

Getting to Here from There:

One Woman's Journey from the South Bronx to the Academy

by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz

I came of age during the 1980's in the South Bronx. Other than its fame as the birthplace of rap music, my neighborhood was similar to many hoods in America. It was a poor community rich in potential and possibility because of its youth. I was privileged to grow up at a time when rap music was a guiding principle in defining and redefining what it meant to be young and Black in Urban America. The "godfather" of rap, Grandmaster Flash lived a few blocks away, and a member of the Cold Crush Brothers, one of the first widely-recognized rap groups was a family friend who lived five floors above. Our neighborhood of housing projects and tenement buildings enveloped the youth of my community in security. We were young, we were Black, and we had dreams. Our parents "made a way out of no way," and it wasn't until we grew up and moved out of the neighborhood that many of us realized we were quite poor.

My father occasionally owned a business. Sometimes he was proprietor of a liquor store or dry cleaners, and when those businesses failed he worked for a man named Maxi, whom I later came to know as Uncle Maxi. Uncle Maxi was a full-bellied, gray-haired Greek man who was a loan shark to many and a numbers runner to most. He became very close to my family, and I'm certain that for many years he was my father's only friend.

My mother was a stay-at-home mom. This was out of necessity since she was taking care of my two siblings, me and my diabetic grandmother. Besides, my dad was adamant that mom be home to watch us. He did not want us to become latchkey kids who roamed the streets and got into trouble while both parents were at work. Although he rarely kept a steady job despite his skills and education, his sketchy employment record didn't seem to matter when it came to this topic. The subject was not open to debate. According to him, and those who subscribe to the 'cult of true womanhood' philosophy, a mother's place was in the home; her job was to take care of her husband and children. I think during those years my mother was so overburdened with raising the three of us, dealing with the drama my father put her through, and caring for a sick mother that even if she had the

inclination to protest "her place," she probably didn't have the energy to sustain her objection.

Time has a way of making things apparent. As I've gotten older, I've come to realize and fully appreciate that my parents did their best for us. My siblings and I managed to have a somewhat pleasant childhood (most of the time) and create decent lives for ourselves with our partners in spite of witnessing many sour moments between my parents because of lack of money and my father's infidelity. He and mom were often at odds about money, especially during those high-pressured "back to school" moments; however, my maternal grandmother and uncles managed to rally together their funds and guarantee that my siblings and I return to school each year in the flyest gear. It wasn't just about the clothes, although this was very important to most kids in my community, particularly those who went to the schools in the neighborhood. The start of the school year was the one chance to rock fresh gear for a least a week straight, and give the impression that your family was "better off" than most of the families in the community. It was also a chance to show off, get noticed and get respect. In spite of his saking out on our "back to school clothes" money for several years in a row, we never believed that our education was not important to father. Both our parents made one thing clear to us: there were things they could not afford to provide; however, a solid education would grant access to those things and offer us a passport to the vast world that existed beyond the boundary of our South Bronx neighborhood.

My father, a Bajan, migrated to the United States during the late 1950s. He was a licensed pharmacist on the island of Barbados, and received a full scholarship to continue his studies at Columbia University in New York City. Shortly after arriving to The States, he met and fell in love with my mother. A few months later mother was pregnant with my sister, and my father's college plans were postponed. He decided to look for work and become a family man. With every passing year the hope of going to Columbia faded. By the time I came along, he was faced with the task of caring for a family of three children, a wife and his sick mother-in-law.

On the surface dad and mom seemed a mismatch. My mom, a southern girl from Alabama, left home and a life of poverty at the age of 16 for a new start in New York City. My dad, who didn't come to New York until he was in his early twenties, was forced to leave Barbados after a tragedy which resulted from a medication he prescribed. His family was middle-class and well-connected and therefore able to get him off the island. Though their lives seemed worlds apart, together, mom and dad were the exact parents my siblings and I needed to get us through the toughness of the South Bronx, and on our way to becoming productive citizens. The truth is my father threatened us if we didn't get good grades, and he was serious about following through on his threats. My mother was motivated by a determination that we each would go further in school than she did. I'm not quite sure what influenced me most back then: the threat of being beat with a stalk of sugar cane by my father, or the disappointment that surely would fill my mother's eyes if I brought home failing grades. In any case, I brought home grades of 90 through 99; my mom was ecstatic, my dad asked where the 100's were.

Mom continued to encourage us with a remarkable dedication to our success. Each morning she would rise early, make us toast with peanut butter, serve us a glass of juice and send us on our way. Mother didn't depend on the schools to feed us. She saw that as her job. From her impoverished childhood days she learned that a child cannot concentrate in school if she is not fed. My mother knew nothing of Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*, but she understood that her children needed to be fed and properly cared for if we were going to reach our full potential in school. Although her devotion was not enough to prevent my brother from dropping out of high school, as many young Black males do for various reasons, it was what was needed to encourage my sister to complete her A.A.S. in nursing and convince me to buy into the notion of lifelong learning.

