



When There's No Yellow Brick Road

Gloria Ladson-Billings



I have framed this essay based on one of my all-time favorite films, *The Wizard of Oz*. I actually saw the film in the theater at a Saturday matinee and I was fascinated by Judy Garland's journey from a small Kansas community to the magical land of Oz. When she ended up in Oz Dorothy was directed to "Follow the Yellow Brick Road" as a way to get to the Emerald City. For a working class, Black girl like me growing up in the pre-Civil Rights era, there was no yellow brick road to follow to the Emerald City. I was going to have to actually make the road. Fortunately, I would encounter "road pavers" along the way that made my journey possible. This essay describes a version¹ of that journey.

I grew up in a close-knit family and a friendly city neighborhood in West Philadelphia in the 1950s and 1960s. My community was quickly changing from

White working-class ethnic to working-class Black. Although we played outside with White neighbor children, they never came into our houses and we never went into theirs. The front door of our homes served as a boundary. My White neighbor friends were Irish American, Italian American, and Polish American. Most of the merchants in my neighborhood were Jewish with a few Black-owned Mom and Pop stores. Another dividing line for us was school. All of the Black children attended the local public school – Belmont Elementary – that was about a block and a half from my home. The White children attended a local Catholic School. However, one White boy who lived across the street with his mother attended the Girard College, a five-day-a-week boarding school for "White, orphaned boys." Not having a father was a criterion for being considered orphaned. Girard College would later become the site of a lawsuit by the NAACP for its racially discriminatory practices.

A second White family, comprised of 17 children, was the only White family who attended our 650-student public elementary school. In my mind, they were the poorest children I had ever seen. They came to school with visible dirt on their skin and clothes. We actually felt sorry for them, not realizing that most of us were living in households that barely made ends meet. Although my nuclear family was small – my parents, my older brother, and me – both my parents were from families of seven children meaning I had a ton of aunts, uncles, and cousins. It also meant that at one time or another some family member lived with us – my grandfather, following his stroke, a single uncle, another uncle and his

¹ I term this a "version" of the story because my training in anthropology helps me understand

that there can be multiple interpretations of a story.

wife. As homeowners my parents were considered successful. Their \$8,000 home was their pride and joy, and my mother was on a constant quest to improve it. She opened up the walls, remodeled the kitchen, added a breakfast room, and filled the house with an interesting assortment of mid-century modern and traditional furniture typically bought on credit. At one point my father “renovated” the basement, i.e. painted the rough cement walls and floor and added some furniture to create a makeshift bar. This was our home, my parents worked hard – my mother a government clerk and my dad a laborer – and my brother and I had one job: do our best in school!

My brother was brilliant. School came easy for him, especially mathematics and science. He was so smart that my mother pulled him out of the neighborhood junior high school and enrolled him in the city’s select admission college preparatory all male school (a school that later lost its single sex status as a result of Title IX). His school was so special that it was one of the only high schools in the nation that could grant students a bachelor’s degree. My brother was one of 12 Black boys enrolled at Central High School and he hated every minute of it. He barely graduated and entered the armed services soon after graduating. He would later attend college and graduate school and go on to a highly successful corporate career, but high school was one of the unhappiest periods of his life.

I was a diligent student. I worked hard to please my elementary teachers, most of whom were Black. They knew my parents, lived in my neighborhood, shopped at the local stores, attended our churches, patronized the barbers and beauticians in our community. My teachers regularly encouraged me and told me how capable I was. There was a seamlessness between our school lives and our community lives. It was

the work of these teachers that prompted me to ask one of the most significant research questions of my academic career – “What happens in classrooms serving Black students where teachers, students, and their families experience success?”

My fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Ethel Benn changed my life. She was a tough, no nonsense teacher who introduced me and my classmates to the city beyond our neighborhood. She enlisted the entire class into the school chorus and that chorus sang in venues throughout the city. She also taught what I later learned was an unauthorized US History. She taught us about Black luminaries like W. E. B DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Mary McLeod Bethune, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth. Her version of history challenged the notion that Blacks had not contributed significantly to the development of the nation. She was also the teacher who regularly told me that I was as smart as any other student and there was nothing I could not do.

When it came time to attend junior high school (grades 7-9) my mother worried about the deteriorating neighborhood school and used an uncle’s address to enroll me in a junior high across town. It was the first time I attended school with mostly White students. It was also the first time that I recognized the huge disparities that

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existed between Black and White people. My White classmates came with many more academic supports than I. One classmate was the daughter of a city newspaper photographer who showed up with current events presentations that had photos worthy of a Pulitzer Prize in journalism. Another had a mother who typed every assignment because his penmanship was atrocious. My White classmates had professional parents (i.e. fathers) with stay-at-home mothers and their science, social studies, and other projects were outstanding. I would not learn

the tricks of tri-fold display boards and professional printing until it was time for my own children to attend schools. I learned that schools regularly award students not for what they know but rather for what they have.

