

# Introduction

## Themes: Why Begin with Hair?

Miz Valerie, What do you want to do with your new growth?

—JEANNIE, my hairdresser

What to do with new growth is a choice that over the years many Black women have faced, for it is the hair's new growth that exposes texture untouched by chemicals, hot combs, flat irons, dyes, or anything meant to “relax” the hair. This is a book about new growth. Although its foundational metaphors are taken from Black women's hair politics, it is fundamentally a book about how a young Black woman finishing her doctorate in the late 1970s and retiring forty-some years later as a vice provost and vice president at one of the nation's largest universities learned to navigate an academy that was not quite ready for Brown and Black women. Because I did not look like most of my colleagues, at every stage of my career I literally confronted the issue of what to do with my hair in tandem with how to manage new growth opportunities presented by professional advancements. Like my hair's own new growth, the experiences that I share are not always in a linear sequence but coiled in my memories in different ways. Some of these memories are downright nappy; others reflect straightening processes that I probably needed as I am what higher education now calls a first-generation underrepresented student.

For Black professional women, hair has been a chronological, cultural, and climate thermometer. Chronologically, some of this book's early essays were written when natural hair was not considered professional. When I was graduating from high school, Afros were beginning to come in style, a detail I remember because my predominately white high school had one hair rule: if one's hair flowed downward, it could be as long as one wanted it to be, but any hair spiraling upward had to be within so many inches from the scalp. Of course, the only hairstyles that stood stalwartly upward were the Black students' Afros. During my late teens and early twenties, I had gone through the Afro stage in college, but by grad school, I was back to perms. As of that time, I had not read Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals—never to look a hot comb in the teeth." By midcareer, and after having taught many Black women authors who wrote proudly about hair, I became uncomfortable teaching what I was not living. Hair became a cultural thermometer. While teaching Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1976), how could I empathize with Nel's evolving disinterest in hot combs and smooth hair if I was unwilling to listen to the *Sula* sisterhood in my own life who, too, were championing their natural selves? Or how many times could I teach Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1997) and hear Hagar's crying awareness that her lover, Milkman, did not love her "soft damp wool"<sup>1</sup> hair without acknowledging my own unease with my permed hair? And how long could I be critical of the characters in Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1993) who saw twisted, locked hair as low class if I had been unwilling to let my own hair challenge professional status norms? Among their many themes, the one theme that every Black woman author that I taught seemed to be addressing was beauty aesthetics, from the "I" voice in Ntozake Shange's *Nappy Edges* (1978) to Celié's voice in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), to the two-headed woman's voice in Lucille Clifton's poem, "Homage to My Hair," who declares that her nappy hair "is as tasty on your tongue as good greens / Black man."<sup>2</sup>

As I moved from a professor in the world of my own office and my own classroom to the larger world of academic service across the university, the university's Big Ten Academic Alliance, and the national Association of Departments of English, hair became a climate thermometer because in the early years of administration no one looked like me. I was a professional with braids, an oxymoron. How does one gain authority with what my grandma used to call "plaits," twisted Black Medusa appendages straight out of pickaninny heads? With orchestrated resistance on the part of several of us sistahs, the academy did change. In fact, as time moved on, my sistah colleagues and

I were able to wear our natural hairstyles long before corporate America welcomed or tolerated our friends to do so. By the time I retired, I was sporting braids every day for the full five-year term as a vice president and vice provost, working alongside an African American dean of student life whose regal looks were framed by blonde-dyed natural hair defiantly cut as short as possible. She is now a college president.

Thus, for professional Black women, hairstyles are literal decisions that affect career choices, as well as a metaphor for claiming one's freedom, defying Anglo-beauty aesthetics, and celebrating organic growth. That a Black woman academic could or would write about hair never occurred to me until I had the occasion to be in an audience of women's studies scholars listening to a young scholar, Noliwe M. Rooks, speak of her forthcoming monograph on hair. I sat there mesmerized and proud that Black women's hair could be a scholarly topic and that a university press was going to publish the work. That manuscript became *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (1996). Rook historicizes African American hair culture through a study of advertisements in periodicals that targeted Black women audiences. Focusing largely on self-made, self-constructed, and self-authored Madame C. J. Walker, who is associated with popularizing the hot comb and building a multimillion-dollar enterprise, *Hair Raising* is the urtext that gave other Black academics the green light to write our own stories about our bodies.

