

**Deconstructing This Self: One Black Woman's  
Exploration of Childhood Sexual Abuse  
and Process of Personal Reclamation**

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## ABSTRACT

*Self-identity and its formation shape the broad query underlying this exploration, while the specific area of focus is childhood sexual abuse and its impact upon one's sense of self and one's sense of agency. This exploration strives to understand the factors that contribute to the perpetration of childhood sexual abuse, looking at socio-cultural reality that is grounded in patriarchal theology, as well as particular historical views of black female sexuality that might have contributed to my own abuse. Evidenced is how internalization of the abuser's regard leads to distortions of self-concept.*

*The first half of the exploration is an examination of concomitant contributors to childhood sexual abuse. This includes investigating the theological ground from which modern dysfunctional views of sexuality sprouted, the socio-historical and cultural determinants of the way black women's sexuality is currently perceived, and the dynamics behind internalization.*

*The second half of the exploration details my personal journey<sup>1</sup> and process of reclamation, and employs the heuristic research paradigm developed by Clark Moustakas.<sup>2</sup> Here the reader is invited to attend the ongoing recovery of memory and personal power that were stunted by my experience of childhood sexual abuse. An earth-based spiritual tradition rooted in Africa and premised on respect for all life is at the center of my healing journey. Dreams are the journey's epistemological core.*

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1. Included is an honest description of a personal incidence of assault I experienced as a child. I am aware that discussing sexual violence runs the risk of triggering other survivors, and I also believe it is important to speak openly. It is my hope that by speaking what is often left hidden, I lift the veil of secrecy and shame that too often surrounds childhood sexual abuse.

2. Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990).

## INTRODUCTION

### *Premise: The Constructed Self*

“William James offered an alternative to the notion that self-identify is based in a mental or self substance. Personal identify is, he said, an idea that a person constructs.”<sup>3</sup> The personal self is constructed from the accumulation of experiences, responses, and feedback one receives throughout life.

The human disciplines attribute the development of the notion of personal identity and the self to symbolic and bodily interaction within the social environment. . . . The concept of self . . . is a construction built on other people's responses and attitudes toward a person. . . . In order to come to a unified and concordant self concept and personal identify, then, the person needs to synthesize and integrate the diverse social responses he or she experiences.<sup>4</sup>

Early experiences are foundational in shaping our psyches and the way we interact with and walk in the world.<sup>5</sup> This exploration will address childhood sexual abuse<sup>6</sup> from the macro perspective of socio-historical and cultural factors contributing to its existence and from the micro perspective of its impact on women's lives.<sup>7</sup>

Because this is also my story, I wondered if perceptions of black women's sexuality are projected onto the black female child, and how these perceptions have been fostered. With this in mind I look at a common stereotype of black female sexuality that resonates in my own experience. Employing a structured research format has facilitated the telling of painful personal history.

### *Overview*

Childhood sexual abuse leaves scars that are deep, and it invariably impacts adult functioning.<sup>8</sup> Accounts by women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse vary as

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3. Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1988), 149.

4. *Ibid.*, 150.

5. John W. Santrock, *Life-Span Development* (Madison, WI: WCB Brown & Benchmark Publishers, 1995).

6. Childhood sexual abuse is referred to as CSA in the literature. However, I have chosen to consistently write out the words in this exploration as an exercise in mitigating my tendency to minimize personal abuse.

7. Statistics vary slightly but indicate that approximately 1 in 5 boys also suffer childhood sexual abuse. (Sexual Abuse/Trauma, [http://www.allaboutcounseling.com/sexual\\_abuse.htm#sA5](http://www.allaboutcounseling.com/sexual_abuse.htm#sA5). (accessed December 2004 and March 2007).

8. Stephen Fleming and Sheri Bélanger, “Trauma, Grief, and Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse,” in *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*, ed. Robert Neimeyer, 311-325

to its impact in their lives.<sup>9</sup> But all have been impacted. The trajectory of their self-development was invariably altered by the experience and trauma of childhood sexual abuse. “Violence sends deep roots into the heart.”<sup>10</sup>

What are possible social and cultural contextual factors that contribute to childhood sexual abuse? As a black woman who was subjected to childhood sexual abuse, I echo the thoughts of a black woman who survived rape at the hands of black males: “*how could they do that to one of their ‘own.’*”<sup>11</sup> As I acknowledge the extent to which incidents of childhood sexual abuse impacted my sense of self and personal identity, Charlotte Pierce-Baker’s question echoes in anguished tones because I suffered abuse at the hands of male family members.

Indeed, how could they do that to one of their own? What in their cosmology, in their sense of relationship to self and the universe, enabled them to feel entitled to use my body for their gratification? And what was my cosmology that I seemingly acquiesced or would perceive victimization as acquiescence?

The process of deconstruction might take a lifetime, although a full deconstruction is highly improbable given the complexity of interwoven factors that constitute the individual. “Because sexual abuse is just one of many factors that influence your development, it isn’t always possible to isolate its effects from the other influences on your life.”<sup>12</sup>

However, in an effort to unlock the mystery, I turn to Elaine Pagels<sup>13</sup> to help my understanding of the theological ground from which modern dysfunctional views of sexuality sprouted. Severe attitudes towards women and children held by the early church fathers shaped philosophical thought and the reality of human lives for centuries and continue to do so. That being as it may, it must be recognized that sexual abuse of children predates the early church by centuries:

A man desiring a youth was obliged to abide by legal procedure. . . . When of age, a boy could be courted and often many admirers would vie for his favor in open competition with gifts, flattery and even cash. Once a suitor was approved, the lucky man was permitted to possess the boy by rape.<sup>14</sup>

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(Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001).

9. Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).

10. Pat Conroy, *The Prince of Tides*, (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), quoted in Charlotte Pierce-Baker, *Surviving the Silence: Black Women’s Stories of Rape* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1998), 63.

11. Charlotte Pierce-Baker, *Surviving the Silence: Black Women’s Stories of Rape* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1998), 63. (Although her research concerns rape, I nonetheless cite Charlotte Pierce-Baker. Her book contains the stories of black women who have been victims of rape, herself included. Some of these women also endured childhood sexual abuse.)

12. Bass and Davis, *Courage to Heal*, 38.

13. Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988).

14. Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980), 50.

For the even earlier Bronze Age warrior, women and children comprised the “spoils of war” to be disposed of as the warrior chose.<sup>15</sup>

In concert with the above consideration, as a black woman I try to understand the socio-historical and cultural determinants of the way black women's sexuality is currently perceived. Views of the black woman's body and sexuality, I learn, are rooted in the insidious institution of slavery. In this part of the investigation I turn to Dorothy Roberts, bell hooks, and Carolyn West for their insight and theoretical understanding.

The current exploration of childhood sexual abuse is also an excavation. I want to dig deep and extract the last vestiges of memory, the memory that clings to my cells and causes flesh, bone, and psyche to recoil from intimacy and trusting. This is memory that is only partially available to conscious awareness. Most of the memory is hidden from consciousness, but it has come to me in visions and somatic recall. I know of a memory's truth by way of somatic confirmation that gives rise to emotional response. “Memory (and history) is an embodied phenomenon.”<sup>16</sup> I am learning that my aloof and detached mind does not always speak *truth*, rather it often obscures truth for the sake of effective daily functioning.

### *Investigational Approach*

The advantage of remembering is that “the previously ostracized experiences can return to the fold, and the increased wholeness resulting from these new integrations favors greater well-being.”<sup>17</sup> Allowing the unassimilated aspects of self stemming from childhood sexual abuse an opportunity to emerge and be heard is a microcosmic take on the tradition of feminist scholarship that provides opportunities for “other persons and other experiences that have not been valued or privileged within the dominant culture to speak their own stories with their own voices and opportunities for these voices to be listened to and honored.”<sup>18</sup> In the case of one's own psyche, it is the intrapersonal politics of dominant ego and suppressed realities.

Accessing and honoring intrapsychic reality in scholarship is counter to the mainstream left-brain orientation to erudition and research. Answering this bias,

Harding (1987), in her analysis of the androcentric epistemological assumptions of science, argued that feminist epistemology, particularly feminist standpoint epistemologies, must “seek to epistemically valorize some of the most discredited perspectives of knowledge” that have been ignored.<sup>19</sup>

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15. Monica Sjuo and Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of Earth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

16. Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), xvii.

17. William Braud and Rosemarie Anderson, *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 44.

18. *Ibid.*, 45.

19. Joanne Ardovini-Brooker, “Feminist Epistemology: A Reconstruction and Integration of Women's Knowledge and Experience,” *Advancing Women In Leadership Journal* (Summer

The perspectives of knowledge in feminist epistemology outlined by Ardovini-Brooker include women's ways of knowing, women's experiences, and women's knowledge.

Subjective knowledge grounded in experience is valued. A woman's personal experience has the power to speak to more than her individual encounter for it reflects the larger socio-historical, cultural, and political context of its occurrence. In this way, *the personal is political*. I believe the subjugation of women and children, and the exploitation of black women's sexuality are formed in the same socio-historical and cultural aberrations spawned by patriarchy and supported by patriarchal theology, philosophy, and politics.

This resonates with the thinking of Patricia Hill Collins who states,

Viewing relations of domination for Black women for any given sociohistorical context as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression expands the focus of analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect.<sup>20</sup>

It is the interconnection of these systems of oppression that makes the task of self deconstruction – the finding of the essential self – daunting.

With this exploration, an important component is included that heretofore I have found difficult to make a central element of scholarship, i.e., my story. This reticence is due to many factors, ranging from traditional western academic indoctrination, to an unwillingness to honor the validity of my experiences, and the inability to face my memories. These are memories housed within my body shielded from my mind, only emerging intermittently in the form of somatic resonance to people, environments, or situations, and in the form of dreams.

*Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology and Applications* by Clark Moustakas, lays the ground rules and provides the methodological framework for my research. Heuristic research is research into the self, buttressed by traditional approaches to inquiry. "The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge."<sup>21</sup>

At minimum, placing the self at the center of scholarship has seemed narcissistic in my estimation. However, a good friend recently reminded me of the dialectic that exists between personal and social transformation – *you try and change the world you change yourself, you change yourself you change the world*. It is not an either/or relationship. Moustakas echoes this when he writes,

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2000). [http://www.advancingwomen.com/awl/summer2000/m4\\_ardovini-brooker.html](http://www.advancingwomen.com/awl/summer2000/m4_ardovini-brooker.html) (accessed December 9, 2004). Copyright (2000) by the Advancing Women in Leadership, Advancing Women Website, [www.advancingwomen.com](http://www.advancingwomen.com); reproduced with permission from the publisher.

20. Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination" in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 221–238. <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/252.html> (accessed November 2004 and March 2007).

21. Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 9.

the question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one's self and the world in which one lives. The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social – and perhaps universal – significance.<sup>22</sup>

Using the heuristic paradigm, the journey of recovering wholeness is discussed. The central place of spirituality within this process is also revealed to the reader. For at least the past 15 years I have skipped along the edges of African-based spiritual customs founded on the West African *Ifá* tradition that was brought to the western Atlantic regions with the slave trade. I say skipped along the edges because unlike my eldest sister, who became initiated into one of the diasporic African-based religions, I had simply read books and attended workshops.

African-based spirituality is earth based; as such it is embodied and comes alive in one's life through practice and application. Only recently have I committed to deeper study and practice. Central to my reclamation process is an altar that I constructed honoring my child self and asking for the guidance, love, and support of *Yemaya*.

*Yemaya* is the orisha (or deity) within *Ifá* who is associated with the nurturing of children and the affairs of women in general. She is also aligned with our dreams. She is the mother of the oceans, teeming with life. "There is no mountain of trouble that *Yemaya* cannot wear down; no sickness of heart that She cannot wash clean; no desert of despair that She cannot flood with hope."<sup>23</sup>

### *Relevance*

To reiterate, the current exploration will look at socio-historical and cultural preconditions to childhood sexual abuse as well as socio-historical and cultural preconditions to internalization of the oppression of childhood sexual abuse especially as a black woman. My own seeking out of this morass is also explored.

The personal relevance of this process is found in the following words of a research participant addressing internalized oppression: "Since I've committed my life to social change, the more that I can release and work through . . . then the more powerful I will be."<sup>24</sup> Although I have felt a call to service from a young age, what my service in the world would look like has never been explicitly clear. The details of the vision are still clarifying, but the core value of championing the humanity of children and women prevails.

At this point I have come to embrace the dialectic between personal and social transformation as reflected above by Moustakas when he says that personal questions have social significance. Rosenwasser, who researched internalized oppression, states

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22. *Ibid.*, 15.

23. Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 119.

24. Penny Rosenwasser, "Tool for Transformation: Cooperative Inquiry as a Process for Healing from Internalized Oppression." Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia, PDF file, 5) <http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/2000/rosenwasserp1-final.PDF> (accessed December 3, 2004).

that her work is in part based on “Mathias Finger’s ‘new paradigm for social action’ that induces ‘a process of personal transformation that inevitably will influence social, cultural and political life.’”<sup>25</sup>

Just as the developmentally stunting and painful effects of childhood sexual abuse need to be eradicated from one’s psyche, the reality of childhood sexual abuse needs to be expunged from society. Childhood sexual abuse is described as “a bodily violation of extreme humiliation and devastation. . . . It silences our voices, numbs our bodies, warps our thinking, and closes our hearts.”<sup>26</sup> It is also an epidemic.

In 1994 Bass and Davis reported that “one out of three girls and one out of seven boys are sexually abused by the time they reach the age of eighteen.”<sup>27</sup> Statistics largely compiled from the 2000 National Center for Victims of Crime Report chillingly inform us that one-third of sexual assault victims are under the age of 12, with 43% of that number being 6 or younger. In addition, 83% of sexually abused boys are under the age of 12, and it is estimated by experts in the field that between 90% and 95% of sexual abuse is never reported to the police.<sup>28</sup> More recent statistics continue to paint a grim picture. In 2004 there were 84,398 substantiated cases of child sexual abuse.<sup>29</sup>

The effects of sexual abuse suffered in childhood are far-reaching. Women who were sexually abused as children frequently engage in self-destructive behaviors, including self-mutilation and suicide. “In clinical outpatient samples, an estimated 50% to 60% of women with sexual abuse histories have attempted suicide, compared to 23% to 34% of women without sexual abuse histories.”<sup>30</sup> The same article points out that when the abuse is kept secret, when the child does not tell, this contributes to self-blame. Self-blame has been shown concomitant with shame, low self-esteem, substance abuse, feelings of alienation, as well as self-destructive behaviors.<sup>31</sup>

As I awaken to the ability to face, the courage to verbalize, and the capacity to heal the personal dysfunctions attendant to childhood sexual abuse, hopefully my process will be of service to other women who want to embark on a similar journey. Also, as I clear my psychic and emotional space, I hope to become a strong vessel able to hold the space for others as they work to face, verbalize, and heal from childhood sexual abuse and encounter self-transformation.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE INTERNALIZATION OF OPPRESSION

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25. *Ibid.*, 1.

26. Ruth King, *Healing Rage: Women Making Inner Peace Possible* (Berkeley, CA: Sacred Spaces Press, 2004), 10.

27. Bass and Davis, *Courage to Heal*, 24.

28. Wings Foundation, “Facts About Childhood Sexual Abuse.” <http://www.wingsfound.org/statsChildhood.html> (accessed December 2004 and March 2007).

29. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007*, Table 332, Prepared by the Publications Services Branch, U.S. Census Bureau, 2006.

30. Debra K. Peters and Lillian M. Range, “Self-blame and Self-destruction in Women Sexually Abused as Children,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 5, no. 4, (1996): 20.