I recall having one Black teacher in junior high school – Mr. McLean my science teacher. I did not enjoy junior high school. Each day involved a streetcar and bus ride across town and few opportunities for out of school friendships. My teachers seemed shocked whenever I excelled but rarely praised that excellence. However, my first quarter in junior high school was traumatic. I thought I was doing what was expected. I studied, I did my homework, and I participated in class. When I received my first report card, I was shocked. I received As and Bs in the academic aspect of every class but in my English, social studies, and homeroom which were all taught by the same teacher I received failing grades in “citizenship” (a proxy for “behavior”). I was never once reprimanded for doing anything

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out of order in any of my classes and yet he rated me failing in the one thing my parents had instructed me to do – “Go to school and behave!” I remember going home crying and trying to explain to my mother my dismay. Fortunately, she believed me and did not punish me. When I returned to school, I decided I would never again speak aloud in any of his classes. My subsequent grades in citizenship in those classes were As and Bs. However, I was still furious for what I saw as unjust. He either did not like me or confused me with someone else. Neither response was acceptable. However, in the spring of that school year I would exact what might be considered adolescent revenge.

Just before Easter my mother took me shopping for shoes. We went to our favorite

low-end shoe store and when we entered the store, I recognized my homeroom teacher as one of the clerks. I knew that teachers did not make much money but was shocked that he was selling shoes. I insisted that we sit in his section so he could wait on us. When he came to us, he shared an insincere smile and greeting, and I began asking to try on almost every pair of black patent leather shoes in the store. I still remember him, down on his knees slipping pair after pair of shoes onto my foot. I also knew, no matter how pretty I thought a pair was, I was NOT going to choose shoes that day. There I sat with almost 20 pairs of shoes at my feet, 20 pairs he had to retrieve, try on my feet, and eventually re-box and return. I was not going to give him the satisfaction of a commission. As we left the store my mother looked at me quizzically and asked, “What was that about?” With a smirk I replied, “That’s the teacher who gave me those failing grades in citizenship.” My mom smiled back and said, “Good job, honey!” My homeroom teacher had no intention of paving the yellow brick road for me.

Just before entering ninth grade it was time to choose my academic “track.” Those who chose the college preparatory track were also required to choose a world language. I chose Latin. My homeroom teacher repeatedly questioned my choice. “Are you sure?” “This will be difficult.” “Why Latin?” What she did not know was I was choosing Latin for two reasons. The first reason was my older brother had chosen Latin when he was in high school. I knew he was smart and if he chose it, it must be the right thing to choose. The second reason was I had heard that knowing Latin roots could be helpful with the vocabulary portion of the SAT.

I did well in my remaining time in junior high and had an outstanding ninth grade year. I earned an A in every class except home economics where I earned a B. I just did not enjoy junior high very much and never felt a sense of encouragement from my teachers. As I was contemplating what

high school to attend my mother had hopes that I would enroll in the specialty all girls' sister school to the high school my brother attended. She did offer me an alternative choice of a high performing co-ed high school – Overbrook High School. To me choosing Overbrook was a no brainer. It was a large (4,500 students) comprehensive high school that was almost equally split between Black and Jewish students.

I entered 10th grade at Overbrook and enrolled in Latin 2, biology, English, world history, geometry, and electives like physical education, health education, and something in the arts. Almost all of my academic or core subjects were classrooms where I was one of a few Black students. After the experience I had in junior high school, high school seemed to be a dream come true. Although not in academic classes with me, many of my neighborhood friends attended my high school. At one point I had 11 first cousins in high school with me! My classes were intellectually challenging, and my social life was robust. I liked everything about high school.

In my junior year I fell in love with chemistry. My chemistry teacher, Dr. Herdegon began the first day by declaring that no one earned an A in chemistry – it was just that hard. I took her declaration as a personal challenge and studied the subject more diligently than any other. I loved its elegance. I could balance equations and marveled at the spectacular results of many of the lab assignments. I earned an A in chemistry and eventually won the chemistry award a year later at graduation. It seemed like the kind of thing I should pursue as a career.

However, I realized I was good at chemistry because it was rule bound. I followed the rules and got the right answers. However, U.S. History was something all together different. I really loved studying history, but it provoked more questions

than answers for me. Much of what I read and learned in the classroom stood in stark contradiction to what I learned at home and in my community (See Epstein, 2010). Almost daily I challenged my history teacher and it clearly annoyed him. For my final term paper, I caught the train and went to New York City to use the resources in the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library. I wrote a paper about how the U.S. slave trade was responsible for the economic viability and vitality of America. For some reason when it was time to return the graded papers my history teacher claimed to have “misplaced” my paper and reported he graded it as a B! I believe my paper probably made him angry enough to tear it up, but to pacify me he offered me a B on a paper I knew was worthy of an A. Also, I think I knew then and there I would study history in college. It was the subject that intrigued me and allowed me to probe and challenge received knowledge. I graduated from high school as the 14th ranked (out of 414) student in my class.