In 2001 another notable text followed: *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* by Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps. Whereas *Hair Raising* begins its history of the production and consumption of Black hair products from the mid-1880s to the early 1990s, the historical sweep in *Hair Story* spans from fifteenth-century Africa to America in the new millennium, examining everything from how hairstyles among African cultures revealed clan identities and geographic locations, to the African American mass production of the plastic Afro pick comb, to Americanized dreadlocks, to hair trends adopted by hip-hop trendsetters. The other text arriving as the new millennium dawned was Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson's edited volume, *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories* (2001). *Tenderheaded* includes sixty essays by a range of writers reclaiming the politics of Black hair by using the metaphors of Black hair styling and sculpting: (e.g., "It All Comes Down to the Kitchen," by Henry Louis Gates Jr.; "The Kink That Winked," by Cynthia Colbert; "Cornrow Calculations (or Math is Beauty)," by Toni Wyn; "Hot Comb" by Natasha Trethewey; "A Happy Nappy Hair-Care Affair" by Linda Jones). Although indebted to those who wrote these

histories of and commentaries on Black hair, my emphasis is on journeying through and navigating spaces I was never meant to occupy. In *Sisterlocking Discourse*, hair is head covering for a book that seeks to do what I did best as a professor: mentor a new generation of thinkers for a more inclusive society. Like skin color, hair for me was always a site of difference. In this book, it is the medium that prompts my thinking on how academic leadership looks, performs, and changes.

### Chronology: Why a Text Over So Many Years?

Memory is a queer creature, an eccentric curator.

—TAYARI JONES, *An American Marriage*

The ideas and words in *Sisterlocking Discourse* have been circulating in my head and landing on yellow pads and computer keys from 1976 to 2018. Some thoughts became keynote speeches, conference presentations, blogs, and of course, journal articles. Thus, this book is a compilation of essays previously published (and essays never published) that follow my journey through the academy from my early days as an assistant professor through the years of full professorship and senior administration, ending with receiving my discipline's highest service award. I would like to say that I was intentional about the book's span of time, but its span of several decades is due to the way that administration disrupts and changes the direction of scholarly pursuits. The result, however, is that the extended time span has served to affirm as well as complicate the unpacking of my experiences and memories. Over time, memory becomes what Tayari Jones terms an "eccentric curator."<sup>3</sup> My arbitrariness of memory needed just one moment to move from eccentric to common, from personal to communal, and that moment arrived in the summer of 2020.

#### SUMMER 2020

Today's current racial and gender social justice movements are why this book is unapologetic in its continued emphasis on categories of difference in twenty-first-century America. Although the chapters span experiences from the late 1970s through the early decades of the new millennium, I am writing this preface two years after my final retirement, in summer 2020. Some are already calling this summer "The Lost Summer" because of the COVID-19 virus with its mandate to shelter-in-place, maintain social distance, and self-quarantine.

Airlines are grounded, 401(K) accounts have tanked, many restaurants are closed, millions are unemployed, the best of plans derailed, and well over two hundred thousand Americans have died. It is a time when the prefix “un” is overused, starting with unprecedented, quickly followed by uncharted, unexpected, unfathomable, unjust, unknown, unpredictable, unstoppable, unsurvivable, untimely, and unusual. Most notably, with its disinfecting and distancing protocols, the summer of 2020 is a time in America with not just one but two interconnected public health crises: the COVID-19 virus and the systemic racism virus. As of this writing, neither virus has a cure or a protective vaccine.

