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Open Secrets – My Journey from Poverty to the PhD

Chapter 1 - Introduction

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Open Secrets: A Poor Person’s Journey from Poverty to the PhD

I am an angry Black woman. This is a secret and has been so most of my life. I am angry because the social justice – righting of historic and contemporary racist and sexist wrongs -- that I expected for myself and my people has eluded America for the sixty plus years that I have been on earth, in addition to, the centuries that passed before. Although I learned to live with what Close (1993) calls the “Rage of a privileged class,” like many people of color, women, and poor people -- I have been the target of exclusion and derision. I have been the target of social exclusion and slights, but more importantly, of economic losses caused by employment discrimination used by and on behalf of the dominant or ruling group (upper class, white and most of the time male) to keep their place at the top of the ladder; I have been stoned as I heard the taunts of nigger in grammar school; and I have experienced the violence of rape.

This book seeks to open the secrets of my experience with oppression as a Black woman who moved successfully through a series educational institutions as both student and professor. I attempt to reveal the secrets/realizations about my life; from them I derive lessons for others who may share my sense of distance from the mainstream, yet who seek to survive and thrive there.

Most of what I have to say is not truly a secret – especially if one knows what to look for – so what may seem to be a secret is in fact already in public view.

Survival in the mainstream has a price. Many years ago my doctoral advisor at the University of Chicago, Dolores “Dodie” Norton, helped me to understand that even the calmest, most placid African American is likely to experience a sense of disaffection
from the mainstream. Not only do Blacks who “make it” often have extensive knowledge of past wrongs (perhaps gained as part of their education and home teaching), but also their skin color (and I add female gender) marks them forever to the larger culture as an outcast to be denigrated, dismissed, and destroyed. Some daily examples may give the reader a sense of how flimsy our career and academic achievements might seem to us. For example, frequently when I am the next person in a line, the sales associate walks to the white person behind me to ask if they need assistance. Another of my “favorite” slights is when those who visit my office approach me then request to speak to the person in charge; for all the decades of my career I have had to patiently explain that I am the person they seek. One of the most celebrated cases of misplaced racial and class identity involved the 2009 mistaken identity of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates when he was stopped as he entered his own home because the police officer suspected him of breaking and entering. Gates’ experience is not unlike an instance when a police officer asked me (when I was an Assistant Dean at the University of Chicago) to move along and quit loitering in front of the President’s annual welcome party.

To cope within this devaluation by the dominant culture Dubois (1903) argued, similar to Norton (1978), that Blacks operate with a “twoness” of behavior where one uses the knowledge, manners, dress, and verbal cadences of the dominant culture to navigate in professional situations (and if one is good at it, to gain a measure of success) while one alternatively speaks, acts, and dresses appropriate to the Black world where one most likely passes all non-professional time. Those who are good at “twoness” have what Norton (1978) identifies as a dual perspective.
The ability to behave within both the dominant American and numeric minority culture has also been identified by other authors writing decades apart. First, Stonequist (1930) detailed the dilemma of the “marginal man” when he discussed Jewish citizens’ resolution of their religious “twoness.” More recently Diversi and Moreira (2009) provide a jarring ethnographic illustration of their experiences as immigrants who study and work in America’s higher education institutions.

In Brazil, where we were born, we are called *gringos* by the folks we work with. In the U.S.A., where we live, the establishment calls us aliens. We call ourselves *betweeners*: (un)conscious bodies experiencing life in and between two cultures (p.19).

This last discussion is both gut-wrenching and angry as the authors provide first-person accounts and theoretical comments on the nature and improbability of their journey as witnesses to life and death in Brazil where they work with street children. Simultaneously, the two men discuss their doctoral education against the backdrop of America’s sometimes dehumanizing and artificial expectations for theories and research rigor.

This brings me full circle to my own anger about the seemingly intractable problem of racial and social injustice. The specific targets of my anger are colleges and universities that fail to graduate students who are more often than not poor, minority, and first-generation (meaning the first in their family to graduate with a college degree). Such institutions know how to graduate “the upper crust” because it is this type of student that the institutions are best suited to serve. I argue here, similar to Roderick (2011), that low-graduation rates are a tragedy, an injustice perpetrated upon the students, their families, and the taxpayers or donors who financially underwrite such schools. Further, when students experience years in college and do not obtain a degree
yet still have the burden of tens of thousands of dollars of loans plus interest charges, then I maintain that the tragedy amounts to financial fraud.