The College Experience

As a student in the high school college preparatory track, talk about college permeated my junior and senior years. I took the SAT and thanks to my study of Latin I did a great job on the verbal section.

I was encouraged to apply for admission to most of the local colleges and universities. I received admission to the University of Pennsylvania, Temple

University, Swarthmore, Bryn Mawr, and what was then Beaver College (now Arcadia University). However, after six years of “desegregated” schooling I was anxious to attend a Historically Black College/University. I had begun touring HBCUs with a youth group from my church and when we arrived at Morgan State University (then College) in Baltimore I found my place. It was a campus in a big city, not too far away from my home, and it

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catered to a relatively working-class student body. As an out of state applicant I was not a priority student, so it was wonderful for me to be accepted. My college guidance counselor seemed so pleased that I got in. I learned about a year after being at Morgan her delight was a reflection of something altogether different. The top 15 students in

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our high school class were guaranteed tuition scholarships to local universities. The first five to the University of Pennsylvania, and the next 10 to Temple University. As the 14th ranked student in the class I was eligible for the Temple scholarship. I did not know that, and the college guidance counselor did not share that information with me. By accepting admittance to Morgan State, the 16th ranked student moved up to receive the scholarship. That student was White. I am not sorry that I chose Morgan State. I am incensed that the college guidance counselor did not give me a choice. She thought she was withholding an important paver in the yellow brick road. Instead, I took the correct detour.

My experience at Morgan was amazing. Each day I walked a beautiful campus filled with mostly Black students (we did have some White students) and walked into classrooms taught mostly by Black professors. My adviser, Benjamin Quarles was an eminent history scholar of Blacks during the colonial and Revolutionary War periods who was both a friend and colleague of Duke University's Professor John Hope Franklin. Dr. Quarles was a stickler for grammar and demanded we focus on both form and substance in our writing. One of the things I learned while at Morgan was the value of scholarship despite who the scholar was. I took a course in Black History from a White Professor named Thomas Cripps. Dr. Cripps was an expert on Blacks in films and helped me learn how to critique and

deconstruct film as text. It is a skill I used as a professor for many years. Also, my college years occurred during some of the more racially turbulent years in the US.

I entered college in January of 1965. In February of that year Malcolm X was assassinated. In April of 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Muhammad Ali, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure), and Nina Simone were among the speakers and artists who appeared on our campus. The events of this era shaped my view of who I was as a Black woman in America. I graduated from Morgan State University in June of 1968, as the ninth ranked student (out of 450) and went home to Philadelphia to become a teacher. I was going home to a city that had experienced a student strike and subsequent police riot seven months before in November 1967, when Black students expressed their extreme dissatisfaction over the quality of education they were receiving.

Welcome to the Mad House

I entered the field of teaching in September 1968. At that time the Philadelphia School District was huge – 285,000 students, 13,000 teachers, 280 schools – and bureaucratic. However, it was led by a creative, innovative Superintendent, Dr. Mark Shedd. He believed deeply in teacher professional development and curriculum innovation and invested heavily in them. Unfortunately, Dr. Shedd and the School Board President, Richardson Dilworth, found themselves on the wrong side of a mayoral campaign. The former Police Chief, Frank Rizzo (the same police chief who directed the aggression against students in the student strike of 1967), ran on a campaign to get rid of Dr. Shedd and Mr. Dilworth. With Rizzo's victory the school district started on a path of disinvestment in curriculum, supervision, and teacher professional development. The apex of the tensions between the schools and the city came during the teacher contract negotiations of 1972-73. The breakdown in negotiations resulted in an 11-week strike that saw the arrest of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

President Frank Sullivan and the union's negotiator John Ryan. That action on the part of the city galvanized all of the major unions – AFL-CIO, teamsters, and others – who threatened to shut down the entire city. Most Black people saw Frank Rizzo as a bully and his leadership just meant more of the same in terms of police brutality in our communities. The rest of the city was finally seeing a bit of what we had always seen.

I loved working in Philadelphia. It was my hometown, filled with my relatives and friends. I taught in schools far from my neighborhood. I was a West Philly girl who worked in South Philly, North Philly and, Germantown. My first job in South Philly was with White working-class ethnic students and a group of Black students who were bused from West Philly. I was one of three Black teachers in the school. One Black teacher had been a Catholic school teacher which was as close to God as one could get according to our school full of “Catholic school rejects”². She got a pass. The other Black teacher taught special education and she was seen as doing “God’s work.” But I was just a “regular” social studies teacher. I had parents ask to remove their children from my sections, but after the first few requests the principal recognized what was happening and denied them. I was told to my face, “No, N-word is gonna teach my kid!” I wasn’t surprised by their response. I grew up in Philadelphia. I already knew how provincial and racist the neighborhoods were. Indeed, I expected to encounter racism in South Philly. Members of this community were not going to help pave the yellow brick road for me.