Summer 2020 measures time on grand and minute scales: four hundred years of slavery, 150 years postemancipation; and nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds of losing breath—the length of time that a white policeman kneeled on the neck of George Floyd, a Black man who could not breathe, crying for his mama. Thus, from my point of view today, I toyed with going back and doing updates on some of the essays. A prime example of an essay that could be rewritten over and over again is chapter 2, the letter to my sons. First written as a university blog when I was shaken by the death of Eric Garner and later revised after the Trayvon Martin case, I now am writing this preface on the heels of the deaths of Rayshard Brooks, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and many others—each name graced with a hashtag. I do not want to keep rewriting that same letter. Every rewrite reopens wounds. Every time a Black mother has to repeat “The Talk” her voice chokes. Years ago when I wrote chapter 2, “We Can’t Breathe,” I did not know that the literal loss of breath and the metaphorical emphasis on the strangulation of Black and Brown lives would reach a crescendo culminating in protesters worldwide carrying signs saying No Justice, No Peace; White silence is violence; Disarm Hate, and yes, Black Lives Matter. I could not have known that my admonitions to my sons about driving while Black needed to encompass jogging while Black through white neighborhoods, sleeping while Black in one’s car at a fast-food drive-through, and birdwatching while Black in a city park. Many of these situations have ended in death for Black men.

In addition to contemplating changes to chapter 2, I toyed with uplifting the tone in chapter 4. As someone who has served as a chief diversity officer, my discussions on diversity and implementing inclusive excellence in chapter 4 are not as hopeful as they might be if I were rewriting them this summer. The smell of change is in the air and caution thrown to the wind in the

presence of a pandemic. Racial reckoning demands change: cities and states are rewriting rules for law enforcement; legislators are asking that Juneteenth be declared a federal holiday and that the Black national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” be sung at national events; corporations are donating funds for implicit bias workshops; activists are toppling the statues representative of the Confederacy; NASCAR is banning the Confederate flag from its racetracks; Mississippi is retiring its long-standing original state flag; after eighty-seven years the Washington Redskins football team is retiring its racist name and logo; the musical group Dixie Chicks is dropping its first name and another musical group, Lady Antebellum, is dropping its last name; the sitcom “The Simpsons” is hiring actors of color to voice characters of color; and Quaker Oats is retiring its mascot, Aunt Jemima.<sup>4</sup>

This last change struck close to home, to the interior of my kitchen table where I enjoyed eating pancakes while collecting the early advertisements of the Aunt Jemima brand. I was literally eating my scholarship. Over the years, I have noted that even after the company reduced the weight of this jolly Black pancake maker, even after taking the kerchief off of her hair, even after adorning her with pearls and lace, it was not enough to shake off stereotypical dust. As with the Confederate statues, Aunt Jemima reeked too much of a bygone era of idyllic plantation paradises. It was only a matter of time for the hip-hop generation to derisively dismiss Aunt Jemima as “yo, mama” and for poet Cheryl Boyce-Taylor to write a poem whose first line asks, “Will the new aunt Jemima have dreads?” (“After Robert Fuller” in *Poem-a-Day* on July 27, 2020, by the Academy of American Poets).

All of the changes to statutes, monuments, emblems, and icons that are currently in progress complement the point that I made years ago in chapter 9 when describing how out of place I felt when traveling world sites that showcased only Eurocentric images and viewpoints. At the time when I wrote on how conflicted I was strolling the streets, squares, and plazas of Brussels while remembering the history of the Congo, I had not imagined that during the summer of 2020, the sixtieth anniversary of Congolese rule, city employees in Ghent would hoist the bust of Belgium’s King Leopold II off its pedestal. When I wrote chapter 9 about visiting plazas around the world, wondering what direction to go to find fragments of Black history, I had not imagined that one day in our nation’s capital near the White House itself there would be a place called Black Lives Matter Plaza, located not on the Sixteenth Street NW that I knew, but now on Black Lives Matter Street. Neither did I imagine that structures that always meant much to me would become even more



Figure I.1. Black Lives Matter. Neighbor Lucinda B. Headrick and my grandchildren, London and Chase Cochran, on their way to a local rally, Atlanta, Georgia, summer 2020.

powerful icons, such as a bridge in Alabama. Congressman John Lewis, who had crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, so many times in life, crossed it one final time in a horse-drawn hearse on Sunday, July 26, 2020.