To me this fraud, this tragedy, is very close to home. According to a report issued by the Business Leaders for Michigan (2013), first-year students enrolled at my university have approximately a 40% possibility of graduation after six years of enrollment.

Calling attention to such injustice (and waste of government resources) President Obama noted in his 2013 State of the Union speech that the federal government will soon take steps to address the issue. He said, “I ask Congress to change the Higher Education Act, so that affordability and value are included in determining which colleges receive . . . federal aid” (Obama, para. 4, p 3). He also indicated that the federal government would release a “College Scorecard” so students and parents can make informed decisions about this important financial investment.

Too often the problem of failure to graduate involves students with the talent and desire to achieve who just cannot locate the stepping stones to graduation, and who may lack the moral support from family and friends to achieve this goal. Over 40 years ago when I graduated from undergraduate school at the University of Michigan, I pledged to myself that I would advocate for other poor and under-represented people. My path through higher education involved finding out about some “open secrets” of higher education from books, mentors, role models, friends -- and as my mother would call it -- “the school of hard knocks.” That is, I learned from my many mistakes as I pursued and earned bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees. Thus, the first aim of this book is to share what I have learned as I walked this path with others who may also be from those under-
represented in the legions of graduates from America’s institutions of higher education. According to federal anti-poverty programs in higher education, those left behind or who are in danger of being left behind include: African American, Asian and Pacific Islanders, Native American or Latino Americans. Such students may also be from low-income families who have no history of college graduation.

Secondly, I want to provide professional educators or counselors with some insights to help them to better serve such students. This book can serve as a focal point of social work, human services, educational counseling, or youth discussions as it offers some scenarios for students to contemplate future educational predicaments in what was for me -- and might be for them -- a strange new world of obstacles and opportunities presented by institutions of higher education. Finally, this book may be instructive not only to low-income students and educational professionals, but may also be read more broadly by parents and guardians who want to help their loved ones make a reality out of their dream of college graduation.

This work uses autoethnographic methods of reflection on the transitions of life within a cultural context (Spry, T. 2011; Diversi & Moreira, 2009; Ellis, 2003). This technique means that I use events from my life as a (formerly) poor African American female to illustrate educational and class dilemmas during the period 1946 to present. I act within the cultural context (political, economic, and social) of an America where institutions and individuals often devalued or prejudged me because of my brown skin, poverty at birth, and female gender. Thus, I am both being acted upon and act within a cultural context that is ever-changing. There is a similar method of reflection that I have used in my class on gerontology and practice with aging people that is called life course
review: an examination of one’s biological characteristics as they are acted upon by the social, political, and economic forces plus major societal events such as riots, wars, and natural disasters.

One example of cultural change within the political arena serves to illustrate the degree of change within my lifetime. When I was born, in 1946 the president of the United States was Harry Truman, a white man from Missouri – a state with a history of ambivalence towards Blacks that pre-dated the Civil War. In contrast, the current president, Barack Obama, was born in Hawai’i, a racially diverse state, and is the child of an African father and a Caucasian American woman (McCullough, 1992, p. 54, & Obama, 1995). President Obama is recognized as the first African American or Black president in the history of our country. I submit that the policies of both leaders impacted my life to some degree.

While not identified as autoethnography, there are also number of best-selling books based on the authors’ experiences that attempt to illustrate the dilemmas of poverty or poverty and race. Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2002), Gardner’s *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), and Walls’s *The Glass Castle* (2005) are other first-person accounts of poverty which are often assigned in introductory policy classes to reinforce the need for policy solutions. *Nickel*, most similar to investigative reporting, was written to test how practical the newly-passed welfare reform laws were during the Clinton administration while *Pursuit* and *Castle* are memoirs that were written for general audiences. While *Nickel* used as policy responses to poverty as a case study it is now quite dated, the other two books were not intended for the specific purpose of teaching or guiding first-generation college graduates and their families.
Chapters from V. C. Polite’s *African American males in school and society* (1999) detail the travails of an orphaned inner-city youth who ultimately achieved world-wide success, and can also be used to teach such content. Similarly useful is Carl S. McNair’s *In the spirit of Ronald E. McNair, astronaut, an American hero* (2006), which offers a unified, although second-person account, of the path to the doctorate degree. Both works are excellent qualitative accounts of the challenges and triumphs on the paths to the doctoral degree, but Polite focuses narrowly on preparing urban educators, and McNair’s book is a biography of his brother’s life. Neither book explicitly states lessons about how to obtain higher degrees.