However, my tension with the community turned around when the father of one of the students in my homeroom died. I prompted the students to contribute what they could (that turned out to be about \$14) and I rounded it up to \$20. I placed the money in a card and hand delivered it to the family. They invited me into their small

South Philadelphia row house, and I found myself in the middle of an Irish wake! The deceased was lying in a casket in their tiny living room. People were drinking whiskey and sharing stories about him. As a 21-year-old novice teacher I was terrified but somehow, I knew it would be considered rude if I left. I stayed the entire time and doing that turned my relationship with those folks around. People were saying that I honored their traditions and showed the proper respect to their loved one. I was starting to pave my own yellow brick road toward what I would come to understand as the importance of culture in teaching and learning.

During my 10 years as a teacher in the city I worked in both elementary and secondary schools. I also became a social studies supervisor for one of the larger geographic areas in the district. I learned to write curriculum and develop programs. My work took me into 44 different schools to work with 4,000 teachers and over 40,000

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students. In the midst of the 1970s energy crisis, I was recruited through the school district by a local utility to write an energy curriculum that could be used in middle grades. After that curriculum was published it ended up in 35,000 classrooms throughout Philadelphia, Delaware, New Jersey and several English-speaking international countries. However, when budget cuts occurred, I returned to the classroom. My area superintendent told me the reason I was vulnerable to the budget cuts was I lacked the right “union card.” I immediately reminded him that I was a

² Almost all of our White students began their school careers in the local Catholic school. When they failed out they came to our school.

member in good standing of the union. “No,” he replied. “You don’t have a PhD!”

Life on the Farm³

I thought long and hard about gaining the right “union card” and eventually applied to Stanford University in 1977. I really did like teaching in Philadelphia. I didn’t like bureaucracy and I certainly did not like incompetent administration, but I did like working with students. I liked working with other teachers, but something about making a larger impact on teachers intrigued me.

I entered the university the following fall and started on an eye-opening adventure about how the other half lives. Stanford is a magical place. The combination of Chamber of Commerce type weather, lovely campus architecture and grounds, world class scholars, and exceptional students made it a perfect environment in which to grow and learn. Stanford University is one of the best universities in the world and its Graduate School of Education consistently ranks among the top schools on most measures.

I enjoyed re-entering the classroom and found the courses both interesting and challenging. My initial interest was in curriculum development. Somewhere in my mind I assumed I would earn my degree and head back to Philadelphia where I might become the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum. Stanford had amazing scholars – Eliot Eisner, Elizabeth Cohen, David Tyack, Larry Cuban, George Spindler, Nel Noddings, Henry Levin, and Amado Padilla, to name a few. I spent my years there laboring under the notion that curriculum could transform the educational experience of Black children. After all, my 5th grade teacher, Mrs. Benn opened up new worlds

to me with information about Black people. My research in the Schomburg Library convinced me that there was so much more that could be included in the K-12 curriculum. My study with Dr. Benjamin Quarles reinforced that notion. Over my 10 years as a teacher and social studies supervisor I repeatedly saw students being exposed at best to a white-washed version of U.S. History and at worst to distortions

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As amazing as Stanford was, I struggled to find someone in the School of Education

that was interested specifically in the education of Black children. I found that interest in the Afro American Studies Program under the tutelage of Professor Sylvia Wynter. Dr. Wynter became my “North Star” as I realized the dissertation would actually be the end of my doctoral studies, not the beginning of my academic career. I also began a professional and community relationship with a former Stanford student who was teaching for a professor on sabbatical. That lecturer was Dr. Joyce King. I took a course with Joyce and later we began working on a community project in East Palo Alto, a majority African American community that struggled with unemployment, under employment, poor schools, and limited resources as an unincorporated area of San Mateo County. Our project was called, “Parents for Positive Action.” We worked with local parents to press the school board to improve education for African American students. Joyce, who had been a Stanford undergraduate and graduate was pivotal in

³ Stanford University was founded on land that belonged to former Senator Leland Stanford where he attempted to grow wine grapes despite

being advised against it. The grapes did not work but the physical space would forever be known as “the farm.”

paving a way on the yellow brick road for me.