31. *Ibid.*

*Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* by Elaine Pagels assists in understanding modern repressive attitudes towards sexuality and the feminine. Grounded in biblical scholarship, this book is an exploration of the Genesis creation myth as interpreted in the first four centuries of the Christian church's existence. The Gnostics' interpretation of the creation story as an allegory that concerns the process of spiritual self-discovery and depicts "Eve – or the feminine spiritual power she represented – as the source of spiritual awakening"<sup>32</sup> was very different from the literal orthodox interpretation. One telling example is what Tertullian, a second century church leader, had to say of women:

"You are the devil's gateway. . . . you are she who persuaded him whom the devil did not dare attack. . . . *Do you not know that every one of you is an Eve? The sentence of God on your sex lives on in this age: the guilt, of necessity, lives on too.*"<sup>33</sup>

Although some voices within the early church might have been more moderate than others – a paramount example being the young Bishop Julian's arguments against the notion of original sin championed by the powerful Augustine in the early fifth century<sup>34</sup> – patriarchy was uniform. The patriarchy of the Christian Church considered the *natural* and God-given place of woman as being subservient to man.

Believed to be inaccurately attributed to Paul, but nonetheless reflecting his apparent misogyny, 1 Timothy expresses a view of women held today by fundamentalists in many areas of the world. Women are to "learn in silence and submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. . . . Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty."<sup>35</sup>

1 Timothy continues its discourse, directing the following to men: "He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful."<sup>36</sup> This reading is from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The reading in my personal King James Version of the Bible is even more harsh, "One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity."<sup>37</sup> Women and children thus fall under the sanctioned dominion of men. This gospel has been translated into the vernacular with sayings such as: *a man's home is his castle*; or, *man is the king of his castle*, with all rights and privileges of his gender.

My father is a Jehovah's Witness. This group is a conservative Christian religious organization that adheres to a literal interpretation of the bible. Two teachings from childhood reverberate in my consciousness: *spare the rod, spoil the child; children are seen and not heard*. Corporal discipline is often used to help ensure that children walk a path pleasing to Jehovah. The place of the wife and children in the family structure is

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32. Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, 68.

33. Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum* 1, 12. Emphasis added, quoted in Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, 63.

34. Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, 127-150.

35. 1 Timothy 2.11-13 and 15. Revised Standard Version.

36. 1 Timothy 3.4. RSV.

37. 1 Timothy 3.4. King James Version.

clearly delineated within the religion. The husband/father is the undisputed head of *his* household. Christian orthodoxy, unable to see the divine as immanent within the individual and seeing woman as a chalice of evil, responsible for the downfall of man and all attendant misery, sees control and repression of woman as deserved and just.

If women and the feminine are generally disparaged and male superiority intoned by religious patriarchy, black women are subject to “a complex set of stereotypes that deny Black humanity in order to rationalize white supremacy.”<sup>38</sup> Within its pages, *Killing the Black Body* by Dorothy Roberts looks at stereotypes of black female sexuality. In particular she describes how these stereotypes were used and are continually used to justify sexual exploitation of black women from slavery to the present day. Harkening back to Eve, the “construct of the licentious temptress served to justify white men’s sexual abuse of Black women.”<sup>39</sup>

During slavery, black women were sexually exploited as broodmares. Children were sent to work in the fields by age eleven and many before age seven.<sup>40</sup> Miscegenation did not spare the child the toils of slavery. Women who did not reproduce were “exposed to every form of privation and affliction.”<sup>41</sup>

“The rape of slave women by their masters was primarily a weapon of terror that reinforced white’s domination over their human property.” Rape of a slave was not considered a crime. Moreover there existed “the prevailing belief among whites that Black women could not be raped because they were naturally lascivious.”<sup>42</sup>

Black females were vulnerable to sexual exploitation early in life. Black Episcopalian minister Alexander Crummel wrote the following in 1881:

In her girlhood all the delicate tenderness of her sex has been rudely outraged.... No chance was given her for delicate reserve or tender modesty. From her childhood she was the doomed victim of the grossest passion. All the virtues of her sex were utterly ignored.<sup>43</sup>

In her essays bell hooks explores contemporary manifestations of the stereotypes and exploitation of black female sexuality. One very interesting manifestation is the phenomenon of white college males’ desire to have sex with *others*, i.e. non-white females. This act of having sex with *others* is envisioned by the young men as self-altering and thus as a rite of passage or “ritual of transcendence.” In her analysis hooks’

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38. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Random House, 1999), 8.

39. *Ibid.*, 11.

40. The history of child labor abuse during the Industrial Revolution demonstrates that exploitation is not limited to the children of subaltern races.

41. *Ibid.*, 26.

42. *Ibid.*, 29, 31.

43. Alexander Crummel, “The Black Woman of the South: Her Neglects and Her Needs,” in *Africa and America: Addresses and Discourses* (Miami, 1969), 64 quoted in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 60.

asserts, “the presence of the Other, the body of the Other, was seen as existing to serve the ends of white male desires.”<sup>44</sup>

Three prevalent black female archetypes are examined in the literature. These are Sapphire – dominant and angry; Mammy – nurturing and self-sacrificing; and Jezebel – lascivious, wanton temptress.<sup>45</sup> This latter archetype encapsulates the stereotype of black women's sexuality promulgated since slavery that feeds the imaginations of many individuals. What are the early influences that might determine its internalization?