Since first-person accounts on this topic are so rare, R. L. Peters’ *Getting what you came for* (1997) is frequently assigned to the 850,000 students annually enrolled in educational anti-poverty programs. This book describes the formal and informal norms which pertain to application, matriculation, graduation, and employment in the undergraduate and graduate academic arena. However, Peters only devotes some thirty pages of his entire discussion to issues of sexual and racial diversity and provides little guidance for poor, first-generation, or under-represented minority students. Furthermore, this work now needs to be updated or replaced, as its point of reference is more than a dozen years old. I have found that Lieberman’s *Women in social work who have changed the world* (2010) speaks more directly to women’s issues than does Peters, but it excludes men who may be first-generation and low-income.

Green and Scott’s *Journey to the Ph. D.* (2003) is most similar to the one proposed because it provides the aspiring doctoral student with an edited anthology discussing three main themes: entrance into the academy, adapting to the academy, and
surviving the academy. The purpose of Journey is similar to mine – it seeks to assist those who plan to obtain a doctoral degree by providing examples of problems and solutions involved in the process. However, there are three primary differences between this book and that of Green and Scott. First, the authors have produced an edited volume that draws on the experiences of a multitude of individuals. Second, the relative youth of the contributors means generally that they have yet to attain reappointment, tenure, and promotion. They are writing more as students and less as permanent members of the academy. The third difference is that Green and Scott’s work is not written for consumption by an interested but non-degreed parent or even a first-generation student who might be intimidated by the more academic tone of their work.

Thus, this book intends to fill a gap in subject, time, and place with a unified discussion of one individual’s qualitative experiences of poverty, sexism, and racism, while it also advances the reader’s understanding of the importance of cultural context for low-income, first-generation, under-represented students as they matriculate through life and institutions of higher education.

In Open Secrets, I seek to provide a framework for success to students in anti-poverty programs – such as one that I formerly administered.

Following this “Introduction,” that explains the goals and methods of the book, in Chapter 2, “Strawberry lessons: The halo effect of an early childhood experience,” I illustrate how a positive childhood label used by my parents – in this instance, smart, motivated me to achieve. I offer for the reader’s consideration several lessons that I gained from this experience.
“The nuts and bolts of getting’ over: A first-generation PhD story,” Chapter 3, frames my life in terms of the generations who went before me: sharecroppers, laborers, maids, and housewives. These kin folks’ lives provided me with the foundation necessary to graduate from the University of Michigan with bachelor and master degrees, plus from the University of Chicago with a doctoral degree. I then detail the obstacles presented by my status as a first-generation college and graduate school student and discuss some of the solutions that I discovered. I describe and define situations including admission at all college levels, financial aid, and competition among doctoral students.

Chapter 4, “Family matters: Walking the path and the achievement gap,” is my answer to the question often posed by my program participants and students: Will I lose touch with my family if I go on for a doctoral degree? I present scenarios that involve my relationships with my husband, parents, children, friends, and extended family from undergraduate through doctoral study.

Chapter 5, “Ism’s on the journey from poverty: Classism, racism, and sexism” identifies “isms” challenges that I faced during childhood, phases of my early career, and while I obtained a higher education. As a low-income person I learned “how to spin straw into gold”; how to deal with on-the-job conflict; and how to fight back when others tried to victimize me.

Chapter 6, ”Tenure: The game” demystifies the various steps one takes to obtain permanent employment in an academic setting (tenure); I explain the process as a series of “game maneuvers” played out by the university as employer and the untenured faculty member as employee.
Chapter 7, “Raising the second generation” is intended primarily for parents and educators as they seek to provide guidance and support to high school and college students who aspire to graduate from a college or university. I use the examples of my two very different but successful children to suggest how one can support, challenge, and motivate students from grade school through the doctoral degree. From these experiences I draw lessons and suggest how to maintain positive relationships with one’s adult children.

Chapter 8, “Blueberry blessings: Wisdom from my farm roots” is a summary of what I have learned on my educational journey thus far. All of the chapters have summary lessons plus questions for the reader to discuss or reflect upon.