I did well in the classroom at Stanford and I was blessed to have an assistantship as a student teacher supervisor (the only Black one Stanford had hired in some time). I also got an opportunity to be a Teaching Assistant. What I did not receive was an opportunity to get into that “inner circle” of graduate study – a research assistantship. My White peers who got this opportunity were typically launched into the world of research. They got to be co-authors on papers. They got to attend and present at academic conferences. They got to rub shoulders with researchers beyond Stanford and that set them up for landing an academic position.

By the time I was ready to begin my independent research at Stanford – the vaunted dissertation study – I had completed a master’s degree in anthropology. In the Anthropology Department I learned new methodologies and new ways of thinking about people and their cultures. I also met anthropologist James Lowell Gibbs who agreed to be my minor advisor. Dr. Gibbs was one of the first Black professors at Stanford and as editor of the *American Anthropologist* he allowed me to work with manuscripts and learn the craft of academic writing. He was yet another person paving a path for me.

To prepare for my dissertation research, I headed off to spend a year with 75 Black 8th graders who were studying US History and Civics. My project would be a kind of replication study of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test of citizenship. My enhancement to the NAEP study was to observe the students in their social studies class over the course of the year and to interview each of them after the administration of the NAEP test items. In the midst of the study I began to realize that it was not merely the curriculum that had an impact on the students. It was the teaching as well. As I write this, I recognize that my interest in this elusive thing schools call

“citizenship” may trace back to experience “failing” citizenship in seventh grade! Perhaps this was an inadvertent “brick” in my path.

Catching a Glimpse of a Yellow Brick

I defended my dissertation in the fall of 1983 and immediately began as an adjunct professor at Santa Clara University. As mother to teenaged boys I was committed to allowing them to complete high school at the schools they attended so I did not look for job opportunities beyond the San Francisco Bay Area. Within a year, my responsibilities at Santa Clara expanded to include serving as the Coordinator of Teacher Education as a result of the fact that my friend Dr. Joyce King who was Santa Clara’s Director of Teacher Education was awarded a Kellogg Fellowship. Initially, Joyce had asked me to teach some courses at Santa Clara while I was still working a full-time teaching job in East Palo Alto. When I completed my dissertation, she asked me about coming to Santa Clara full time. At Santa Clara I would become only the fifth African American on the faculty.

Originally, my job at Santa Clara was considered academic staff. A few things frustrated me about being there. My department (actually it was a “division”) was the Division of Counseling Psychology and Education. Counseling Psychology paid the bills. Most of the students were being licensed as counselors and all of my colleagues in counseling psychology maintained private practices as therapists. Education had four full time faculty, two of which were in teacher education. While I had the pure joy of working with Joyce King who was the best mentor I could ask for, the dean required me to answer to a woman with a master’s degree from Santa Clara! I rarely stand on formality and credentials, but I did have an earned doctorate from Stanford. Why was I being asked to report to this woman?

I quickly discovered that Santa Clara would not be the place to help me grow as a scholar. I thought the solution was to

continue to use Stanford and its resources as a place to continue to develop as a scholar. Since I still lived in Palo Alto, I regularly used Stanford libraries and attended many of the public lectures they offered. But, I still did not have a clear vision of what I wanted to do career-wise.

After four years at Santa Clara, where I taught seven courses a year, made student teaching and practicum placements and served as a supervisor, I finally completed my Spencer Post-Doctoral Fellowship Application. I asked Professors Larry Cuban and George Spindler from Stanford to serve as my referees. I proposed a study that would look specifically at the pedagogical expertise of teachers who were successful with Black students. My study would be ethnographic and theory generating. I clearly remember George Spindler telling me, “Gloria, you know the people that read these proposals rarely understand what anthropologists are trying to do. Don’t be too discouraged if you don’t get the fellowship.” As I was working on my final edits to my proposal, I looked again at the fellowship announcement and saw that the chairman of the fellowship program was Professor Lee Shulman.

Professor Shulman had recently come to Stanford after a distinguished career in Teacher Education at Michigan State University. I did not have him as a professor – he arrived after I had completed my course work – but I certainly knew of his reputation. I decided to call his secretary, the only Black secretary in the School of Education, and got on his calendar. That secretary provided another brick on my road and one of the things I definitely learned at Stanford was how to network. I met with Professor Shulman and shared my proposal idea with him. He listened carefully and asked some insightful questions. At the conclusion of the meeting I went back to my computer and fine-tuned the proposal based on the kinds of questions he asked. By mid-April I received word that I was one of the 1988-89 Spencer Post-doctoral fellows. This work would change my career

trajectory from the study of curriculum to that of pedagogy. I spread my fellowship over two years, and in those years the Spencer Post-doctoral cohorts included Michele Foster, Lisa Delpit, Signithia Fordham, Vivian Gadsden, and Vanessa Siddle-Walker. I was among a powerful group of Black women who were paving the way to think differently about the field.