My sister received fairly good grades and passed through school in an uneventful, middle-child-syndrome sort of way. But school had to be different for me. I had to excel. It was the only way to show my mother what her dedication meant to us, and to help heal the wound that my brother inflicted on her heart when he dropped out of high school. Although I was the youngest child, I felt this immense pressure to make up for my brother's failure and uphold the family's definition of educational

success. I began to bring home report cards with 100s in many subjects, entered and won local and national storytelling contests, and secured a place in a weekend gifted and talented program at the elite Fieldston School in Riverdale. I wrote poetry, short stories, joined the debate team and the weather club; my participation in the weather club even won me 15 seconds of fame on a local television news program. By the time I was in my last year of junior high school, I realized that my mom had sparked what already lived in me: a love of school and a passion for learning.

I was considered an excellent student in junior high (I was bestowed the honor of valedictorian of my eighth grade class) and I did very well in high school (I graduated with a 98 average); however, it was during my first year in college that I began to experience the effects of my inadequate public school education. All was fine when I academically competed against other poor Black and Latino kids from communities like mine, but when I entered the collegiate arena and suddenly had classes with white and Black middle- and upper-class kids, excelling became a challenge for me. I realized that my classmates knew much more than I did; they'd read books I'd never heard of and visited places that I had only seen on television. There was a significant gap in the quality of our education, and my education was clearly on the lowest end of that gap. I played catch up during my four years in college and managed to graduate (after taking remedial math and writing classes my first year) and finish with a 3.3 grade point average. My G.P.A., along with my personal statement, and in spite of my GRE scores, managed to get me into Teacher's College, Columbia University. I was no longer new to the game, and though I clearly was deficient in many areas that my classmates were not, I found a way to excel at Columbia while holding down a full-time job as a marketing manager. I worked hard, embraced the challenges before me, and made a vow to earn my Ph.D. even before I fully understood or could imagine what it meant to complete the terminal degree.

Though I continued to love learning, I cannot say that my first four years of college were easy for me. I had just started at Columbia, married and moved to Manhattan's Greenwich Village. I was an evening student at Columbia and worked for *The New York Times* as a marketing manager during the day. I made a decent salary, but without my Ph.D. — the degree I vowed I would earn

a decade before—I was not completely satisfied. After spending seven years at *The New York Times* I went to work for another media company, and then a large college. I was earning a nearly six-figure income when I decided to walk away from the money and the career I had carved out for myself and become a graduate student at New York University’s School of Education. I was about to become a doctoral student and I was determined to not let anything — a successful job or lack of money — stand in my way.

Now that I am a Ph.D. and working at a community college, I’m still not completely satisfied. Once again, I am faced with the “inadequacy” of my education as I compete for grants and tenure-track jobs at four-year institutions against Ph.D.’s who attended a more “prestigious” college than I. Although NYU is highly regarded and I received a decent education there, I am aware of the hierarchy which exists in academe. The school where you complete your doctorate has everything to do with the institution where you’ll ultimately teach, and besides there are not many options for a junior assistant professor from New York who wants to remain in New York. My decision to work at a community college is additionally driven by my desire to make a difference. Part of making that difference, I think, is to care enough about each student and their personal story and offer space for them to share their experiences. Just as writing has allowed me to make peace with my past, I believe my students benefit from writing about those people, places and moments that impacted their lives. Thus, the educational autobiography is at the center of every course I teach.

To do this type of work (particularly in a community college setting where the class load is heavier than in senior colleges) with students who come from different cultures and struggle against uncertain futures, requires a lot of energy and steadfast belief that students can work through their issues via the narrative process. In particular, my load of three composition classes and one literature class, an administrative assignment, and my participation on several college-wide and department committees puts a strain on my energy level. Since I am one of only five full-time, African American tenure-track faculty among the 65 in the English department, I am often selected to be on college-wide committees and called into department meetings that involve issues concerning Black students. It is rewarding for me to

take part in these projects; however, my involvement puts a strain on my scholarly work. I recently read an article about how few Black women actually make it in academia, and those who do make it become the workhorses of their departments. These women are overloaded because they are often designated the voice for the few students of color in their department or on their campus. They are overwhelmed with committee work, student advisement and teaching. Because of this they rarely find the time to work on their own scholarship. Naturally, when their time comes up for tenure, their names are not on the short list.

I tackle this disturbing news and my current responsibilities by using the same approach I perfected during my early college years — I work hard and focus on what can be and not what is. I also find that writing helps me sort out many issues and helps me construct a happy ending to the narrative I wish to write for my life. When I write I create a path for myself; I construct a space where tenure at a Research 1 University is a possibility for a young Black woman like me. With each lecture I give, each conference paper I deliver and each article I submit, deep down I know I can do more and even do better. But for now I take some comfort in where I am on this journey, and in the fascinating possibility of just how far this little Black girl from the South Bronx can go.

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