Using myself as example, I would posit that inappropriate childhood sexual encounters led to conflating love, acceptance, and security with sexuality – more exactly, being sexually pleasing to men was internalized as a precondition to receiving love and nurturance. “A child is naturally dependent on adults for nurturance, guidance and support. This fundamental right of the child is broken when the child is sexually victimized.”<sup>46</sup>

There is a myth of power tied to sexuality that is a distortion of the truth of victim and victimizer. According to Carolyn West the rationalization of the rape and forced breeding of enslaved black women was justified through the Jezebel archetype. “Instead of acknowledging this sexual victimization, slave owners portrayed Black women as promiscuous, immoral Jezebels who seduced their masters. This image gave the impression that Black women could not be rape victims because they always desired sex.”<sup>47</sup> This image also created the fallacy that black females hold power over their victimizers.

Victim-blaming has survived with the negative archetype. In a study of undergraduates presented with a date rape scenario, researchers “found that a forced sexual encounter would be perceived as less serious if the victim were a Black woman than if the victim were a White woman.”<sup>48</sup>

In terms of the implications of this archetype for childhood sexual abuse, telling is the response of a law enforcement official to a 12 year-old black female who was raped by her mother's boyfriend: “(A) man cop asked me all these questions and I felt really, really dirty. He asked me, Do I ‘switch’<sup>49</sup> around the house?”<sup>50</sup> The child suffers secondary victimization at the hands of the authority who is supposed to be her ally and protector against the perpetrator. Here the child is the perceived Jezebel, seducing her adult abuser.

Abusers often project attributes or qualities onto the children they abuse. These attributes are false, and are just in the mind of the abuser. A perpetrator may create false beliefs about a child's wishes, desires, and likes, or try to bring the

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44. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 24.

45. Carolyn M. West, “Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire: Developing an ‘Oppositional Gaze’ Toward the Images of Black Women,” in *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*, eds. Joan Chrisler, Carla Golden, and Patricia Rozee (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 236-251.

46. Fleming and Bélanger, *Trauma, Grief, and Surviving*, 318.

47. West, *Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire*, 246.

48. Ibid.

49. Black slang from the 1960s meaning to sway one's hips provocatively while walking.

50. Pierce-Baker, *Surviving the Silence*, 156.

child up to their peer level (imagining a sexual attraction or relationship with them). They may believe the child wants them to do the sexual acts. We often hear ridiculous statements from abusers such as, “he/she was a seductive child”; which is complete nonsense.<sup>51</sup>

I have no memory of being told “don’t tell” about my early abuse, but I knew not to tell. Although upwards of 80,000 incidents of child sexual abuse are reported annually,<sup>52</sup> it is believed that “the number of unreported instances is far greater, because the children are afraid to tell anyone what has happened, and the legal procedure for validating an episode is difficult.”<sup>53</sup> Even though an incident of abuse occurred in a car full of my allies and protectors, I was silent. Had I already internalized the message that I would be blamed for my uncle’s behavior? bell hooks speaks of the family’s role in socializing children, as does *The Cultural Basis of Racism and Group Oppression*:

It is in this form of family where most children first learn the meaning and practice of hierarchical, authoritarian rule. Here is where they learn to accept group oppression against themselves as non-adults, and where they learn to accept male supremacy and the group oppression of women. . . . Here is where the relationship of superordination-subordination, of superior-inferior, of master-slave is first learned and accepted as “natural.”<sup>54</sup>

Even if no male is present in the household, this behavior is modeled from the mother’s interaction with other males and the society in general.

I cannot remember the role of men in my early household. Life in Jamaica revolved around my grandmother and aunts. I do remember thinking my aunts beautiful and remember their gift-giving male friends. I remember watching the dance of relationship and even remember once a group of us mischievous cousins or “bad *pikni*” spying on my aunt and her male friend engaged in courtship.

Beauty–sex–power became a confused trinity that made subsequent victimization acceptable. Indeed the sexual predatory behavior of another male relative when I was age 14 carried this false veneer of power. *Why else would this man come after me? It must be something I am doing or exuding?* I acquiesced to a disembodied sexual experience, with myself the numb observer. The fallacy of power in connection with the Jezebel archetype

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51. “Sexual Abuse/Trauma,” [http://www.allaboutcounseling.com/sexual\\_abuse.htm#sA5](http://www.allaboutcounseling.com/sexual_abuse.htm#sA5). (This website is an immensely rich source of information, encouragement, and solace to individuals who have suffered childhood sexual abuse, doing an admirable job of answering the often unspoken concerns of survivors of childhood sexual assault.)

52. American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, “Facts for Families: Child Sexual Abuse” no. 9 Updated July 2004, <http://www.aacap.org/page.wv?name=Child+Sexual+Abuse&section=Facts+for+Families>.