With so many changes, the air this summer portends that meaningful changes will take place, from eliminating no-knock warrants to criminalizing the chokehold. It is no accident that the immediate changes focus on the body. As Ta-Nehisi Coates contends, “All our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that “racism is a visceral experience, . . . it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.”<sup>5</sup> The physicality of George Floyd’s death awakened viewers worldwide. With this summer’s protests there seem to be more vocal allies of social justice from a wider spectrum of races and generations. In this regard, I smile at a photograph of my grandchildren who live in Atlanta on their way to a social justice rally accompanied by their senior white activist neighbor. Although my grandchildren are too young to be fully aware of the politics of the Black

Lives Matter sign that is planted in their front yard, their neighbor, Lucinda Headrick, certainly understands the necessity of continuing the fight for a more perfect union. All are smiling, the photograph capturing the spirit of collaboration and connection that has been building in local neighborhoods and global communities. A sense of structural inequalities seems to be resonating across bodies, beliefs, and borders. Unlike in earlier years, fewer white people are reacting defensively, countering and diluting the Black Lives Matter signs with All Lives Matter. Most notably, it is summer 2020 wherein a presidential candidate on a major ticket has selected a woman of color as his choice for vice president. Incremental and major changes permeate the airwaves, but only time will tell if minds and hearts are truly changing, if there will be measurable outcomes and sustainable solutions. Just like contact tracing is difficult but necessary in controlling the spread of COVID-19, successful contact tracing for the racial virus calls for identifying all those with whom a racist comes into contact—an impossible task unless legislatures, communities, houses of worship, and yes, the academy, work in concert. Will the social justice energy of summer 2020 last, or will it be like summer 1964, Freedom Summer, when courageous work was done to increase Black voter registration, only to have Black voter registration remain a contested issue for many years to come?

I write this preface also during a time when an African American woman, Tarana Burke, has started the #MeToo movement, prompting women around the globe to expose the sexual indiscretions and crimes of men in business, entertainment, and government circles. If I were writing some of the essays today I would have included incidents that I now have vocabularies and allies to help me unpack. In the previously mentioned chapter 4 where I discuss a racial encounter on a plane, I would have added the story of a flight early in my career that shook my confidence as a Black woman professional. When my seatmate, a white male who was the provost at a prestigious northeastern college, learned that I was an assistant professor at an equally prestigious private liberal arts institution, his arm kept brushing against my thigh and then my left breast. I was naïve enough to think that he was simply reacting to close quarters—although I knew better and departed the plane embarrassed and disappointed that I had not voiced my discomfort or done what my college roommate, an experienced subway rider from Harlem, had instructed me to do in such situations—yell out loud and clear, “Why are you touching my boobs?” Women during summer 2020 have not hesitated to speak loudly and clearly, chanting “Say Her Name.” At the same time, it is in summer



2020 that we celebrate the passing of an icon, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a soft-spoken yet powerful voice for women's equality. With Ginsburg's death, we are reminded that no matter how small our frames, our voices can thunder with power and truth.