We’re Not in Kansas but We are in the Heartland

My National Academy of Education Spencer Post-Doctoral Fellowship helped me focus on teaching in a new and exciting way. Instead of asking deficit-based

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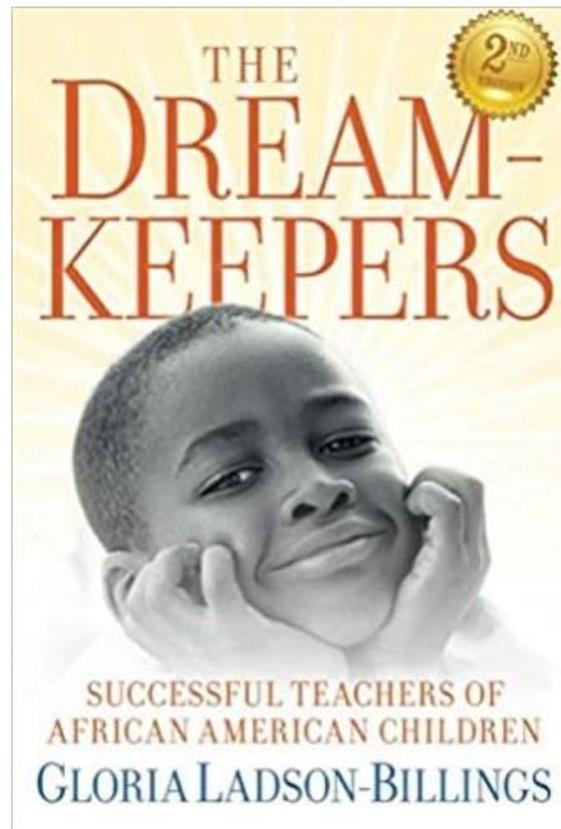
questions that challenged the intellect, achievement motivation, family structure, linguistic repertoire, or culture of Black students I was prompted to ask an asset-based question. “What is right with Black students and what happens in classrooms where teachers get it right?” That question presented a challenge to almost everything the literature tried to teach me. My first attempt at a computer search for the phrase, “Black Education” quickly returned results such as “see, culturally deprived,” “see, cultural deficits,” and “see, at-risk students.” There was no language of excellence when it came to the education of Black children. I was actually asking something that mainstream scholarship had not considered.

After three years of interviewing, observing, videotaping, and small group meetings with teachers in a predominantly Black community that parents and administrators identified as outstanding, I began writing a few articles about the work. First, I published a short piece for the College Board after having given a talk there

(Ladson-Billings, 1985). Next, I went to the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Ethnography and Education Forum. There I met Professor Rodman Webb, who heard the methodological paper I presented and spoke to me about turning it into a publishable paper for the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (Ladson-Billings, 1990). Dr Webb spent almost a year helping me get the manuscript ready for publication. It was eye-opening for me to discover that there were people who wanted me to succeed.

From there I received an invitation to give a lecture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for Educational Research (WCER) and under the leadership of then Chancellor Donna Shalala the School of Education began pursuing me to become a part of their faculty. I had a pivotal encounter with Professor Carl Grant while visiting Wisconsin. Carl had been critical in helping me secure the invitation to Wisconsin. Just before I left Wisconsin, Carl and I sat down for a cup of coffee. During that visit, he said something to me that I think was one of the most generous comments of my professional life. Carl said, "Gloria, these people (at Wisconsin) really like you, but you don't have to come here. However, what you have to do is get off that campus you're on. They can never fully support the work you want to do!" That statement forced me to look carefully at what my next steps should be and Carl paved a major way for me and continued to do it throughout my time at Wisconsin.

I went to Wisconsin with the idea that I would probably stay there long enough to earn tenure and then move on. However, what I found there was indeed a kind of intellect's Emerald City. My colleagues were smart, celebrated, and generous. It was that last quality that made all the difference in my decision to remain at Wisconsin. I earned tenure in spring 1995, four and one-half years after arriving at Wisconsin. I subsequently learned that I was the first African American woman to earn tenure in



the history of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education's 150 plus-year history.

Wisconsin (especially the Department of Curriculum & Instruction in 1991) was a place that afforded scholars autonomy, resources, and collaboration. Instead of the 7-course load of Santa Clara's quarter system, I had a four-course load in a semester system and in my first couple of years I had negotiated course reductions. With that limited teaching responsibility I had plenty of time to focus on my scholarship. I was able to produce journal articles, book chapters and completed the manuscript for what would become my first single authored book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

In addition to my research on pedagogy I formed a professional friendship and collaboration with Carl A. Grant and William Tate. Together we produced an article that looked at the cost of the landmark Supreme Court *Brown* decision (Tate et al. 1993). In the process of writing

that manuscript William Tate and I discovered that we had very similar interests in the way race was operating as a primary lever to foster inequality in education. We also recognized that there was barely any robust theory on race. In most of the research, race was treated as a “variable.” Its legitimacy was unquestioned. Omi and Winant (1986) were two of the few authors we read who were willing to problematize the concept of race. More important, we discovered a group of legal scholars who were taking on the question of race in a new and innovative way. Their work, termed “Critical Race Theory,” (CRT) intrigued Tate and me and we began reading everything we could on this topic. In some ways we were taking a short course in law to understand the arguments and the precedents that undergird them. Ultimately, we decided to write a paper that addressed how CRT applied to education. That paper (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) has been cited almost 8,000 times and challenges much of orthodoxy about how the US operates and questions the idea of meritocracy in education and social outcomes.