53. Ibid.

54. John L. Hodge, “Dualist Culture and Beyond,” in *The Cultural Basis of Racism and Group Oppression*, ed. John L. Hodge, Donald K. Struckmann, and Lynn Dorvand Trost (Berkeley, CA: Two Readers Press, 1975), 233.

is seen in the following description of a young woman appearing on a television talk show:

Connie, a slender, 17-year-old wearing a small tight vinyl dress. . . . She says to both an audience member and her sister, who redress her about her promiscuity, "If I want to have yo' man, I'll take yo' man."<sup>55</sup>

I wonder at Connie's conception of personal power. I wonder how she would answer a question Bass and Davis use to help individuals take stock of the effect of childhood sexual abuse in their lives: "Do you feel your worth is primarily sexual?"<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, through gathering stories of women who were abused as children, the Women's Research Center has a ready answer to the question: "A child – particularly a child who is deprived of affection except as it is disguised as sexual abuse – learns that her primary value is sexual."<sup>57</sup>

The message of love, acceptance, and security that is linked to sexuality is a message generally reinforced within this culture and which some young women have learned to turn to advantage. Hooks states:

Popular culture provides countless examples of black female appropriation and exploitation of "negative stereotypes" to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefit of it. . . . Many black women singers, irrespective of the quality of their voices, have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious.<sup>58</sup>

In my own reality, while I had learned to turn male desire to advantage, primarily in the form of evoking adulation and praise as surrogates for love, at a young age I had become dissociated from my body and ultimately from intimate sexuality. A deadening of my body had resulted, where sexuality was enacted rather than deeply felt. Sexuality was often in the service of another, not necessarily felt as a coerced duty, but rather rationalized as a service or act of kindness mainly because physical and psychological boundaries and the ability to say "no" were impaired. Imbibed notions of black femaleness along with religious tenets to which I was exposed and which permeate society and collective consciousness disadvantageously informed my young mind.

## A HEURISTIC JOURNEY

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55. Shawna V. Hudson. "Re-creational Television: The Paradox of Change and Continuity Within Stereotypical Iconography," *Sociological Inquiry* 68, (1998): 246 quoted in West, *Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire*, 246.

56. Bass and Davis, *Courage to Heal*, 42.

57. Women's Research Center, *Recollecting Our Lives: Women's Experience of Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Vancouver, Canada: Press Gang Publishers, 1989), 105.

58. hooks, *Black Looks*, 65.

One's heuristic journey wends its way from a place of inner awareness – “only the experiencing person . . . can validly provide portrayals of the experience”<sup>59</sup> – unfurling at its own pace, leading to self-transformation. Thoughts, feelings, senses, dreams (the numinous), and immersion in experience are all welcome epistemologies. “The focus in a heuristic quest is on recreation of the lived experience; full and complete depictions of the experience from the frame of reference of the experiencing person.”<sup>60</sup>

Unlike a formal heuristic study where the experiences of several individuals would be considered in order to find a pattern joining the experiences, mine is a solitary heuristic process to find the pattern that links the experience of childhood sexual abuse to my current lived reality. As nothing occurs outside of context, part of the heuristic process into childhood sexual abuse involves ascertaining how social constructions inform childhood sexual abuse, especially that of the black female child.

The heuristic research process entails six phases: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis.<sup>61</sup> Each will be looked at in turn with regard to this project.

### *Initial Engagement*

“The task of initial engagement is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern. . . . During this process one encounters the self, one's autobiography, and significant relationships within a social context.”<sup>62</sup> The broad context of my interest in this subject was addressed in the introduction. On a more personal level, I confront my significant relationship with an uncle (and other black male relatives) within the social context of patriarchal psychosis manifesting in childhood sexual abuse.

The earliest full memory I have of my childhood sexual abuse is of an incident that left me feeling utterly helpless and without voice – too ashamed to speak, to say stop out loud, to ask for help. I was in a car full of loving women – my grandmother and aunts. As a four or five year-old I was put to sit on my uncle's lap in a back window seat. With my legs turned toward that window, my uncle proceeded to put his hand under my dress, then under the elastic edge of my cotton panties. He was maneuvering his finger between the lips of my immature vulva, and no matter how I squirmed or tried to twist my legs forward, he did not stop.

When he removed his hand it was to smell his finger and sink more deeply into the thick leather seat of the old car as he sighed with contentment and rapture. I looked at him relieved because he had stopped and in disbelief at what I saw. I so clearly remember his response and my being simultaneously shocked, repulsed, and fascinated. I do not think I had the conceptual language to identify the source of my fascination as being the thought that the little area between my legs could cause such an evidently strong response. But that is the message my psyche absorbed.

Memories of incidents that occurred much later with other male relatives were never forgotten, as was the above incident. It was not until after my mother's death, while

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59. Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 26.

60. *Ibid.*, 39.

61. *Ibid.*, 27-32.

62. *Ibid.*, 27.

I was living through the grief of her loss, that I remembered this incident with my uncle. I was age 30. My mother's death catalyzed a long, ongoing journey back to the Self.

There is another early childhood felt memory of abuse that over the past two years has lived with me in somatic recall, images, and dreams. All the particulars of this incident are not in focus. I know it happened before the incident with my uncle described above. I see a few non-threatening images but hear no sound. "Survivors... may remember the context in which the abuse took place but not the specific physical events."<sup>63</sup> Also, "most memories from early childhood, especially before ages 5 and 6, will usually be just a 'snapshot' process."<sup>64</sup>

This submerged incident I feel is intrinsic to certain aspects of my self-definition, particularly to the internalization of the image of black female sexuality as contained in the Jezebel archetype. I started this heuristic process hoping for more clarity regarding what I feel is my foundational sexual abuse experience. What follows is a sharing of the personal component of my heuristic process around this formational experience.

### *Immersion*

During the immersion phase, "the researcher lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states."<sup>65</sup> I have been immersed in the process of coming to terms with the reality and impact of my childhood sexual abuse since 1998. It started with my long investigation of rape – what is rape, why men rape, women's rape response, and rape recovery – that culminated in my master's thesis.