The lapse of time from writing some of these essays and penning this introduction during Summer 2020 tempts me in other ways. The final chapter on retirement is a celebration of freedom, but the citywide activities that I would have been enjoying, the Science Festival, Arts Festival, Asian Festival, and Blues & Jazz Festival, have all been canceled. I worry that many will mistake what it feels like to be housebound with what retirement must be like. But a stay-at-home mandate with Zoom gatherings is not retirement. Indeed, this summer's sheltering-in experience has made my plea to my husband James that he retire all the more difficult. Because he is an attorney in solo practice, I managed to get him to watch *Judge Judy* with me. But when during the pandemic I began watching Rachael Ray prepare all kinds of dishes, he accused me of mistaking the pandemic's goal of slowing the spread of the virus, a process called "flattening the curve" with what seemed to be my goal, "fattening my curves." Rather than spending every day in the bliss that I describe in chapter 10, I presently go to James's office a few days a week to help out because the pandemic forced him to furlough his small staff. I had always imagined that if I had attended an HBCU (Historically Black College or University), I probably would have elected to become a lawyer because at an HBCU I would have seen Blacks in all occupations. However, it has taken only a few days at James's law practice for me to feel blessed that I chose a career in higher education. As a professor of English, I stare quizzically at legal language that says, "further affiant sayeth naught"; "Now comes James C. Lee, Esq., Attorney for the Defendant, John Doe, and hereby gives notice of his appearance as counsel in the above styled cases." "Sayeth naught"? "Styled cases"? Everything James writes is "pursuant to. . ." Soon I hope to return to full retirement, to the "reality" television courts where even if the law is mostly entertainment, the language is at least clear.

As mentioned, the long incubation period of *Sisterlocking Discoarse* might have warranted some change of details, but I have chosen to let details mirror their historical period. I do want to note, however, that given the publication of *Sisterlocking Discoarse*, there is at least one other book that will need to make some edits in its next edition. Earlier this calendar year I read *Not Even Past*, a history of the Department of English that I once chaired. As a contributor to that text, I certainly anticipated much of its content. Knowing that I

had a manuscript that soon was to be published, but not processing that several of the previous chairs had also written memoirs, I would have alerted the authors of *Not Even Past* (2019) that this statement needed amending: “Two people who have served as Chair of the English Department have published memoirs that cover at least part of their careers.”<sup>6</sup> With the publication of *Sisterlocking Discoarse*, the number changes to three. Reading *Not Even Past* confirmed for me that the socially active life that I, as a young, naive graduate student suspected the faculty of having, was indeed true (the bromance road trips, the poker games, the drinking, the dancing). But this is not a story of a student who was involved with the department in one way or another for over forty years and is now writing an exposé. I enjoyed every minute of my graduate years, finishing with a 4.0 cumulative grade point average. Yet if I had read *Not Even Past* prior to writing some of my reflections, I might have been tempted to change some details. Instead, my memories remain intact as mine.

### Genres: Why Mix Genres?

It is true that my attempts to write in my own voice have placed me in the center of a snarl of social tensions and crossed boundaries.

—PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*

From the very beginning of my career I felt the need to draw from my own cultural heritage to supplement and enrich what I was learning from other cultures. As a professor of literature, I admired Black creative writers who insisted on creating their own genres: Ntozake Shange clarifying that *For Colored Girls who considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf* was not a play but a choreopoem; Audre Lorde for terming her autobiography a bio-mythology; Octavia Butler for naming her novel *Kindred* a grim fantasy; and others who consciously wrote outside of prescribed formats. Black women scholars, too, have experimented with genres, most notably law scholar Patricia Williams. When *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* was first published in 1991, I immediately appreciated its use of metaphors, stories, and parables as one of the most interesting law books I had read. Contrastingly, when I team-taught the work with a professor of law and a class divided between third-year law students and doctoral students in arts and humanities, I soon noticed that only the latter group of students was as excited about all the genre mixing as I was. The law students (except for those with undergraduate

degrees in English) wanted Patricia Williams to get to the point, cite case law, and be done. I enjoyed her narrative process, her intentional meanderings, her anecdotes, her references to the likes of Shakespeare and Ursula Le Guin. Similarly, I marveled at the way critic Ann duCille wrote *Skin Trade* (1996), a volume that moves from national romance stories, to Black Barbie toy theory, to a formal literary discussion of the occult of true Black womanhood, and to anything she chose when thinking of what she calls “discourse and dat course.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps Black women scholars have created their own definition of discourse because they have had to create their own definitions of themselves as explained in Morrison’s *Sula*: “Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the creation of genre is linked to the creation of personhood.