Acknowledgements

Autoethnography involves the reflections of an individual; as author of this book I am solely responsible for the content. However, I am indebted to many family members who have reviewed the manuscript for factual accuracy: Michael, Jahi, and Aisha Chappell were joined in this endeavor by my siblings Frances Ray, Gail Patterson, and Ben Brown, as well as, my cousin Linda Dixon. Friends and colleagues have assisted me with the interminable drafts: Ann Rosegrant Alvarez, Pastora San Juan Cafferty, Melvin Peters, Pavritha ____, Desiree Hellegers, Pamela Gesund, Dara Walker, and Annarosa Mendoza-King. I am grateful for the comments of both McNair Scholars at Eastern Michigan University and social policy students enrolled at Eastern Michigan University during 2010. David Erik Nelson, my writing coach, provided me with much-needed encouragement and technical writing guidance. I owe particular thanks to Dr. Sarah Huyvaert who pointed out many years ago that failure to publish this book meant that I
believed in the negative judgments of others in society. She urged me repeatedly to tell
this story and to realize its value.

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“We can’t pick these strawberries, Betty,” said my mother with a tremor of fear in her voice. There are snakes in these bushes; I saw one the other day – might have been a rattler!” The type of rattlesnake found in Michigan is called a Masasagua, and it is as poisonous as many of its counterparts. My mother had killed several of these snakes with the sharp blade of the garden hoe in the recent past. Then as a sign to other invaders she hung their bodies on the picket fence in front of our house perhaps in hopes that their “brethren” would take head. I guessed Mom had a point.

Yet at six or seven years old I knew all the answers. And I also knew that if I picked a case of berries -- sixteen quarts -- then I would have enough money to buy a plastic wading pool. It was very hot for early summer – projected to be in the 90s by mid-day. This is why I really wanted that wading pool.

So I said, “Mom, let’s take some big sticks and hit the berry bushes in front of us ‘cause you always said that the snakes are more afraid of us than we are of them. And, Mom, why don’t we put our winter boots on? That way the snakes can’t bite our feet as we walk along with the sticks.”

Dressed incongruously in blue jeans and a starched white shirt for the sweaty manual labor before us, Mom turned her beautiful mocha-brown profile to survey the acre plot of strawberries that would bring our family the money for “extras” like school books and shoes, replacement tires for the balding ones, and I hoped even a night at the A & W root beer stand. Mom considered this advice. “Well, your dad did say that the berries have to be picked today because they’ll spoil otherwise. I would rather wait for him to get home from work, but we might lose the crop by then.” Mom paused to glance
over the ankle-height rows of bushy plants which grew so well that they appeared to be hedges. Our cultivated strawberry bushes were the envy of other farmers because my Dad had taken great care to get just the “right” variety from a friend. Now the plants sat in all their deep dark green glory with the large red juicy berries waiting to escape the unremitting sunshine.

Stock-still in my worn bib overalls that we all called “floods” because I had outgrown the length and the pant legs were now so short that they would not get wet in the high water of a flood, I held my breath waiting for her answer. Mom seemed to gather all her strength and resolve (she was rightfully frightened by poisonous snakes) and said, “Okay. Let’s put our boots on. Then let’s use the sticks just like you said and see what happens.”

At first we gingerly poked the sticks ahead of us while stomping firmly in the straw between the rows of bushes. Every so once in a while during the two hours it took us to pick a few cases, I would sample a large shiny berry. “Betty! Stop eating all the profits,” reluctantly, I obeyed Mom. More than fifty years later, it still seems that those berries, our profits, were something special: plump, dark red, juicy and more the size of a small egg but with a much sweeter taste than any I have had since.

Although we did not run into any snakes, the tale of my solution to our dangerous dilemma became legend. Mom told Dad about my suggestion as soon as he came home from his factory job in town. He said, “Well, you are one smart little girl, and tomorrow I’m going to take you to town, and you can buy the pool as soon as we finish selling the berries.” I was as proud of the compliment from my Dad as I was about the money I had earned.
My Dad, a muscular Black man of six foot tall, had a demeanor often as hard as the work he did. He was employed at Bohn Aluminum and Brass which was a light manufacturing plant in South Haven, Michigan, located about 10 miles away from our farm. I hated to iron Dad’s shirts and blue jeans because even after washing they often still smelled sweaty, and they had many small holes in them from the molten aluminum that he poured into molds to make automobile pistons. Dad wore gloves with tape to protect his hands from the molten metal, but often it did not do any good. Dad’s hands, legs and arms had many small burns acquired over the years spent at this job. He seemed to enjoy working the truck farm (small farm that yields enough crops to take to market in a truck) and tending the animals that fed us and earned a little extra cash on the side. Maybe he enjoyed it because he was his own boss and because he saw himself as more successful at the combination of farming and paid labor than many of his neighboring contemporaries.