I immersed myself in the process of trying to understand the damage caused by rape to self and soul, and of finding ways of healing. During the process of researching rape I came to understand the power dynamics that constitute rape and came to understand why statutory rape is indeed rape – the initial engagement that launched my investigation. A 40-something male relative copulating with a 14 year old girl is rape.

Through the literature I learned of the social context within which rape and sexual abuse are situated. Dreams have been my guide in coming to terms with my personal history of abuse and in assisting me in the journey out of abuse. My own dreams have been instructive, and the dreams received for me by a close friend and gifted dreamer have been particularly helpful. "In heuristic investigations, I may be entranced by visions, images, and dreams that connect me to my quest."<sup>66</sup>

As part of my immersion into heuristic process, I have incorporated elements contained in *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*. I have created a shrine for the spirit of my child self and her healing/transformational process.<sup>67</sup> Author Malidoma Somé states, "A shrine is where one goes to enter into communication with the Other World. It is a place of beauty and mystery, and also the place of memory."<sup>68</sup> On the shrine are images of

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63. Bass and Davis, *Courage to Heal*, 78.

64. "Sexual Abuse/Trauma," [http://www.allaboutcounseling.com/sexual\\_abuse.htm#sA5](http://www.allaboutcounseling.com/sexual_abuse.htm#sA5).

65. Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 28.

66. *Ibid.*, 11.

67. Photographs of the shrine are included in this exploration.

68. Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: Putnam, 1999), 134.

myself as a child of 3, 4, and 7 years of age. A candle to the mothering orisha or deity, *Yemaya*,<sup>69</sup> also graces the shrine.

In part, I made the shrine to encourage my child self to communicate with me and in this regard employed Moustakas' self-dialogue technique that is very similar to the Jungian technique of active imagination. Active imagination is used as a means to bring unconscious material into consciousness. It is an invitation to the unconscious to speak, knowing that the conscious mind is paying attention. Active imagination is a counterpoint to dreams, developed by Jung for working with dreams.<sup>70</sup>

While dreams simply occur, through active imagination one directly engages the dream and dream elements – asking questions, confronting images, and generally dialoging with the unconscious as it becomes manifest. Moustakas' self-dialogue is not employed exclusively with dreams, however. The process of attunement, of establishing deep inner connection, is key to self-dialogue.<sup>71</sup>

The night I built the shrine and did the self-dialogue, I had two series of significant dreams. Each series contained three dreams. The number three is a gateway number. "Three is the numerical vibration that opens the gateways to the higher planes. ... Dreams themselves are the gatekeepers and thus vibrate to the number 3. ... Thus when three shows up in a dream, it is a signal that requires attention."<sup>72</sup> In the alchemy of Jung, the number three symbolized in dreams signals the descent process into the soul from which one emerges with gifts of insight and the ability to be in alignment with the soul's individuation process.<sup>73</sup>

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69. Introduced earlier, she is a member of the West African Yoruba spiritual pantheon.

70. Carl G. Jung (1875 – 1961) and Joan Chodorow, *Jung on Active Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

71. Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*.

72. Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *Dreamwork for the Soul* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1998) 157-158.

73. Charles Bebeau, "Praxis II" (seminar, Avalon Institute, Boulder, Colorado, Spring 1997). Note: artwork and journal entries, including self-dialogue and dreams, have been omitted from this version of the exploration due to the requirements of space.



### *Incubation, Illumination, Explication*

Incubation is described as “a process of spontaneous mental reorganization uncontrolled by conscious effort.”<sup>74</sup> Because of time limitations on this research project, the heuristic process was not allowed to unfold “organically.” I feel that it is ongoing and that although I am at the explication stage, the incubation is not complete. In fact, this exploration as explication feels like part of the immersion process because research and writing occur simultaneously, in large measure, and generate more questions and areas of inquiry.

Through immersion in the “tangible” (traditional scholarship) and “non-tangible” (dreams and tacit knowing), I have gained insight into and illumination on the area of childhood sexual abuse and my personal experience of childhood sexual abuse. Traditional research has helped me see that my responses are *normal* and shared by many women who have been similarly traumatized.<sup>75</sup> Contact with the numinous has shed light on my personal journey in relation to childhood sexual abuse and presented me with the promise of healing and transformation.

“The purpose of the explication phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness in order to understand its various layers of meaning.”<sup>76</sup> As such I have been able to write about the personal impact of larger socio-historical and cultural forces that operate in childhood sexual abuse and in the internalization of this form of oppression for myself as a black female.

Ascertaining how the larger socio-historical and cultural forces impact my personal experience of childhood sexual abuse is the task of deconstructing this self. It is an undertaking just begun. This exploration is an overview and introduction more than an explication of complete understandings.

### *Creative Synthesis*

An incredibly healing aspect of this heuristic exploration has been reconnecting with the playful, creative spirit of my seven-year-old self. This reconnection was made manifest through a spontaneous impulse to color and play jump-rope. The reconnection itself feels like a creative synthesis, although this is not how Moustakas employs the term. Generally the creative synthesis is a tangible creative work arising from the distillation of the insights and results of the heuristic process.<sup>77</sup> In this regard, a poem was produced out of the heuristic process that I share on the next page.