A second reason for my deliberate use of various genres is due to the way I was situated in the academy, in interdisciplinary, intersecting, and interlocking ways. As a professor of English, I also held courtesy appointments in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, comparative studies, the Institute for Folklore Studies, the Center for Interdisciplinary Law and Policy Studies, and African American and African studies, serving on dissertation committees, administrative committees, or performing teaching duties for all of them. These were not lines from a curriculum vitae, or mere professional window dressing. Rather, each appointment represented the performance of substantive work when called upon. This wide exposure gave me respect for various kinds of scholarship: literary analyses, feminist studies, critical race studies, ethnography, folklore studies, and Black performance and cultural studies. Thus, in this book I have chosen to include folk stories, scholarly essays, legal cases, invited speeches, family and office photos, cartoons, a travelogue, and a student essay. I work within spheres where hybridity, creolization, liminality, and intersectionality are serious concepts, not easily contained in generic structures.

Not limiting myself to a specific genre represents a freedom that I have earned. I want to share knowledge and tell stories on my own terms, deliberately mixing the formal and the informal, the academic and the popular. My journey covers a range of roles: a graduate student entering a very large doctoral program, a newly minted assistant professor, a senior professor, and a senior administrator who chaired three different departments. But I also include stories that embrace my other identities: a mother of four children, a wife of a Black attorney with his own small law practice, an executive

director of a community book club for over thirty years, and a woman of faith active in a local church. I tell stories about selected professional moments that have informed my thinking on race, gender, power, position, and privilege. Although some of the stories are puzzling at best and jarring at worst, this is not a book about overcoming family or community hardships. And although I would love to be able to claim deep southern roots, this is not a story of Black migration from South to North. I grew up in southern Maryland, barely south of the Mason-Dixon line, sixty miles to be exact. This is not a story of growing up in an impoverished urban 'hood amid generational poverty. Growing up, I never looked poverty in the face until I became a graduate student receiving a tuition benefit and living on a stipend—not generational poverty, but genteel poverty, mere dollars away from having a professional job. Although my brother, sister, and I were raised in a house with one bathroom, one wall of the house was decorated with expensive z-brick and that house sat on over five hundred acres owned by my grandmother's people. Today that country road still carries her maiden name. At sixteen years old I awakened to the fact that the families of my white classmates at the newly integrated high school owned businesses on their land. In adulthood when I returned to visit my grandmother and saw how developers had purchased her family's land for pennies, I knew that there would be little intergenerational transfer of wealth. But by the Black standards of my childhood days, I was middle class. It was not until I sent my own children to a historically Black college that I truly became aware that there were some Black families who were more middle class than mine. My children had the humbling opportunity to meet Black bourgeois.

In addition to the lack of poverty, blessedly, I cannot lay claim to a story where several of my playmates ended up shot or on death row, although these are valuable stories. Nor is this a story of academic failures—failed tenure bids, failed promotions—although these are also stories that are needed and have meant much to me. Rather, my stories trace a career of a fairly middle-class Black woman who had high grades and ACT scores, performed top-of-the-class college and graduate schoolwork, and earned career advancement opportunities. Nevertheless, I lived a racialized and gendered life where microaggressions were pervasive. Excellence in high school did not protect me from the racial rioting after basketball games when my Black male friends were carted off to jail and their white teammates freed. Nor was I protected from the white high school system that refused to name a Black valedictorian.

Excellent teaching skills did not protect me from students who claimed that their prep-school teachers said they were good writers, so how dare I, a representative from a Black vernacular tradition—one syllable away from Ebonics speech—give them “C” grades on their compositions?

*Sisterlocking Discourse* is a work of reflections. It is my parting message to the academy and a thank-you note to all the students who made my career joyous, challenging, and memorable. As Teresa De Lauretis explains in her introduction to *Alice Doesn't*, I too “will tell some stories and retell others. . . . And time and time again the same concerns, issues, and themes will return throughout the essays, each time diffracted by a different textual prism, seen through a critical lens with variable focus.”<sup>9</sup> I am deliberate in my blending of scholarship and storytelling, reliving the warmth of a well-taught, interactive graduate seminar.

