bring myself back to it over and over again.

I did not know it then, but I was struggling with my terror. Each time I made an image which acknowledged my hurt and pain as a woman, I felt disloyal to my brothers and to all Black men. Perhaps it was the beginnings of my search for myself as a woman. I do know that I began to accept the fact that no matter what I said, I could not speak for all Black people. I felt that some would rather not hear my voice, but now I had to speak for me.

For the first time in my life, “us” meant “us women.” At the same time, I met only one or two women artists that I felt connected to. I could tell by their assumptions that regardless of their “race”, few understood about being working class. I wondered if there was a place for my voice. Yet, I began to learn from them how much I had not been able to acknowledge how hard sexism was on me. I could not tell one kind of prejudice from another. It just seemed everything got hard at a certain point. Through them, I began to learn to see the woman I had become. I began to appreciate my mother's struggles and her goals for me.

Finally, in 1984, I decided that I would leave Wall Street and try to work full time as an artist. I had no idea what that meant. I was really scared. I thought about my grandfather who had left everything behind in order to save his life. Somehow, in some way, I knew I was following him.

Today, making my art has become a way of learning what I know, a way of being conscious of how and why I learned it, a way to heal the scars and learn new truths. It has become a way to learn to trust my own gut feelings, my own thinking in a way I never could. With each new piece, I can see how I still work around my edges and walk around in circles. Sometimes I reach my center and the work flows well. The process is not predictable. I never know how long it will take or if it will happen at all. I now work harder and longer than I ever had to. Sometimes, the more clarity I get, the more I seem to get lost. Most of the time, I do not really understand the gesture, what I have made, until long after it has been done.

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