The two strands of my research – culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race theory – have defined me as a scholar. Culturally relevant pedagogy reflects the practical aspect of my work. I am able to speak to teachers, students, teacher educators, parents, and community members through this work. School districts, schools, and teacher education programs regularly call on me to share the insights I learned from this research. Also, I was able to impact the design of an innovative post-baccalaureate teacher education program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison based on this work. From that program I wrote a second book about the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on novice teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

My research has allowed me to travel the world and meet teachers, teacher educators, students, community leaders, and policymakers on six of the seven continents (I’ve never been to Antarctica). I am regularly surprised at how the work translates to situations beyond the US. In Brazil it speaks to the issues of Afro Brazilian people. In Sweden it speaks to immigrants from Somalia, Iran, and the Indigenous Sami peoples. In China it speaks to the ethnic Chinese peoples and in Canada it speaks to First Nations peoples.

I have enjoyed the recognition of my peers by being elected President of the American Educational Research Association and being elected into and the National Academy of Education and the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. More important, I have had the privilege of supervising 51 doctoral students – 19 of whom were Black women. They represent my legacy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Although Wisconsin is not a perfect institution it has helped me prosper and grow as a scholar and academic citizen. I have served as the Department Chair for Curriculum & Instruction. I was honored to be the first Kellner Family Distinguished Chair in Urban Education. I served on the University’s Graduate Research Committee and its Athletic Board. I was the campus’

faculty representative to the Big Ten Conference.

The life changing event that coincided with my arrival at Wisconsin was my diagnosis of an aggressive breast cancer.

I was in a new city with just my husband, Charles and 5-year-old daughter, Jessica. I did not really know my colleagues. I did not know the health care system. In fact, I was still in the California Kaiser-Permanente system. I had no accumulated sick leave at Wisconsin. I was just starting. However, Chancellor Donna Shalala (who I swear knew everything) called and told me not to

...when you do discover the Yellow Brick Road your job is not merely to go to the Emerald City. It is to add more bricks so that the next generation can travel further!

worry. We would find a way. And, find a way we did. I had surgery and my colleagues covered my courses that first week. When I returned to campus my colleagues and students were amazing. I came to campus two days a week – Tuesday mornings for my undergraduate course and Wednesday evenings for my graduate course. When I began chemotherapy, I scheduled it early Tuesday mornings and my husband drove me from there to campus. I taught my course, my husband drove me home, and I crawled into bed. My colleagues provided us with meals and those with young children came to pick up my daughter for swim lessons and other kid activities to provide her with a bit of normal “kid life” during my recovery. I had joined a wonderful church during my early days in Madison and the pastor and members became a wonderful support system. My cancer journey was an important aspect of my development not just as a professional but as a person. It made me question the value of academic life versus the value of the work I was attempting to do. I forged a career based on the work, not climbing the academy’s career ladder.

Over the past decade I have made some important connections with younger scholars who have introduced me to the power of youth culture in shaping the educational experiences of marginalized students. These young scholars have helped me rethink the pedagogical theory I explored over 30 years ago. Their work has helped me understand that when you do discover the Yellow Brick Road your job is not merely to go to the Emerald City. It is to add more bricks so that the next generation can travel further!

**I forged a career based on the work,
not climbing the academy’s career
ladder.**

Coda: When You Realize You Were Home All Along

Dorothy’s story in the *Wizard of Oz* draws to a conclusion as she realizes the real place she was attempting to get to was home. All of the people she encountered in Oz were replicas of the people she knew at home. The power to get home was always within her power. While I am not certain I was trying to “get home” I was trying to find a “home” in academe. I am one of the lucky ones. Far too many African American women struggle to find a place in the academy. Black women faculty make up a mere 2.3% of tenure track faculty. That number shrinks when we examine how many achieve tenure and it shrinks further when we explore how many Black women earn the rank of full professor. The number of endowed and/or named chairs is miniscule. Thus, I achieved what some call, “rare bird status.”