Chapter 1, “Sisterlocking Discourse: Or How Is Leadership *Supposed* to Look?” sets the backdrop for my coming to consciousness about hair and the role it would play in my assuming leadership positions. I start with women in my family and their views that often were in contrast to the literature I was reading by African American women writers. The chapter’s compilation of autobiography, literary sources and allusions, and diversity “aha” moments establish a pattern for upcoming chapters.

It is hard focusing only on the academic when one is a mother of four children. Family life intervenes and affects how one views events on one’s work calendar. Chapter 2 demonstrates the type of intervention that brought theatrical performances of race too close to home. I wrote chapter 2, “When We Can’t Breathe: Generational Spirit-Murder” in 2003 after watching *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, a play cowritten by playwright Adrienne Kennedy and her son, Adam. Chapter 2 shares the original letter that I wrote to my twin sons, Adam and Andrew, when they were months away from turning eighteen years old. Although their father and I had given them “The Talk” (how race in America works) in bits and pieces from the time they entered a predominately white elementary school, my letter was the first time that I shared “the Talk” at length in writing. *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* ends with a young Black man crying to police officers that he can’t breathe. At the time that I saw the play and wrote my sons, I could not have known that “I can’t breathe” would become the recurring refrain for future Black men’s conflicts with police injustice. A little over a decade later, Eric Garner’s last gasp was “I can’t breathe.” I updated my letter to my sons, this time aware that I was

writing the letter for public consumption but unaware that there would still be a need for such a letter in 2020 when George Floyd's "I-can't-breathe" cry would reverberate worldwide.

With chapter 3, I am back on track with my professorial posture. "Smarts: A Cautionary Tale" is my commentary on coming of age in the academy. First given as the required inaugural lecture upon promotion to full professorship, I start off doing the expected job of summarizing my previous scholarship and methodologies. Then I seize the moment, not to thank the academy for accepting me in its hallowed halls but to question the way higher education has defined what constitutes intellect, rigor, appropriate subject matter, and methodologies. Who determines smarts? I argue that African American literature and folklore have always questioned what constitutes true education.

Whereas chapter 3 focuses on the scholarly role of professors, chapter 4 focuses on how teaching and diversity converged in my career. Stories of my teaching experiences could fill volumes: comments from students who had never been taught by a Black teacher; ideological conflicts in multicultural classrooms where I was expected to take sides; teacher/student authority issues; canonical debates. "On Learning that I Was Teaching 'N---r Literature" signals that this is a chapter where I share experiences that jolted me, preparing me to analyze more deeply why so much diversity work is window dressing instead of dressing for success.

Chapter 5, "Pearl Was Shittin' Worms and I Was Supposed to Play Rang-Around-the-Rosie?" turns to the third leg of university performance: service as reflected by the chapter's subtitle, "An African American Woman's Response to the Politics of Labor." By the time I wrote this chapter, I was chairing one of the country's largest English departments, had already chaired a women's studies department, and served on scores of committees on the college, university, and national levels. This chapter confronts the difficult situation that many faculty of color face: the burden and blessing of extraordinary service. Tellingly, even as I was typing the pages to this book manuscript, I sometimes mistakenly typed *sisterworking* instead of *sisterlocking*. Service in the academy is both rewarding and vexed.

Chapter 6, "Underground Railroads on Postracial Tracks" is a shout-out to my literary training. Long before the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, I was teaching neo-slave narratives and watching how quickly that canon was growing. Neo-slave narratives are a genre that Black writers have refused to let die, long after the legal ending of American slavery. Its many authors include Octavia Butler, J. California Cooper, Michelle Cliff, Charles

Johnson, Gayl Jones, Dolen Perkins-Valdez, Ishmael Reed, Margaret Walker, Colson Whitehead, Sherley Anne Williams, and others. Chapter 6 adds to the scholarship on the subject by connecting the continued presence of slave narratives as a genre to critical race studies and critical Black feminist framings. The chapter focuses on Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Butler's *Kindred*.