However, I do believe that the contact made with this seven-year-old aspect of myself and feeling her energy as distinct from energy I am accustomed to experiencing are a distillation and result of the heuristic process. They have produced an embodied creative synthesis of highly transformational value.

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74. Polanyi, Michael., *Science, Faith, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 34, quoted in Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 29.

75. Bass and Davis, *Courage to Heal*; Fleming and Bélanger, *Trauma, Grief, and Surviving*; King, *Healing Rage*;

76. Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 31.

<sup>77</sup> Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 32.

My hypothesis regarding the reason for my seven-year-old's manifestation is that she feels safe because she knows I will protect her with Yemaya's blessing, and she feels honored to be given the opportunity to be heard. I must be patient and allow her to tell her story in her time. The process of reclamation will unfold organically, as will the process of integrating our energies.

I hear silence

I hear silence  
I feel the prickly straw of the mattress  
I see the upper portion of dirty, greenish walls, a light fixture on a wall  
I smell dankness coming from the mattress

A small flat sheet not covering the small mattress  
bound head and foot between its iron frame

I hear silence

I see myself sitting  
on the edge of the mattress  
feet on the floor  
mouth closed, lips sealed  
looking, waiting

I look afraid, scared to move  
did someone place me there and tell me to wait, tell me not to move

What happened before? What happened after?

I asked my friend for a dream  
she who dreams for others was shown a brick wall

What happened before? What happened after?

I will sit and watch until I see, until all of me is ready to see

I will sit and wait until I hear  
a voice  
the wind  
a fly  
the creak of floorboards trod upon

I will dwell in this image  
await and welcome the vision's expansion.

## CODA AND DISCUSSION

One very early morning while in the hypnopompic space between sleep and waking, I faced the thought or worry that black men (“*my own*”) will feel threatened, hurt, or angry at my disclosure. In this liminal space of predawn consciousness, a black male student of my acquaintance either demonstrated this thought or simply represented black men. In either case I erupted in a seismic outburst of anger and was able to vociferously use masterful billingsgate<sup>78</sup> to fully express my rage. It was bodily felt, and a very cathartic experience.

This phenomenon of group allegiance in relation to childhood sexual abuse is spoken of by Bass and Davis who state that “when a group of people has been discriminated against, there is a need to maintain a united front. This can make it more difficult to acknowledge abuse within the group.”<sup>79</sup> Black men have been victims of the hegemonic dominant culture but have also internalized its tenet of male privilege. As in the dominant culture, this patriarchal domain of influence is power over the family, the home, women, and children.

Pierce-Baker eloquently speaks to the dilemma of black women who are victims of sexual abuse by black men.

For black women, where rape is concerned, race has preceded issues of gender. We are taught that we are first black, then women. Our families have taught us this, and society in its harsh racial lessons reinforces it. Black women have survived by keeping quiet, not solely out of shame, but out of a need to preserve the race and its image. In our attempts to preserve racial pride, we black women have often sacrificed our own souls.<sup>80</sup>

At the end of this heuristic process I do not have any clearer a picture of what happened to me in the greenish walled room, on the prickly, thin straw mattress of my earliest, fragmented, and vague memory. But as a fellow survivor of childhood sexual abuse put it: “Really, I think you have to be strong enough to know. I think that our minds are wonderful in the way they protect us, and I think that when I’m strong enough to know, I’ll know.”<sup>81</sup>

Although I have not grasped the elusive brass ring of whole memory, this heuristic process has brought me many gifts and blessings. Seeing childhood sexual abuse in its larger context is one such gift. I am closer to a synthesis of the socio-historical and cultural factors involved in childhood sexual abuse and the interrelationship of these factors with the dynamics of internalization of that abuse. This synthesis will enable me to deconstruct the self of this particular black woman and perhaps provide a pathway for other individuals. The synthesis will enable me to

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78. Used for “Billingsgate, a London fish-market dating from the 16th c., known for the invective traditionally ascribed to the fish-porters” (Oxford English Dictionary, 142).

79. Bass and Davis, *Courage to Heal*, 70.

80. Pierce-Davis, *Surviving the Silence*, 84

81. Bass and Davis, *Courage to Heal*, 92.

relinquish shame, guilt, and self-blame. Relinquishing self-blame means shedding the personal sense of responsibility for my own abuse.

What the socio-historical and cultural factors involved in childhood sexual abuse and the dynamics of the internalization of oppression have in common is the element of domination. Collins speaks of “the social relations of domination” and the “matrix of domination” as fundamental to the issue of oppression.

Bell Hooks labels this matrix “a politic of domination” and describes how it operates along interlocking axes of race, class, and gender oppression. This politic of domination refers to the ideological ground that they share, which is a belief in domination, and a belief in notions of superior and inferior. . . . The foundation is the ideological beliefs around which notions of domination are constructed.<sup>82</sup>

It was informative to look at the theological ground of these beliefs through the work of Elaine Pagels. The early fathers of the Christian church clearly articulated their belief in female inferiority and sanctioned the dominance of man over woman and child.

A second gift is that I have once again had confirmed the value of the loving, clear guidance of dreams. And most significantly, I have been blessed to experience a transformative reconnection with the spirit of my seven-year-old self – the little girl who holds so much pain along with her capacity for play and creativity. Feminist scholarship embedded in a transpersonal research paradigm provided the fertile soil from which this experience could arise.

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82. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 4, 5.

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