As I look back over the road I’ve traveled I’ve learned a few lessons I believe I can share with those hoping to travel the same road. First, decide for yourself the questions you wish to investigate. Many young scholars arrive at a university program and are paired with a scholar with a well-funded and widely known research agenda. While that pairing can be advantageous, it may mean that the young scholar is expected to shape his/her research questions into some version of their adviser’s work.

Second, have a healthy integration of your professional, community, and personal life. I have deliberately avoided the oft used term, “work-life balance.” The word balance implies an ability to get to some 50-50 relationship between one’s work and one’s life. I would argue that balance is a fiction and the constant attempt to achieve it is futile. However, if you begin to see how your work can influence your community activity or how your community activity can influence your personal life (or some combination of the three) you are more

likely to be more satisfied across all aspects of your life.

Third, I learned that the easiest way to move to a more desirable academic position is to “write your way out” of the place you are in. I worked very hard at Santa Clara University – teaching seven courses a year. My teaching evaluations were superb. Indeed some 30 years later I still maintain some relationships with former Santa Clara students. However, teaching evaluations are invisible to external audiences. Research and writing are our public signatures. Wisconsin noticed me because of the articles I began publishing.

Fourth, seek advice. Many (K-12) teachers and scholars think that asking for help represents weakness. Unfortunately, in some environments asking for help is seen as just that. However, teachers and scholars need to seek out trusted colleagues (perhaps beyond their own institutions) to provide advice and help. What helped me at Wisconsin was the fact that I had supportive colleagues who were willing to read and comment on my work. I never sent out a manuscript to a journal or publisher without having trusted senior colleagues read and review it first.

Just as you should seek advice, you should plan to help other people. None of us achieves in life on our own. Just as someone, somewhere helped you.

Fifth, help someone else. Just as you should seek advice, you should plan to help other people. None of us achieves in life on our own. Just as someone, somewhere helped you. It is important that you reach back and help others. In addition to being at a supportive institution I have found my professional associations (e.g. American Educational Research Association, American Anthropological Association, etc.)

to be wonderful places to cultivate supportive relationships to help and be helped.

Sixth, like the *Wizard of Oz*, the world in the fantasy mimics the larger world. The same racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, xenophobia, etc. that are a part of the larger society find their way in the academy. They may show up more subtly (but not always) but they show up. And, as scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserted, “The only way to destroy the master’s house is by using the master’s tools.” To me this means it is imperative to document your experiences. Keep copious notes and write yourself memos about what people say to you or how they respond. Culturally, I would much rather talk about an issue, but I learned early on that mainstream culture tends to treat that which is written as both credible and sacred. I follow up most academic meetings about my work with a memo “thanking” people for meeting with me and reiterating what I believe I heard them say. It can be a great protection.

Seventh, find a way to enjoy academic life. As much as we complain about overbearing deans, unsupportive department chairs, or ungrateful students, people like me realize this work is a blessing. It is not physically challenging; it is not poorly paid; and most of all it is not boring. I have often said to my students who ask how I keep doing this work, “I remind myself that this work was not forced upon me. I chose it!”

The one part of *The Wizard of Oz* I wish were true for me is in the final scene when Dorothy is surrounded by her family and community and with an excited voice she tries to explain her experience and declares, “And you were there, and you, and you.... You were ALL there.” I wish that the many teachers, family, and community members who made my journey possible were in this place I have landed... somewhere over the rainbow!

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About Acquired Wisdom

This collection began with an invitation to one of the inaugural editors, Sigmund Tobias, from Norman Shapiro a former colleague at the City College of New York (CCNY). Shapiro invited retired CCNY faculty members to prepare manuscripts describing what they learned during their College careers that could be of value to new appointees and former colleagues. It seemed to us that a project describing the experiences of internationally known and distinguished researchers in Educational Psychology and Educational Research would be of benefit to many colleagues, especially younger ones entering those disciplines. We decided to include senior scholars in the fields of adult learning and training because, although often neglected by educational researchers, their work is quite relevant to our fields and graduate students could find productive and gainful positions in that area.

Junior faculty and grad students in Educational Psychology, Educational Research, and related disciplines, could learn much from the experiences of senior researchers. Doctoral students are exposed to courses or seminars about history of the discipline as well as the field's overarching purposes and its important contributors. .

A second audience for this project include the practitioners and researchers in disciplines represented by the chapter authors. This audience could learn from the experiences of eminent researchers – how their experiences shaped their work, and what they see as their major contributions – and readers might relate their own work to that of the scholars. Authors were advised that they were free to organize their chapters as they saw fit, provided that their manuscripts contained these elements: 1) their perceived major contributions to the discipline, 2) major lessons learned during their careers, 3) their opinions about the personal and 4) situational factors (institutions and other affiliations, colleagues, advisors, and advisees) that stimulated their significant work.

We hope that the contributions of distinguished researchers receive the wide readership they deserve and serves as a resource to the future practitioners and researchers in these fields.


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