Noting how many of the neo-slave narratives had origins in legal cases, I became interested in how enslaved Black women navigated the judicial system. Hence chapter 7, "Forty Devils Can't Make Me Obey You," describes legal cases by enslaved Black women that I was researching at the same time as taking one of my daughters to college. In my mind the sassiness of the enslaved women and my daughters' eagerness to experience life at a southern, historically Black college connected in surprising ways.

Chapter 8 on cartoons returns to my administrative duties. The chapter describes the cartoons in my desk drawer that I surreptitiously looked at to keep moving on my academic journey. Located primarily in the pages of the *New Yorker* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, these cartoons helped me maintain a sense of humor and balance while juggling so many roles. I read the cartoons through a Black feminist, multicultural lens, sometimes identifying with persons or animals that seemed a caricature of my lived experience. As Rebecca Wanzo expresses in *The Content of Our Caricature: African American Comic Art and Political Belonging* (2020), "I feel as if caricature is waiting around the corner, the thing that I may move into or that may overtake me. Sometimes it is an identity that I willfully move into—righteously, vengefully—often because I have become undone by microaggressions."<sup>10</sup> For someone who rarely read the comics while growing up, I began to yearn for comics to relax life's tensions, always wondering if there were comics about Black women. Thus, the chapter ends with a turn toward comics by and about Black women.

After the comedic release, the book returns to a more reflective posture in chapter 9 by defining the person that I have become, someone who realizes that even her life's global travels and international relationships have been raced and gendered. "From Soweto to Harlem, From the Antilles to Accra" chronicles how cultural baggage intervened in fully enjoying my travels throughout Great Britain, Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. Long before I traveled to different American cities, I traveled internationally. The first time I flew on a plane was when I was nineteen years old, flying from New York to Paris. I saw palm trees in Florence, Italy, before I ever saw them in Miami, Florida;

I saw Switzerland's Matterhorn before seeing Tennessee's Smoky Mountains, and the Seine River before seeing the Mississippi. Somewhere between those early trips and my later years of traveling, I became fixated on landmarks and histories through the eyes of a daughter of the African diaspora.

With chapter 10, *Sisterlocking Discoarse* ends with the comfort of retirement and an epilogue that is a final salute to my grandmother whose words began my opening story. I thought about writing a formal conclusion for those readers who would want a list of action steps for diversifying academia. I certainly have the background to do so and have been a part of many teams that have formulated such lists for various institutions, as well as for specific academic departments.<sup>11</sup> But there are many handbooks on the market and readily available scholarly works on diversity that detail how to formulate a diversity strategic action plan, measure results, and ensure accountability. Although in some of my chapters I inevitably address these issues, for this project I am not as much interested in the prose of diversity and its mechanics as I am its poetry—the thoughts and lived experiences of a woman of color. Because I have settled within me that this will be the last monograph I write, I do not want space to be given to charts, tables, and statistics. I notice that when some people have come to terms with the arc of their lives or when they are gravely ill, their ability to render the poetic rises. In Randy Pausch's *The Last Lecture* (2008), the lecture he gives is not narrowly tailored to his field of computer science but rather “a summation of everything Randy had come to believe.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, when the young neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi was dying of stage-four lung cancer, he wrote *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016) with a beauty and lyricism that transcends medical record reports. Although my admiration of these works does not stem from any sense of impending mortality, I admire that Pausch and Kalanithi chose to write outside of disciplinary and formalized structures. The task for me became: “What do I want to say about race and gender if my life depended upon it?” I would want an honest narrative that had heart.

Watching Lin-Manuel Miranda's play *Hamilton* with its emphasis on “who lives, who dies, who tells your story” affirmed for me that I wanted to tell my own story on my own terms, a story made more important because as a senior administrator, I literally sat “in rooms where it happened.”<sup>13</sup> In sum, *Sisterlocking Discoarse* is about braiding and breathing and believing that a Black woman's journey through the academy is important.