At sunrise the next day Dad took me and my sisters to town to sell the strawberries. I could hardly contain myself in anticipation of my first-ever purchase. Unfortunately, we had to wait in what for me was an agonizingly long line to sell the strawberries. Looking at the semi-trailer trucks lined up to receive the berries, I asked, “Who will ever eat all these?” My Dad replied, “The people in the city – Chicago.” This puzzled me. I had been to Chicago and I saw a lot of people, but I could not match the number of people I had seen with the long line of huge trucks which would deliver the crops from our local farms to stores where the city people would buy them. I did not yet know the concept of a million, yet alone that more than a million people lived within hours of our home.
At long last my Dad hoisted the strawberry cases up to the waiting refrigerator trucks. He was paid, and in turn I had the $7 for my pool in my grubby little hands! As promised, Dad took me to the hardware store to buy my wading pool. I chattered away at my two younger sisters about how I would enjoy the cold water after sitting in the hot car. Once we got home, Dad inflated my wading pool with a bicycle pump, and water was added from the outdoors hose. At last! I happily splashed about in the pool impervious to the noon-time sun. Then out of the corner of my eye I spied Gail and Frances as they dipped their dirty grass-covered little feet into my pool. Well, that is where I drew the line.

I pulled myself out of my cool spot and yelled, “You didn’t work for this. Get out.” Frances, about three years old, poked her little lip out and stood her ground, but Gail, ever the meek and sweet little lady obeyed me.

Both my parents came running. “You have to share with your little sisters,” Mom explained.

“But, Mom why? They didn’t work like I did to earn this pool.”

Dad said, “Well, that may be true but you also did not pay for the gas to take those berries to market or repay me for all the work I put into growing them. Listen, what if you take the first dip and cool off? Then you can invite Gail and Frances in after a little while.”

I whined, “Well, that’s not fair, they didn’t do any work.”

Dad responded, “That’s true but they are too little to do a good job like you did. I know that you want to share with your little sisters because we are a family, and that’s what families do.”
Reluctantly I agreed – since I figured that I wasn’t going to win this argument what with Dad being the youngest of seven, he had a lot of sympathy for those farther down in the birth order. Of course, I paraded myself to the pool and lounged for as long as possible before “inviting my sisters” into my wading pool. “You have to wash your dirty feet before you can get in my pool,” I said in a huff to remind them of my terms and conditions. Soon we were all wading and splashing about in our underwear (we could not afford swim suits) and it almost felt as wonderful as it had without my unwanted “guests.”

I believed I was smart (as Mom and Dad later restated to relatives and friends) and that I had solved an important problem for our family: how to harvest without danger so that we could all make money. I was also secretly pleased at my ability to negotiate some private time in my pool. There is a phrase “efficacy” in community organizing literature, which generally means that a community may learn a lesson from trial and error that will enable future successes, and that a success on a small scale is likely to yield larger ones. Solving this “Strawberry Problem” provided me with my first sense of efficacy: I came to believe that being smart meant finding solutions through creative thinking, working hard, and negotiating with authorities (my parents) for concessions (keeping my sisters’ dirty feet out of my new wading pool at least for a while).

I still like strawberries, but they have never tasted as good as those I ate when I earned my first seven dollars to buy that little blue and white plastic wading pool.

To me the strawberry lesson is that people can solve difficult – even dangerous problems -- if they think about problems creatively, are willing to take a risk and work very hard (harder than you might originally envision). When my parents labeled me as
smart early in life this motivated many of my future achievements such as being an honor student throughout most of my elementary and high school years, graduating from the University of Michigan with a bachelor’s and master’s and from the University of Chicago with a doctorate. This strawberry lesson gave me the efficacy to work for the positive regard that I believe I deserved.

Once I heard a motivational speech at the beginning of a summer college prep program that my son was attending at the University of Michigan’s College of Engineering. The speaker (I no longer remember the name) emphasized the importance of understanding “not just who you are but whose you are.” That is, one should never be ego-driven but rather realize that the path through life is always taken within the context of a larger community and family culture regardless of whether the members of this reference group are present in the physical sense. Putting this more like an anthropologist who studies culture: You are always a member of a tribe. Your successes and failures reflect on others even beyond your nuclear family and your well-being is inextricably tied to theirs.